The truth about diminutives, and how we can find it: Some theoretical and methodological considerations
Klaus P. Schneider

Diminutive research is often too narrowly focused on suffixed nouns, while other types of diminutive formation are neglected. A plea is therefore made to also consider other formation types including reduplication, compounding and periphrastic constructions. Furthermore, it is shown that a more differentiated account of diminutive meaning is needed than is currently available. It is suggested that an adequate semantic description, which can accommodate the various ambiguities of diminutives, can best be found in systematic corpus-based analysis of diminutives in context. Finally, a pragmatic approach is outlined which avoids the problems pertaining to diminutive formation and meaning and is particularly relevant for cross-lingual and typological studies. This approach is focused on the social functions of diminutives in specific types of contexts. A particular case of meiosis is used for illustration.

1. Introduction

The truth about diminutives is not easily found, given the specific nature of this phenomenon. Bauer et al. (in press: 664) aptly summarize the situation, as they note: "The notion of diminutive […] is not easy to define clearly. One problem with this notion is the semantics, the other the kind of formal means employed to express diminutive meaning." Indeed, it is not a trivial task to identify formal means when it is not entirely clear what these means are supposed to express. The problems, at least in part, stem from the fact that 'diminutive' is a category derived from traditional grammar, originally used in the description of Latin, with a typical mélange of structural and semantic aspects. Thus, as traditional definitions tend to be circular, and as it is neither clear what exactly diminutive formation is, nor what diminutive meaning is, diminutives pose a two-fold challenge.

In this paper, I want to address both, the semantic problem and the problem concerning diminutive formation, and thus contribute to a solution to these problems. Furthermore, I would like to go beyond form and meaning and suggest an alternative approach to the study of diminutives. This approach focuses on the communicative functions of diminutives, yet not on their functions in general, but on their functions in specific types of context. In section 2, diminutive formation is discussed, while section 3 deals with the meaning of diminutives. Thereafter, in section 4, the alternative approach is sketched out and illustrated with examples from several languages. This approach seems particularly suitable for comparing diminutives across languages and typological work. Conclusions are offered in section 5.

2. Analyzing diminutive formation

The problem concerning the formal means which can be employed to express diminutive meaning can in essence be attributed to a prototype effect in the category 'diminutive'. Prototypical diminutives, i.e. diminutives generally considered to be the "best" examples of this category, are nouns derived from nouns by attaching a suffix which functions as the

diminutive marker (or 'diminutivizer'): N + suffix$_{dim}$ > N$_{dim}$ 'small N'. In this case, the suffix does not change the word class of the base, nor does it crucially change the meaning of the base. The meaning of the base is merely modified by adding the semantic component SMALL (cf. section 3). Thus, cubelets, for example, are still cubes, and droplets still drops, albeit small ones compared to the size considered normal for cubes and drops respectively. It has therefore been suggested that prototypical diminutives do not result from a process of derivation, but from a process of modification, in which word class is retained and the meaning just modified (cf., e.g., Schneider 2003: 9).

With this prototype in mind, diminutives have been, and predominantly still are, narrowly defined as a morphological category belonging to the realm of word-formation commonly referred to as 'evaluative morphology', together with only very few other phenomena including, first and foremost, 'augmentatives'. This approach seems entirely valid for languages which have developed from Latin, such as Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, and some other Indo-European languages, especially Slavic languages and also Dutch and German. This approach is, however, inadequate for the description of languages in which prototypical diminutives do not exist. A statement to the effect that, e.g., the English language does not have any diminutives, or that diminutives are only marginal in English (cf., e.g, Grandi 2011: 7), only make sense if the notion of diminutives is reduced to the prototypical form. More generally, a narrow morphological approach is particularly unsuitable for typological work, because many of the world's languages e.g. in Africa or Asia do not have any suffixes, or have no affixes at all. As Haspelmath (2007: 128) reminds us: "Typologists must realize that they cannot base their comparisons on formal categories […]".

What is needed, therefore, and especially for cross-lingual comparison, is an onomasiological perspective, i.e. taking diminutive meaning, and not (prototypical) diminutive form, as the starting point for analysis. Needless to say, such an approach presupposes a clear idea of the meaning which is expressed, in other words, of the common denominator which justifies the identification of formal means as means of diminutive formation (cf. section 3 below). Adopting an onomasiological approach in their survey of word-formation in the world's languages, which is based on a sample of fifty-five languages, Štekauer et al. (2012: 237-303, esp. 264-274) identify a total of four different processes which are employed to form diminutives. Apart from suffixation, these are prefixation, reduplication and compounding (Štekauer et al. 2012: 267-269). Schneider (2003), whose primary interest is in English diminutives, also discusses the formal means generally available in languages to convey diminutive meaning, but does not limit his survey to word-formation processes alone. In addition to the four processes identified by Štekauer et al. (2012), Schneider furthermore lists truncation, inflection and periphrastic constructions (Schneider 2003: 7-10). The first two of these are also morphological processes, although the status of truncation has sometimes been challenged. While some scholars have argued that truncation is an extra-grammatical process and, hence, does not belong to word-formation or morphology, others have classified it as a secondary or unpredictable word-formation process, or have dealt with it in the framework of prosodic morphology (for a discussion, cf. Schneider 2003: 9; cf. also Lappe 2007: 31-58). The third type, on the other hand, i.e. periphrastic construction, is definitely outside the scope of morphology. Diminutives formed by employing this formation type are sometimes referred to as 'syntactic diminutives' or 'analytic diminutives' (as opposed to 'morphological diminutives' or 'synthetic diminutives'; cf. Schneider 2003: 7). As a rule, such constructions comprise two constituents, namely the base word and an independent diminutive marker, which may be an adjective as in the A+N pattern found, for instance, in English as in *little house*, *little chat* and *little bastard* (examples of syntactic diminutives from Selee, a Niger-Congo language, are discussed in section 4 below).

At the end of his survey of the various types of diminutive formation available in a wide range of different languages, Schneider (2003: 10) proposes a hierarchy specifying the relative status of the formation processes discussed:

1) Synthetic formation > analytic formation,
2) Word-formation > inflection,
3) Additive processes > subtractive processes,
4) Morpheme combination > morpheme repetition,
5) Affixation > compounding,
6) Suffixation > prefixation.

In each line, the processes listed on the left-hand side seem to be more frequent than those on the right-hand side. However, this account reflects only general trends. Much more systematic research is needed, involving many more different languages, to substantiate, or modify, the claims made in this hierarchy. Moreover, the preferences which manifest in an individual language seem to depend on the overall structural make-up of the language. English, for example, seems to prefer the analytic type over the synthetic types.

The inventory of formation processes discussed above is not exhaustive. Bakema & Geeraerts (2000: 1045), for instance, also list infixation and submorphemic formation. These two types seem to be rare, however. Štekauer et al. (2012: 269) do not find any examples of these two types in their survey of fifty-five languages representing twenty-eight language families. Of the four word-formation processes identified in their survey, suffixation was by far the most frequent type, followed by reduplication and then compounding, while the frequency for prefixation was very low (Štekauer et al. 2012: 325). These findings support some, but not all of the observations summarized in the above hierarchy as far as additive word-formation processes are concerned. Suffixation is indeed more frequent than prefixation, as predicted by line 6. Also, suffixation, but not prefixation, is more frequent than compounding (cf. line 5), and suffixation is finally also more frequent than reduplication ("morpheme repetition"; cf. line 4), which is, however, not the case for the other two types of "morpheme combination".

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate as well as useful and sometimes necessary to limit the analysis of diminutives to any one type of diminutive formation, including prototypical suffixation, as long as it is remembered that this is a methodological decision which can never provide "the truth" about diminutives, i.e. a complete picture. If the focus is on one language alone, then the primary aim should, however, be to establish the full range of processes available in this language for forming diminutives (cf., e.g., Schneider 2003 on diminutives in English). In a second step, this initial overview should be supplemented by in-depth studies. Ultimately, not only each formation type occurring in a language (e.g. suffixation or periphrastic constructions), but each diminutive marker available in this language (e.g. each suffix or adjective) merits, and in fact requires, such an in-depth study. Ideally, studies are based on large electronic corpora of contemporary language. This is the best way, I suggest, to obtain a fuller picture. It would be great if typologists could draw on comprehensive accounts of this type, but as large electronic corpora do not (yet) exist for many of the world's languages, typologists have to resort, as they do, to the descriptions available, which often are very limited in scope and outdated, if not inaccurate. This is a serious, but of course well known problem. In the most general terms, in-depth studies of each diminutive marker have to include three parts, namely to specify the properties of the marker, the properties of the input, i.e. the base form, and the properties of the output, i.e. the diminutive.

In the following, the type of analysis I have in mind is briefly illustrated by using the example of English diminutive formation with the suffix *-let*. In this, I concentrate on the properties of the base forms. Bases are general nouns, but not names, especially not first

names. Concerning their syllable structure, bases are monosyllabic, always ending in a consonant (e.g. *book*, *flat*, *pig*, *king*). These seem to be well attested facts (cf. Schneider 2003: 96-102, also Schneider & Strubel-Burgdorf 2012). More systematic searches in larger corpora have, however, shown that these findings have to be supplemented. Here are three new insights obtained in an analysis of one of the largest corpora of the English language. The corpus which was used is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), comprising more than 400 million words of written and spoken language. This corpus was searched automatically for words ending in -*let*, and the hits were edited manually. The first new insight is that bases also include clipped nouns, which has not been observed before. Thus, *lablet*, for example, is derived from *lab*, which is, of course, a truncated form of *laboratory*, and *applet* is derived from *app*, which is a truncated form of *application*. However, as the form to which the suffix is attached is also monosyllabic, this finding is perhaps less relevant to the study of diminutive formation than it is to the study of diminutive processing. *Applet*, for instance, could be misinterpreted as a diminutive form of *apple*, particularly when listed out of context, as is common practice in work on word-formation (cf. section 3 below for further discussion). The second insight is that bases may not only be monosyllabic, but also bisyllabic. Examples include *crater, parrot* and *bookmark*. Suffixing these trochaic bases results in dactylic diminutives, viz. *craterlet, parrotlet* and *bookmarklet*. Finally, monosyllabic and bisyllabic bases may end not only in a consonant, but also in a vowel or a diphthong. Examples are, e.g., *bra*, *bay*, *pie* and *echo*, resulting in *bralet*, *baylet*, *pielet* and *echolet*. An additional issue of formation refers to bases ending in an /l/, e.g. *owl* or *isle*. This final /l/ does permit suffixation with -*let*, but leads to a simplification in spelling, i.e. *owlet* and *islet* (diminutives derived from such forms as isle, circle and temple in particular seem to contradict the alternative analysis considered in Bauer et al., in press: 667).

Further aspects which can be addressed in an analysis of diminutive formation, and specifically in qualitative and quantitative studies of each diminutive marker in a given language include (type and token) frequencies as well as issues of productivity of each marker, e.g. based on an examination of the hapax legomena in a large corpora of present-day language.

3. Analyzing diminutive meaning

In the preceding section it was argued that an onomasiological approach to the analysis of diminutives is more fruitful than a form-based approach. It was, however, also pointed out, albeit perhaps only in passing, that an onomasiological analysis can only be successful if it is clear which meaning or concept is expressed. Yet, this is where the semantic problems of defining and analyzing diminutives start (cf. section 1), because there is no general agreement on what should be considered the meaning or meanings of diminutive forms.

A standard description of diminutive meaning is that the meaning of the base word is essentially retained, and that the semantic component SMALL is added through the diminutive marker. This additional component does not change the meaning of the base word, but merely modifies it. In this view, cubelets and droplets, for example, are still cubes and drops, as mentioned at the beginning of section 2. They are, however, small ones compared to the size considered normal for cubes and drops respectively. As sweeping generalizations are not helpful in a discussion of diminutive meaning, I continue to use the example of English diminutive formation with the suffix -*let*.

The standard description of diminutive meaning mentioned in the preceding paragraph is, however, not always adequate. While the meaning of the form *cubelet* may well be glossed as 'small cube', the meaning of the form *wifelet* cannot be glossed as 'small wife'. As a rule, *wifelet* expresses a negative evaluation of the referent, i.e. a negative attitude of the

speaker/hearer towards the referent, and, more precisely, such emotions as contempt (cf. Schneider & Strubel-Burgdorf 2012 for further discussion). By contrast, a negative meaning component is usually absent in such diminutives as *cubelet* and *droplet*. In such cases, only size but not attitude seems to matter. In the light of these findings, it has been suggested that this meaning difference results from the semantic category of the base word, as *cubelet* and *droplet* denote inanimate entities, while *wifelet* refers a person. It has been further suggested that three semantic patterns can be observed in formations with the suffix *-let* (Schneider & Strubel-Burgdorf 2012: 17-18). These are:

(1)   N 'object' + *-let* > N 'small object' (e.g. *cubelet, droplet, bomblet*)

(2)   N 'animal/plant' + *-let* > N 'young animal/plant' (e.g. *piglet, skunklet; plantlet, nutlet*)

(3)   N 'person' + *-let* > N 'despicable person' (e.g. *wifelet, princelet, thieflet*)

Bauer et al. (in press: 666), who discuss formations with *-let* taken from the British National Corpus, also distinguish the first two of these patterns, but not the third. In the first pattern, they describe the meaning component added by the suffix as "a simple meaning of small size used on inanimate entities". The label 'object' employed in pattern (1) above is, in fact, shorthand for 'inanimate entities', as this category includes not only man-made objects such as *bomblets, pielet* and *flatlets*, but also natural phenomena such as *droplet, cloudlet* and *wavelet*. The suffix meaning in the second pattern is characterized by Bauer et al. (in press: 666) as "'small of a species', occasionally 'young of a species'". Their examples include animal terms exclusively, while my COCA data also include plant terms, e.g. *branchlet, bulblet* and *rootlet*. Plant terms are, however, much less frequent in the corpus. While the meaning of diminutives derived from plant terms seems to be 'small X' more often than 'young X', the opposite seems to be true for animal terms. Diminutives such as *piglet, skunklet, froglet* etc. usually refer to 'young of a species' rather than 'small of a species'. Young animals are, of course, not only younger but also smaller than adult animals.

As mentioned before, Bauer et al. (in press) do not identify the third semantic pattern listed above (i.e. N 'person' + *-let* > N 'despicable person'), despite the fact that they discuss the forms *wifelet* and *kinglet* and the various meanings these forms may express, before they present their semantic groups (Bauer et al, in press: 664-665). They do, however, list another third group, for which they characterize the meaning of *-let* as "slightly disparaging" (Bauer et al., in press: 666). This group includes *godlet, playlet* and *starlet*. These forms do not, however, pose any serious problems and can actually be subsumed under the semantic patterns listed above. While a god, by definition, is not a person, gods are often personified, i.e. humans think about gods as persons. Hence, the form *godlet* would fit the third pattern. More importantly, and irrespective of whether or not gods are personified, the default reading of *godlet* (which could, I propose, be established experimentally) is 'despicable god' or something similar. In other words, *godlet* is used to express a negative attitude towards the referent. *Starlet* seems to be a more complicated case. This form is derived from *star*, an expression which metaphorically refers to a person, specifically a famous person such as a film star. Therefore, the third semantic pattern appears to be the relevant one. However, starlets are not (really) 'despicable persons' because they are still young and therefore not famous yet. Consider, for example the following definition of *starlet* in the COBUILD dictionary (1995): "a young actress who is expected to become a film star in the future". Youth seems to neutralize or at least mitigate the negative attitude usually expressed through diminutives derived from persons, as young age also serves as an explanation of small size in the case of animals and plants. On the other hand, it is worth noting that, while stars may be male or female, starlets are always female. *Starlet* cannot be used to refer to men and, thus,

conveys a (covert) negative attitude (on the sexist use of diminutives, cf. Schneider & Schneider 1991, also Schneider & Strubel-Burgdorf 2012). This negative attitude is at least implied in other dictionary definitions, cf., e.g., "a young actress with aspirations to become a star" (NODE 2001), "a young actress who plays small parts in films and hopes to become famous" (DCE 2003).

Finally, *playlet* is an 'inanimate entity' and, therefore, the first semantic pattern appears to be applicable. On the other hand, 'size', in terms of three-dimensionality, is definitely irrelevant. What is relevant in this case is the dimension of time. *Playlet* is therefore understood as a short play, i.e. as a play which is shorter than full-length plays, which take up the "whole" evening. The example of *playlet* shows that the semantics of the base words plays an even larger role than the three semantic patterns discussed so far suggest. A case could, therefore, be made for establishing more semantic patterns or at least distinct sub-patterns. 'Inanimate entities' could, for example, be subdivided into 'physical objects' (e.g. *cubelets*, *bomblets*) and entities for which length or time is relevant (e.g. *playlets*, *novelets*). However, a more elegant solution seems to be to find a common denominator, not only for these subdivisions, but in fact for all semantic patterns. A possible generalization would be that the referents of diminutives are considered as subnormal, i.e. below the norm (whereas the referents of augmentatives could be regarded as supernormal, i.e. above the norm). The relevant norm depends on the category the base word belongs to. For *droplets*, the relevant norm is the usual size of a drop, which may vary across types of liquids, but is essentially determined by natural laws, and this applies to all natural phenomena. For artefacts such as household items and furniture, normal size depends on their functionality for adult humans. For example, platelets or little chairs (to also include a periphrastic construction) are smaller than normal plates or chairs for adult use and possibly made for children or, when even smaller, doll houses. For playlets and other cultural phenomena the relevant norms may be more variable and differ cross-culturally and/or historically. In the case of animals and plants and also humans, size correlates with age. In these cases, the norm is determined by average adults. For some human categories, however, size and age are irrelevant. This applies in particular to such roles referred to as *wife*, *king* or *thief*. For these categories, concepts of a 'good wife' or a 'good king' constitute the norm, and diminutives derived from such expressions are used to refer to 'underperforming' individuals. In this sense, the referent of such diminutives can be considered subnormal. It is, incidentally, not relevant what exactly the respective norm is, or whether the referent is actually perceived as subnormal by the speaker/writer. What is crucial is that the referent is represented as subnormal. This may be done for a number of reasons and purposes (cf. also section 4 below). The discussion of English diminutives and specifically nouns derived from nouns by attaching the suffix *-let* should not blind us to the fact that in other languages diminutives may also be formed from bases belonging to other word classes, especially from adjectives and verbs (cf., e.g., Schneider 2003: 5-6). There are also norms for their referents, e.g. a prototypical quality in the case of a qualitative adjective, or a specific intensity or duration of an action in the case of an action verb.

Subnormality is often not stated neutrally, but evaluated negatively. This applies in particular to diminutives derived from nouns denoting persons. Underperformers are viewed critically and referred to with contempt or similar emotions. If, however, subnormality results from young age, then it may not be assessed as a deficit, since there are natural causes. The diminutive *plantlet*, for example, can be interpreted as 'tiny or embryo plant' or as 'underdeveloped plant'. In the latter case, the meaning is negative. This distinction is, in fact, much more relevant for humans and also pertains to the category of functional roles mentioned above, as the following examples show.

(4)   There are stories that, failing Imperial heights, he plans to carve out a new Empire in the Barbarian hinterland. It is said, but I don't vouch for this, that he has already given one of his daughters as wife to a Kinglet somewhere in the uncharted Periphery." (Asimov 1951: 160-161)

(5)   Three diminutive Kinglets, carrying a Kelly lamp, a silver sugar castor, Mrs Ellenby's Chinese enamelled cigarette box, bowed, wobbled, kneeled. (Byatt 1986: 40)

(6)   *Andy*:   And if this little kinglet of corporate shit thinks he can get away with this, he's greatly mistaken. (Rafelson 1992)

The first of these examples, which is taken from a science fiction novel by Isaac Asimov, illustrates the original and literal meaning of the diminutive *kinglet*, which is defined in dictionaries as "a weak or petty king" (MWOD 2012), or: "Often derogatory the king of a small or insignificant territory" (CED 2003). In this example (under (4)), *kinglet* refers to a king who is politically insignificant because his kingdom is in "the uncharted Periphery", allegedly in "the Barbarian hinterland". In the second example (under (5)), taken from A.S. Byatt's novel *Still Life*, the form *kinglets* refers to three young children (hence the modification *diminutive*, and the wobbling) enacting the roles of the three magi (hence the capitalization of *kinglets*) in a nativity at school. In the eyes of the spectator who describes this scene these young children, who are not real kings and therefore not measured against the norms specifying what a 'good king' is, are just sweet and not evaluated negatively. Finally, in the third example (under (6)), which is taken from the cinema movie *Man Trouble* directed by Bob Rafelson, Andy uses *kinglet* metaphorically to refer to her former boss, who made her redundant. She is angry about this man, who in her view plays the king unsuccessfully and behaves rather like a would-be king. Her negative evaluation is emphasized by combining the morphologically and syntactically marked diminutive *little kinglet* with the expletive *shit* in the explicitly insulting phrase *this little kinglet of corporate shit*. These examples show that the diminutive *kinglet* can be used literally and metaphorically, with a negative or a positive meaning, depending on the referent and the context in which this form is used.

An internet search for *kinglet* provided more than one million hits, most of which, however, referred to the bird *kinglet*, whose ornithological name *regulus* is a Latin diminutive derived from the word for 'king', which suggests that the English form is a borrowing. Regarding the study of diminutive meaning, the crucial point is that the existence of a fully lexicalized bird name which is used very frequently does not block the employment of *kinglet* as a genuine, i.e. non-lexicalized and fully transparent, diminutive, as illustrated in the three examples discussed above.

In the context of presenting semantic groups of diminutives derived with *-let*, Bauer et al. (in press: 666) also mention a group of formations denoting a "'piece of jewelry or adornment'", including, e.g., *armlet*, *necklet* and *wristlet*. In these forms, the base refers to the body part where the piece of jewelry is worn. Accordingly, *necklet*, for example, does not mean 'small neck'. Yet, this is not the full picture. The existence of forms with this meaning does not block the use of these same forms as diminutives either. To begin with, armlet is also commonly used to metaphorically refer to a small inlet of the sea or a small branch of a river. Furthermore, and more importantly, it is perfectly conceivable that *armlet* is used to refer to the respective body part of a child or a doll. In general, it can be observed that fully lexicalized or opaque forms do not block the use of these same forms as transparent diminutives, expressing (some of) the meanings discussed so far.

At this point, I would like to return to two semantic issues mentioned briefly above. These issues are neutral versus evaluative meaning, and positive versus negative evaluation. For either pair, there is no established terminology. Instead, a wide range of different terms

are used in the literature, among them both traditional and more recent terms. Neutral meaning is also referred to as, e.g., descriptive, cognitive or denotative meaning and, more specifically, quantitative meaning. Evaluative meaning, on the other hand, is referred to as, e.g., connotative, expressive, emotive, affective, attitudinal or associative meaning and, more specifically, qualitative meaning. Alternative terms for positive and negative evaluation include, among others, endearing, hypocoristic, meliorative and appreciative, and derogatory, pejorative, deteriorative and depreciative respectively (for a discussion, cf. Schneider 2003: 10-15 and 20-22).

Concerning the first of these semantic issues, it has been debated controversially whether or not forms must express evaluative meaning to count as diminutives. Essentially, three positions are found in the research literature: 1) diminutives have to express 'smallness', and only 'smallness'; 2) diminutives have to express 'evaluation', and only 'evaluation'; or 3) diminutives have to always express both, 'smallness' and 'evaluation' (cf. Schneider 2003: 10-15 for discussion). However, this debate seems to miss the point. One and the same diminutive form can be used to express different meanings. *Kinglet*, for instance, can, as has been demonstrated, express a negative evaluation or positive feelings. *Playlet*, to take another example, can be used to refer to a short play, thus expressing a neutral quantitative meaning, but it can also be used to characterize a play as insubstantial or bad, thus conveying a negative evaluation. Moreover, forms such as *tartlet* are ambiguous, depending on the meaning of the base form from which they are derived. If *tartlet* is derived from the term for a specific type of pastry, then the (default) meaning of the diminutive form is purely quantifying (it may also be qualifying, if the referent is considered disappointingly small). If, however, *tartlet* is derived from the colloquial and derogatory term for prostitutes, then the meaning of the diminutive is also derogatory. Finally, the fact that forms such as *applet* or *thumblet* are now frequently used in the sphere of Information Technology with very specific meanings ('a small application program' and 'a micro USB' respectively) does not preclude their use as diminutives referring to a small apple or the tiny thumb of a baby.

As has been shown, diminutives, and even the very same forms, can express a range of different and sometimes contradictory meanings. These observations have to be adequately dealt with in a semantic analysis of diminutives. It is therefore suggested that the diverse meanings form a conceptual space of interconnected meanings which are essentially based on the general notion of subnormality. This space includes notions of 'smallness' in a concrete quantitative and dimensional sense as well as in a figurative sense, and importantly also possible evaluations of subnormality, which may be positive or negative. Figure 1 (below) includes a proposal of what this conceptual space might look like. The shape suggests that it is a fuzzy category. The inventory of meanings included in this space is merely illustrative and not exhaustive. This inventory may change diachronically and vary across languages; it may even differ for each of the diminutive markers available in a language. It is, therefore, not advisable to lump together, e.g., all diminutive suffixes of a language in an analysis of diminutive meaning. Finally, the idea of this conceptual space is perfectly compatible with the finding that diminutives are acquired and used very early in life (cf. Schneider 2003: 36 for references). An alternative approach to diminutive meaning is included in Fortin (2011).
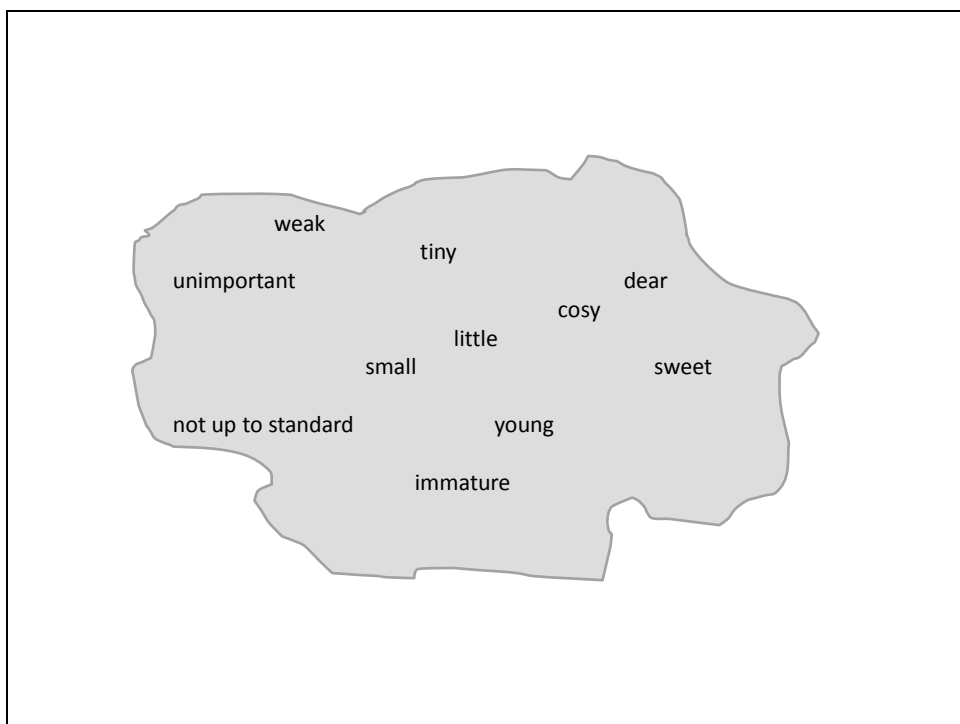
Figure 1 *The conceptual space of diminutive meaning*

The most important question is, of course, which meaning in the conceptual space is activated in the employment of a diminutive form and relevant for its interpretation. As should be obvious from the discussion in this section, this question cannot be answered by examining isolated diminutive forms out of context. Diminutive meaning crucially depends on the co-text and situation in which a diminutive is used. In the following section, an approach is developed which takes these insights into consideration. This approach is suggested to circumvent the problems concerning the formation and the meaning of diminutives addressed in this and the preceding section. Furthermore, it is argued that this approach offers a better alternative for typological studies of diminutives.

4. Analyzing diminutive function in context

Considering the two-fold problem of diminutive research addressed in section 1 and elaborated in sections 2 and 3, namely the problems with diminutive formation and diminutive meaning, the question is now posed what typological comparison can be based on. It is clear that the typological study of diminutives cannot be reduced to prototypical diminutives and suffixation. Taking a wider range of formation processes into account necessitates, as has been argued, an onomasiological approach. However, bearing in mind the difficulties associated with diminutive meaning and the fuzziness of the relevant conceptual space, this option does not offer an entirely convincing alternative. Therefore, in this section, an attempt is made to outline a pragmatic perspective which might serve as a 'tertium comparationis' in cross-linguistic and typological studies. The current approach is based on work in morphopragmatics and notably Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994), which is, however, mainly focused on prototypical diminutives in Italian. The current approach is also based on the integrative formal-functional framework for diminutive analysis developed in Schneider (2003), whose pragmatic part mainly concentrates, however, on speech act types

and illocutionary acts. By contrast, the approach suggested here focuses essentially on social functions specific to the type of context.

This approach is illustrated here with the example of meiosis, which is standardly defined as 'intentional understatement'. It has been shown that diminutives can be used for exactly this purpose, i.e. to represent something as lesser in size or significance (cf. section 3 above). Staverman (1953), who discusses diminutive usage in Dutch, identifies one specific use which he calls 'diminutivum modestum'. In this case, diminutives are employed to avoid exaggeration and boasting (Staverman 1953: 409-410). This particular use of diminutives is also discussed by Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 331-337). Here is one of their Italian examples (followed by an interlinear translation into English and a gloss in idiomatic English, as provided by the authors):

(7)   *Ho fatto anch' io i miei pass-etti ava*nti.
        I've made also I the my steps-DIM forwards
        'I've also made my own modest progress/little steps ahead'
        (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 332)

This example, "uttered by a woman referring to her career advances, where she did not want to appear boastful to her interlocutor" (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 332), includes the (prototypical) Italian diminutive form *passetti* in the phrase *passetti avanti*, translated literally as "little steps ahead" (with the periphrastic English construction *little steps*), and alternatively more freely as "modest progress", actually using the adjective *modest* in the English gloss of the Italian 'diminutivum modestum'. Characteristically, the diminutive form is prefaced with the first person possessive *miei* (rendered in English as "my own"), and the grammatical subject of the sentence is the first person singular pronoun referring to the speaker. Both devices explicitly indicate that the 'diminutivum modestum' is employed to play down the speaker's own achievement.

Similar examples from German are discussed in Ettinger (1974), who reports that the eminent German writer Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), in letters to his publishers, repeatedly referred to his own works as *Gedichtchen* (< *Gedicht* 'poem'), *Romänchen* (< *Roman* 'novel'), *Werkchen* (< *Werk* 'work') or *Bändchen* (< *Band* 'volume') (Ettinger 1974: 63). Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 331-332) also quote an Italian writer who refers to one of his works as *la mia poesiola* (translated, again periphrastically, as "my little poem"). Examples from the Greek language illustrating the use of 'diminutiva modesta' are presented in Sifianou (1992).

The examples discussed so far might suggest that the use of diminutives as 'diminutiva modesta' is specific to Indo-European languages and diminutive use in cultures in which these languages are spoken. Yet, this is not the case. Haas (1978) refers to diminutives in Snohomish, a (now nearly extinct) Salishan language, spoken in the North West of Washington State, close to Canadian border (Lewis 2009). Haas (1978: 86) quotes Hess (1966: 351-352), who maintains that a speaker of Snohomish "often uses the attentuative [i.e. diminutive] in referring to his own possessions in order to indicate humility." The use of 'diminutiva modesta' is, thus, not limited to Indo-European languages, but also found in indigenous languages of North America.

More recent examples are provided by Agbetsoamedo (2011), who analyzed the diminutives of Selee, a still understudied Niger-Congo language spoken in Ghana by some 10,000 speakers. The recordings were made in February 2011. In the following two examples, the diminutive forms are periphrastic constructions, although Selee also has a diminutive suffix (*-bi*) and a diminutive class marker similar to those in Bantu languages (*ka-*). There seems to be a 'division of labour' between these three diminutive patterns (Agbetsoamedo 2011: 30-31; page numbers refer to PowerPoint slides).

(8)   *Ami apìtìpìtì nwu ko nin-te mi lɛ-ta fɔ nɛ*
        1SG small DEF only 3PL-sleep 1SG 1SG.RP-give 2SG CP
        'I have only something small to offer you'

(9)   *Leyo bììbìì ko le-tofo*
        House DIM only 1SG.RP-build
        'I only build a small house.'

The diminutive markers used in these two examples are *pìtìpìtì* and *bììbìì* respectively, both pronounced with low tone. Agbetsoamedo (2011: 21) glosses their meaning invariably as 'small meliorative'. If, however, these two markers are pronounced with high tone, they express the opposite evaluation, glossed as 'small derogatory'. The evaluative meaning of these diminutive markers of Selee is, thus, not just a matter of hearer interpretation in context, as is the case with most diminutives in Indo-European languages, but marked formally by tone.

Regarding the 'small meliorative' meaning of the diminutives in the above contexts, Agbetsoamedo (2011) provides more specific comments. She writes about example (8): "The diminutive can be used to downgrade an object or event by the speaker. This is normally done by speakers who do not want to be seen as bragging or showing off" (Agbetsoamedo (2011: 24). Similarly, in her comment on example (9), she writes: "the speaker downgrades his personal achievement by stating that […] he built a small house which in fact is a two-storey house" (Agbetsoamedo 2011: 25). This second example clearly shows that a 'diminutivum modestum' is used specifically in such contexts in which the speakers are especially proud of their own achievement or possession which they refer to by employing the diminutive form. A two-story house is a big and not a small house. Reality thus contradicts speaker representation.

Diminutive use remarkably similar to the use of the Selee diminutives in examples (8) and (9) can be observed in English, despite all typological differences between these two languages. Example (10) corresponds to example (8), while (11) corresponds to (9) (cf. Schneider 2003: 223-224 for a discussion of these English examples).

(10)   *Here's a little something for your birthday.*

(11)   *I've got a little chalet in the mountains.*

An example similar to (9) and (11) is given by Staverman (1953: 410) who notes that a Dutch speaker may use a diminutive to refer to a house he built which has more than twelve rooms, and Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 334) provide Italian examples in which "a luxurious mansion" is referred to by a diminutive (*villino* or *villetta*). Staverman (153: 410) further mentions the use of a diminutive (viz. *wagentje*) to refer to a car, and Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 336) provide an Italian and also a Viennese German example in which the speakers refer to their "splashy Mercedes" respectively as *la mia machinetta* and *mein Wagerl* (both prototypical diminutives, preceded by a first person possessive). Regarding such examples, Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994) discuss the difference between true and pretended modesty. They finally arrive at the conclusion that it is impossible for a hearer or an analyst to tell the difference without knowing the wider context. They further note (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 335):

Although it may be important for the addressee to understand whether the speaker is truly modest or not, the speaker would hardly use different strategies as far as diminutives are concerned. Regular differences would be strategically self-defeating, since false modesty only works if interchangeable with true modesty.

It should be clear, however, that if an obvious clash occurs between the downgrading force of the diminutive on the one hand, and the size or importance of the referent of this diminutive on the other hand, then the addressee will infer that the speaker is proud of his or her possession or achievement. In this case, diminutives, by minimizing the expression of self-praise, are used to boast in a socially acceptable way.

Irrespective of whether or not true modesty motivates the use of 'diminutiva modesta', i.e. when speakers talk about their own achievements or possessions, this use of diminutives observes Leech's Modesty Maxim (Leech 1983). This is also noted by Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 335), who add, however, that "the morphopragmatics of English diminutives is too limited to allow this." This additional remark reveals the narrow focus of their study on prototypical morphological diminutives, as indeed the term 'morphopragmatics' shows.

Leech's Modesty Maxim is phrased as "Minimize praise of *self*" (Leech 1983: 132; original emphasis). It is one of his six maxims of politeness, which come under his Politeness Principle. Hence, following the Modesty Maxims means being polite, and thus the use of 'diminutiva modesta' is also polite. As the Politeness Principle is formulated as "Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs" (Leech 1983: 81), a full version of the Modesty Maxim would be 'Minimize the expression of beliefs which express or imply praise to self' (by analogy to the full version of the Tact Maxim provided by Leech 1983: 132). This formulation describes more precisely what speakers or writers do when using a diminutive to play down their own achievements or the value of their possessions.

Considering the various examples from Dutch, German, Italian, Greek, Snohomish, Selee and English discussed above, it seems that modesty is a language- and culture-independent value, and that diminutives employed for praise minimization are, perhaps, even a pragmatic universal. It has, in fact, been argued that Leech's Politeness Principle and its maxims are better suited for cross-cultural comparison than other politeness theories (cf., e.g., Chen 1993). Against this background I would like to suggest that 'modesty contexts' could be a starting point for typological work on diminutives. Situations in which speakers or writers refer to their own achievements and possessions would be one specific type of 'modesty context'. From a perspective unprejudiced by traditional views of diminutive form and meaning, any linguistic device employed to represent an achievement or possession as less impressive, valuable, praiseworthy, etc. may count, prima facie, as a diminutive. If corpora are available for a language, searches involving strings such as 'I have a' or 'This is my' may facilitate the collection of occurrences of this particular 'modest context', which can then be used in production questionnaires or interviews (cf., e.g., Kasper 2008) for more controlled and systematic data collection in the same language, or in languages for which corpora are not yet available. Complementary strategies of data collection include, of course, the creation of concordances for established diminutives derived from words denoting possessions such as houses, cars or books. Further 'modesty contexts' include situations involving praise of other which (following Leech's Approbation Maxim; Leech 1983: 132) is effectively maximized by ironically representing as small or insignificant etc. what is obviously just the opposite. Such contexts specifically include situations in which a visitor pays the host or hostess a compliment and uses a diminutive to refer to something which requires praise, again including cars and houses (at least in some cultures). English examples would be *Nice little car*, *This is a nice little room*, *What a nice little garden!* (cf. Schneider 2003: 203-204). In general, specific types of context suitable as a 'tertium comparationis' in contrastive and typological work can be identified by comparing and classifying contexts in which established diminutives in well-researched languages are frequently used.

5. Conclusions

Despite a very large body of research on diminutives, there are still problems pertaining to both the formation and the meaning of diminutives. At least some of these problems stem from the traditional notion of prototypical diminutives and are particularly acute in cross-linguistic and typological work. For such work, a focus on prototypical diminutives is too narrow, as is a limitation to word-formation or morphology. In short, diminutives are not, generally speaking, a morphological category. Other linguistic devices must also be considered in the analysis. These include, for instance, reduplication, compounding and periphrastic constructions.

An onomasiological approach, on the other hand, is also problematic as long as it is not sufficiently clear what exactly the meaning is which diminutive forms express. Progress in this regard can be made if the various meanings which even the very same form may express are fathomed out systematically. These meanings include neutral and evaluative meanings, negative and positive evaluations, and different types of ambiguities. This semantic range must be accommodated in a model of diminutive meaning. However, this range cannot be adequately examined by considering diminutive forms in isolation. What is needed instead is empirical research based on corpora of present-day language use.

To avoid formal and semantic problems, an alternative approach is proposed which seems particularly suitable for cross-lingual and typological studies. In this approach, the starting point for the analysis is neither form nor meaning but function, and especially socially motivated functions which diminutives fulfill in specific types of context. The example chosen to illustrate this approach is a particular type of 'modesty context', i.e. a type of situation in which speakers talk about their own achievements or possessions and employ diminutives to minimize self-praise and avoid boasting, thus observing the politeness maxim of modesty. As this type of 'modesty context' exists in a large number of related and also unrelated languages, it is suggested that context types of this degree of specificity can be used to identify diminutives across languages in an unprejudiced way.

Acknowledgements

References

AGBETSOAMEDO, Yvonne. 2011: The Selee Diminutives: Origins, Forms and Functions. Paper presented at the *12th International Pragmatics Conference*, Manchester, July 2011.

ASIMOV, Isaac. 1951. *Foundation*. London : Panther Books, 1974, pp. 160-161.

BAKEMA, Peter, GEERAERTS, Dirk. 2000. Diminution and Augmentation. In BOOIJ, G.E., LEHMANN, C., MUGDAN, J. (eds.). *Morphology: an international handbook on inflection and word-formation*. Vol. 1. Berlin : Walter de Gruyter, 2000, pp. 1045-1052.

BAUER, Laurie, LIEBER, Rochelle, PLAG, Ingo. In press. *The Oxford guide to English morphology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press.

BYATT, Antonia S. 1986. *Still life*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1986.

CHEN, Rong. 1993: Responding to Compliments: A Contrastive Study of Politeness Strategies Between American English and Chinese Speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 1993, vol. 20, pp.49-75.

COBUILD 1995 = *Collins COBUILD English dictionary*. London : Harper Collins, 1995.

CED 2003 = *Collins English dictionary*. Available at: <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>

DCE 2003 = *Longman dictionary of contemporary English*. Harlow, Essex : Longman, 2003.

DRESSLER, Wolfgang, MERLINI BARBARESI, Lavinia. 1994. *Morphopragmatics: diminutives and intensifiers in Italian, German, and other languages.* Berlin; New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.

ETTINGER, Stefan. 1974. *Form und Funktion in der Wortbildung: Die Diminutiv- und Augmentativmodifiaktion im Lateinischen, Deutschen und Romanischen. Ein kritischer Forschungsbericht 1900-1970.* Tübingen : Narr.

FORTIN, Antonio. 2011. *The morphology and semantics of expressive affixes*. Oxford : University of Oxford. Available at: < http://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:88a23d7c-c229-49af-9fc9-2cb35fce9d54>

GRANDI, Nicola. 2011. Renewal and Innovation in the Emergence of Indo-European Evaluative Morphology. In KÖRTVÉLYESSY, L., STEKAUER, P. (eds.): "Diminutives and Augmentatives in the Languages of the World." *Lexis: e-journal in English lexicology*, 2011, vol. 6, pp. 5-25. Available at: <http://lexis.univ-lyon3.fr/IMG/pdf/Lexis_6.pdf>

HAAS, Mary R. 1978. The Expression of the Diminutive. In DIL, A.S. (ed.). *Language, culture and history: essays by Mary R. Haas*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1978, pp. 82-88.

HASPELMATH, Martin. 2007. Pre-established Categories Don't Exist: Consequences for Language Description and Typology. *Linguistic Typology*, 2007, vol. 11, pp. 119-132.

HESS, Thomas. 1966. Snohomish Chameleon Morphology. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 1966, vol. 32, pp. 350-356.

KASPER, Gabriele. 2008. Data Collection in Pragmatics Research. In SPENCER-OATEY, H. (ed.). *Culturally speaking: managing rapport through talk across cultures.* Continuum, London, 2008, pp. 279-303.

LAPPE, Sabine. 2007. *English prosodic morphology*. Dordrecht : Springer, 2007.

LEECH, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of pragmatics*. London : Longman.

LEWIS, M. Paul. 2009. *Ethnologue: languages of the world*. 16th edition. Dallas, Texas : SIL International, Online version. Available at: <http://www.ethnologue.com>

MWOD 2012 = *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*. Available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/copyright.htm>

NODE 2001 = *The new Oxford dictionary of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

RAFELSON, Bob (dir.). 1992. *Man trouble*. 20th Century Fox, 1992.

SCHNEIDER, Klaus P. 2003. *Diminutives in English.* Tübingen : Niemeyer, 2003.

SCHNEIDER, Iris, SCHNEIDER, Klaus P. 1991. 'Ach Kindchen, davon verstehen Sie nichts!' Über den sexistischen Gebrauch deutscher Diminutivformen. In FELDBUSCH, E., POGARELL, R., WEISS, C. (eds.). *Neue Fragen der Linguistik. Akten des 25. Linguistischen Kolloquiums, Paderborn 1990.* Vol. 2: *Innovation und Anwendung*. Tübingen : Niemeyer, 169-174.

SCHNEIDER, Klaus P., STRUBEL-BURGDORF, Susanne. 2011: Diminutive *-let* in English. *SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics*, 2011, vol.9:1, pp. 15-32.
Available at: <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTL20/pdf_doc/2.pdf>

SIFIANOU, Maria. 1992. The Use of Diminutives in Expressing Politeness: Modern Greek versus English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1992, vol. 17, pp. 155-173.

STAVERMAN, W.H. 1953. Diminutivitis Neerlandica. *De Gids*, 1953, vol. 116, pp. 407-419.

ŠTEKAUER, Pavol, VALERA, Salvador, KÖRTVÉLYESSY, Lívia. 2012. Word-formation in the world's languages: a typological survey. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Klaus P. Schneider
Institut für Anglistik, Amerikanistik und Keltologie (IAAK)
Bonn Applied English Linguistics (BAEL)
Regina-Pacis-Weg 5,
53113 Bonn, Germany
k.schneider@uni-bonn.de