The meaning of diminutives: A first-order perspective

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Abstract
Despite a host of publications on evaluative morphology, no agreement has been achieved on the semantics of diminutives. It must, however, be borne in mind that all descriptions of diminutive meaning in the research literature are second-order conceptualizations, i.e. abstract scientific constructs developed by linguistic experts. The present paper, by contrast, is aimed at exploring first-order conceptualizations, i.e. how ordinary language users understand the meaning of diminutive forms. The paper reports on an experiment which involves collaborative translating. The findings reveal first-order conceptual-izations, which may advance our understanding of the semantics of diminutives.

Keywords: *evaluative morphology, semantics, first-order and second-order conceptualizations, comprehension, experimental data, joint translating, collaborative thinking-aloud, introspection, verbal protocols.*

> "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."
> Sherlock Holmes in *A Scandal in Bohemia* (1892)

1   Introduction

Diminutives are traditional category, and there is a long history of diminutive studies (cf. e.g. Grandi and Körtvélyessy 2015). Books and articles have been written about diminutives at least since the mid-nineteenth century, and yet several issues are still controversial to this day. The current situation is characterized as follows in the *Oxford reference guide to English morphology*: "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" (Bauer et al. 2013: 664).

In the present paper, I do not address the issues related to the "formal means employed to express diminutive meaning", which have been dealt with elsewhere (Schneider and Strubel-Burgdorf 2012, Schneider 2013). Instead, I concentrate on the semantics of diminutives and offer a new approach to examining diminutive meaning. Specifically, I suggest a first-order approach which examines how ordinary language users who are not professional linguists process and understand the meaning of diminutives. It is argued that the conceptualizations of these users and the categories they employ to describe and talk about diminutive meaning may supplement previous scholarly analysis by providing new insights and an empirical basis for clarifying some issues which no agreement has been reached on in the literature so far.

In the following section, some of these controversies are mentioned and the status of lay conceptualizations is briefly addressed. In section 3, the methods are described which were employed for the present study to tap relevant lay concepts. The results of an experiment are then presented and discussed in section 4, before the paper closes in section 5 with a summary of the main findings and a short discussion of the limitations of this study.

2   Background

Diminutives express smallness. This is the standard definition found at least in terminological dictionaries and textbooks on morphology and word-formation. However, this definition has been challenged from different perspectives. In the many controversies about diminutive meaning, the following questions have not received a conclusive answer yet, or, rather, different answers have been given in different traditions and approaches:

- Is the expression of smallness obligatory?
- Is the evaluative/attitudinal/expressive/emotive, etc. meaning which diminutives can also express optional?

- Is 'smallness' the denotation and an evaluation etc. the connotation?
- Is metaphorical smallness a denotation or a connotation?
- Is it contradictory that the evaluation expressed, even by the same diminutive form, can be positive or negative?
- Do all meanings which can be expressed by diminutives belong to one and the same conceptual space of metonymically linked assessments?
- Do true diminutives express smallness exclusively?
- Do true diminutives express an evaluation exclusively?

These questions will, however, not be discussed in any detail in the present paper (for a discussion, the reader is referred to Schneider 2003 and 2013). It will not be examined whose position is more convincing or less convincing, nor what the arguments, the criteria or the evidence are in each case. What is emphasized instead is that all of the views of diminutive meaning which are held by semanticists, lexicologists and morphologists are 'second-order conceptualizations', i.e. abstract theoretical expert constructs. Against this background, the question is posed what first-order conceptualizations look like, in other words, how lay persons interpret the meaning of diminutives.

The distinction between first- and second-order concepts has become relevant in many disciplines and fields of inquiry. For instance, in studies of relational work in communication there is an on-going debate about first- and second-order (im)politeness (cf., e.g., Bousfield 2010). In their recent monograph *Understanding politeness,* Kádár and Haugh (2013: 41) offer a general explanation of the two types of conceptualizations:

> The terminology of first-order and second-order is used in various fields of linguistics, as well as other areas. In general, a first-order conceptualization refers to the way in which a phenomenon is perceived by its users, while second-order describes a more abstract, scientific conceptualization of the given phenomenon.

The overall purpose of the present paper is to explore first-order conceptualizations of diminutive meaning as a complement to second-order conceptualizations. It is

expected that an analysis of the former sheds more light on some of the problems mentioned above and, thus, contributes to a better understanding of the semantics of diminutives. While second-order conceptualizations are often based on a random collection of decontextualized diminutive forms interpreted by individual researchers relying on their own respective language competence and communicative experience alone, the present study investigates how a group of language users interprets diminutives in context. Which methods were employed to examine these lay interpretations is described in the following section.

3   Method

Examining how language users understand diminutives is not a trivial task, as semantic processing and processes of comprehension cannot be immediately observed. Accordingly, a range of methods was adopted which provide indirect access to what goes on in the mind of language users. These were methods developed and employed in cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics and applied linguistics (cf., e.g., Saldanha and O'Brien 2014), and included recall experiments and translation tasks. The latter yielded both product data and process data, i.e., on the one hand, translated texts, and, on the other hand, manifestations of cognitive processes such as problem-solving and decision-making while translating. The product data were elicited in hand-writing or on a computer. Computer-writing was accompanied by key logging, employing *Translog II*, the software standardly used for this purpose in translation studies and writing research (cf. Jakobsen and Shou 1999). The process data were collected through verbal reports which were either retrospective interviews following the completion of the translation task, or think-aloud protocols, i.e. transcribed audio-recordings of verbalizations produced during the process of translating. The think-aloud protocols were of two types. One type was monological, elicited from individuals, and the other dialogical, recorded while two informants were translating collaboratively (cf., e.g., Pavlović 2009). In the following, the focus will be on the dialogue protocols of joint translating exclusively.

Using translations in diminutive research has a long history (cf. Schneider 2003: 27-28). Traditionally, empirical studies of this type examine only translation products,

but not process data. In these studies, as a rule, prose fiction is used, e.g. a novel, and source text and target text are compared. The aim consists in establishing cross-linguistic equivalence between expressions of diminution by contrasting diminutives in the original work and their translations. The results show how individual translators interpret the meaning of diminutives. In the present study, by contrast, not only prose fiction is used, but also other sources. Furthermore, a group of non-professional translators is involved in the experiments to reveal supra-individual or collective aspects in the processing and understanding of diminutive meaning.

The translation task which was employed included three sentences, one in English and the other two in German. The informants were asked to translate the first sentence from English into German and the second and third sentence from German into English.

1. *If this little kinglet of corporate shit thinks he can get away with this, he's greatly mistaken.*
2. *Oh, Mütterlein, wie gut warst du zu mir!*
   ['Oh, mother dear, how good you were to me!']
3. *Was geschah im Bahnhof des kampanischen Städtchens Marcianise?*
   ['What happened at the railway station of the small Campanian town of Marcianise?']

The first sentence is taken from the film script of an American cinema movie, the second sentence from the lyrics of a song, and the third one from a newspaper article. Each sentence includes a prototypical diminutive form, i.e. a noun derived from a noun by adding a diminutive suffix, namely *kinglet* (< *king*), *Mütterlein* (< *Mutter* 'mother'), and *Städtchen* (< *Stadt* 'town'). While these diminutives occur in context, the context is only minimal in the sense that it is restricted to an isolated sentence in each case. Only three sentences were chosen so that it was not too obvious to the informants what the experiment was about. They were led to believe that it was a general translation task, and the term 'diminutive' was not mentioned. The purpose of the experiment was further obscured by including different diminutive suffixes (*-lein* and *-chen*) in the two

German sentences. Moreover, the phrase *of corporate shit* in the first sentence, and the two geographical names *kampanisch* and *Marcianise* in the third sentence worked as distractors. The informants found these items particularly difficult to translate.

The population consisted of postgraduate students (N = 10) in the MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of Bonn who were in their first year of this two-year program. Most participants were native speakers of German with a high proficiency in English. The students worked in pairs on a computer and jointly translated the three sentences, which were displayed, with the instructions, in the upper part of the user interface of the key logging program *Translog II*, while the informants keyed their translation into the lower part of this interface (the resulting key logging protocol of the writing process is only visible in the researcher interface of that program after completion of the task).

4   Results and discussion

In this section, the results of the experiment are presented and discussed. In the present paper, the key logging protocols are not referred to, the focus is only on the dialogue protocols. I will begin with sentence 3, containing *Städtchen* ('town-DIM'), whose interpretation and rendering was found to be less complex than in the other two sentences, which include diminutive forms referring to humans. That diminutives referring to humans seem to be harder to process than diminutives referring to other entities can be considered a first finding, which will be elaborated below.

4.1 Städtchen

For convenience, sentence 3 is presented here again: *Was geschah im Bahnhof des kampanischen Städtchens Marcianise?* ['What happened at the railway station of the small Campanian town of Marcianise?']. Of the five informant groups, two finally rendered the German diminutive in this sentence as *town*, using no explicit diminutive marking (groups 2 and 4). Two further solutions were *small town* and *small city*, i.e. two periphrastic diminutives with *small* (and not *little*) in both cases, but combined with different bases (groups 5 and 3). The fifth group avoided the problem altogether by

retaining only *Marcianise*, the Italian place name, in their translated text (group 1). Why these translations were chosen and how they were arrived at can, however, not be established with reference to the final solutions alone, but only by analyzing the dialogue protocols recorded while the translation task was being performed. Here is an excerpt from one of the elicited protocols.

<u>Excerpt 1 (group 2)</u>
```
A: But Städtchen is little city, yeah?

B: Yeah, //right

A: It's\\ not a g- it's not a big one, so like town? It's a town,
Städtchen? Can we say that?

B: Ah, yeah like little, yeah
```

In excerpt 1, *Städtchen* is immediately associated with *little city*, for which *town* is then considered a more concise term. A city, in this conceptualization is big, but a *Städtchen*, like a town, is *not a big one*. It is worth noting here that informant A, in her first turn, uses *little* and does not use *small*, which is usually considered the default meaning, or even the invariant meaning of diminutive suffixes (cf., e.g., the discussion in Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994). It is further worth noting that A, in her second turn, uses *big*, and not *large*. In other words, this informant seems to regard *little* and *big* as a pair of antonyms, and seems to think that this pair adequately captures the meaning of diminutives and their opposites. This finding is in line with results from research on the acquisition of adjectives in English as a first language. It has been found that *little* and *big* form a pair (albeit an asymmetrical one: *little* is used much more frequently than *big*) which is acquired at an earlier stage than the pair *small* and *large*, which is semantically more neutral, purely quantitative in meaning, and more restricted in use (cf. Schneider 2003: 127, for further discussion). Arguably, the incomplete word in *It's \\ not a g-*, uttered by A in her second turn, is the onset of an abandoned *great*, since *g-* appears in the same syntactic position as *big* in the following phrase realizing the same

syntactic frame, viz.*it's not a big one*. Spontaneously selecting *great* in place of *big* may be attributed to interference from the informant's first language, which is German. The German adjective *groß*, which can be used as an equivalent of both *big* and *large* in English, starts with the same consonant cluster as *great*.

Excerpt 2, by contrast, is an example in which the word *village* is considered as a solution, but then rejected, as it is regarded as the equivalent of the German word *Dorf*, which clearly denotes a rural and not an urban place. Instead, the two members of this group agree on *small town*.

Excerpt 2 (group 5)
```
B: of the\\ kampanische? (laugh) city? Or small town maybe?
Because //Städtchen?

A: village\\ no

B: No, village, would be Dorf

A: yeah, yeah

B: Städtchen is small town

A: Yeah
```

It is worth pointing out that in both excerpts, no. 1 and no. 2, no solution appears in isolation. That is to say, words which are considered English equivalents of the diminutive in the source text are always contrasted with related concepts, and attempts are made to pinpoint the differences between them. This is also true for excerpt 3, in which the informants start with comparisons and end up with an explicit hierarchy of expressions in terms of size.

Excerpt 3 (group 4)

```
A: Städtchen, I'd rather translate with town than with city

B: Ok or even sma- //but I

A: small city\\

B: But I don't know how big the city is, or town. I think town is
always ok but I dunno if you would say town or small town. Or
small town is rather village (laugh)

A: Yeah is this the hierarchy, you got village, then you got
small town, you got town, you got small city and then city?

B: I mean, it means you have village, town and city

A: Yeah
```

Here, informant A develops a five-point scale, ranging from the *village* through *small town*, *town* and *small city* to *city*, which is then reduced by informant B to the three unmodified lexical items *village*, *town* and *city*. This particular hierarchy, which is primarily based on size, does not seem to be specific to German users of English. It seems to be psychologically real more generally. This assumption is supported by the following quotation from a recent novel by the London-based author Tash Aw (2014: 205; added emphasis):

> She thought of her mother, living alone in that **small town** in the north of Malaysia, a **town** that was shrinking, becoming less and less alive as each year passed. It was the opposite of the Chinese **villages** that these girls spoke of, that grew and grew with the money they earned in the **big cities** on the coast, the fields of rice and wheat shrinking and eventually turning into industrial parks and high-tech factories, **the villages**

> **becoming towns, the towns cities**, because the girls who left would one day go back and get married, as certain as the seasons passed.

In excerpt 4, *city* and *town* are compared, and *small city* and *small town* are also considered. What is worth noting in particular, however, is what happens next. Informant A then introduces a further meaning component of *Städtchen* which is not mentioned by any of the other groups.

<u>Excerpt 4 (group 2)</u>
```
B: Campanic. Uhm, now, small city

A: Mmh (affirmative)

B: Maybe, we have city and town, //so

A: mmh (affirmative)\\

B: maybe it could be more of a town than a city?

A: Yeah, yeah I would say that but

B: Maybe small town?

A: Yeah. It- I- idyllic? This is also somehow in Städtchen? Isn't
it? So this //idea of

B: Maybe\\ mmh (affirmative)

A: Or romantic but yeah, //you can't

B: maybe, yeah\\. Maybe it's, that would be too much
interpretation
```

Informant A claims that the German suffixed diminutive conveys not only smallness, but also an evaluative meaning component tentatively described by this informant as *idyllic* or *romantic*. What seems to be implicit in this claim is that *Städtchen* is tacitly contrasted with the competing German compound *Kleinstadt*, in which the same base, *Stadt*, is combined with the adjective *klein*, the equivalent of English *small*. Arguably, this compound is more neutral than the diminutive form and that it expresses only smallness. If *Kleinstadt* has connotations, then these are negative as in the case of *petit bourgeois*. By contrast, *idyllic* and *romantic* are clearly positive. Informant B is, however, skeptical of A's claim, thinking that A's interpretation is too far-fetched. This observation illustrates the intricacies of relational work between informants in collaborative translation tasks which are sometimes considered a disadvantage of this particular method (cf. Pavlović 2009: 90-95).

In the light of the above findings, it appears that for native speakers of German diminutive forms such as *Städtchen* primarily express a quantitative meaning, and specifically small size, but may also convey an additional qualitative meaning, which may be a positive evaluation. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the assessment of size is often based on explicit comparison between semantically related concepts and between the terms used to name them in both the source and target language. Needless to say, a much larger empirical basis is needed to substantiate these preliminary findings.

4.2 *Mütterlein*

The second sentence the informants were asked to translate includes the German diminutive *Mütterlein* ('mother-DIM'): *Oh, Mütterlein, wie gut warst du zu mir!* ['Oh, mother dear, how good you were to me!']. In this case, the translations of the German diminutive in the target texts were less varied than in the case of *Städtchen*. In the present case, there were only two types of solutions: either *mommy*/*mummy* (in American or British spelling), chosen by groups 1, 2 and 3, or *dear mother*, chosen by groups 4 and 5. The latter solution is structurally analogous to *small town*/*small city* (adjective + base noun), but neither *small* nor *little* are considered here, as the

diminutive suffix is seen to express endearment and not size. The other solution formally resembles the German diminutive, assuming that *mommy/mummy* is derived from *mom/mum* by suffixation, following the pattern *piggy < pig*. *Mommy/mummy* is, however, more informal than *Mütterlein*, given in particular that *-lein* is used rather than the competing suffix *-chen*, which is more frequent today. By comparison, *-lein* is more old-fashioned and more poetic, which is why *mother dear* is preferred over *dear mother* in the above English gloss of the German sentence. The informality of *mommy/mummy*, by contrast, results from the fact that it is usually used by (young) children to address their mother. In this function, it is, of course, also a term of endearment. Thus, all the translations of *Mütterlein* which the informants came up with show that size is not an issue in this case, and that modifying the base word with *small* or *little* is, therefore, not an option.

Again, a much more differentiated and complex picture emerges from the dialogue protocols recorded during the collaborative performance of the translation task. In excerpt 5, informant B tries to capture the meaning of *Mütterlein* by starting from the base form *Mutter* ('mother') and suggesting that the diminutive derived from it should be *softer*, to which informant A responds by putting forward *Mutti*. *Mutti* is also derived from the German word for 'mother', formed by truncating the base *Mutter* and adding the suffix *-i*. This German suffix (like the roughly homophonous English suffix spelled <-ie> or <-y>) is classified by some scholars as a diminutive suffix, and by others as a hypocoristic suffix. This German sufix is highly productive, often employed by children and generally used in informal situations characterized by a low degree of social distance, e.g. among family members (cf. Schneider 2003: 20, also 86-91). Therefore, the stylistic value of *Mutti* differs from that of *Mütterlein*. *Mutti*, like *mommy/mummy*, represents a higher level of informality. Irrespective of this difference, B accepts *Mutti* and offers *mummy* as an English translation, which is the solution this pair of informants finally settles on. Thus, this solution was found via a (near-) synonym of the source word, which is a well attested strategy of lexical search in translating (cf., e.g., Zimmermann 1989).

Excerpt 5 (group 1)
```
B: Mutter but but

A: Eh //yeah

B: more\\ softer

A: Mutti-like yeah //I

B: Mutti\\ yeah

A: Mhm (affirmative) Ehm

B: Mummy oh mummy
```

Another pair of informants (group 2) considers further alternatives in both German and English (cf. excerpts 6-9). In excerpt 6, they explicitly compare *Mütterlein* to *Mütterchen*, trying to establish what the difference between these two competing forms might be. They agree that the form including *-lein* combines the notion of smallness with a positive attitude or feeling, whereas the form including *-chen* is used to refer to an *old woman* (first realized as *old lady*, but abandoned before completion), and specifically to a woman who is not only *old* but also *weak*, implying a negative attitude.

Excerpt 6 (group 2)
```
A: The analysis (laugh). Ok, so Mütterlein. But there's also
Mütterchen in German, isn't there?

B:Mmh mmh(affirmative). Mütterlein. Maybe, I think, or for me,
lein is small positive

A: Yeah, Mütterchen sounds like an old //la-

B: yeah\\

A: Old woman

B: Mmh (affirmative)

A: Weak, something

B: Mmh (affirmative)
```
In excerpt 7, informant B of this same pair tentatively considers *mummy*, which A, however, rejects, suggesting that *mummy* translates as German *Mami*, which A seems to regard as unsuitable. Instead, A attempts to find an English equivalent of *Mütterchen*, in order to arrive at a more convincing translation of *Mütterlein*.

<u>Excerpt 7 (group 2)</u>
```
B:Mummy maybe

A: Yeah. But there's also Mami //these

B: in German\\

A: kind of of of, yeah

B: Yeah (...)

A: I don't know if you can, (..) I can't even think of this
Mütterchen, something. An equivalent of that in English, I don't,
you normally say something like old old woman, or

B: Mmh (affirmative)
```

In the next excerpt (excerpt 8), B suggests as a translation not only *mummy*, but also *mum*, both prefaced by the possessive *my*, claiming that these combinations have the required positive connotations.

Excerpt 8 (group 2)

```
B: Ehm, yeah maybe something like my mummy or my mum? //this

A: mmh (affirmative)\\ yeah that, that would ehm incorporate this
yeah

B: This positive

A: Mmh (affirmative)

B: connotation

A: Yeah
```

In the last excerpt from this group (excerpt 9), the informants explicitly contrast English *mummy* and German *Mütterlein*. They come to the conclusion that these two expressions are not equivalent and that the difference consists in the attitude of the speaker towards the addressee. They posit that *mummy* is used when *looking up to somebody*, whereas German *Mütterlein* is used when *looking down at somebody*, i.e. in a *patronizing* way. What the informants probably have in mind in the former case are young children addressing their mother, while in the latter case the speaker they imagine is probably an adult who is younger than the addressee.

<u>Excerpt 9 (group 2)</u>

```
B: Mmh (affirmative). Yeah, although, I think mummy is is a bit
different from Mütterlein

A: Mmh (affirmative)

B: Because mummy is more like uhm

A: It's really what you say, it's looking u- yeah

B: Yeah looking up to somebody, Mütterlein is more like looking
down at somebody, I think

A: Yeah, it has a bit this this patronizing idea //doesn't it
```

In excerpt 10, another pair of informants (group 4) do not talk about the nature of the relationship between the interactants or the speaker's attitude but about the feelings of the speaker towards the addressee, which are characterized as positive. Informant A suggests *dear mother*, while B comes up with *sweet mother*, but is doubtful whether this is an adequate solution.

Excerpt 10 (group 4)

```
A: Dear mother, I was thinking about dear mother? 'Cause I think
th- this is a ehm expression of ehm yeah positive feelings
towards towards //the mother

B: yeah\\ I know sweet mother (laugh) I don't know if you would
say that
```

The final excerpt presented here (excerpt 11) also includes *dear mother*, which A in this pair of informants does not, however, hold to be an appropriate translation, assuming that *Mütterlein* refers to an old, but not dear woman. Informant B does not share this view, claiming that *Mütterlein* is merely an old-fashioned expression, thus introducing style as a new parameter of analysis. It is true that, as briefly mentioned above, the suffix *-lein* is generally felt to be antiquated by comparison to its rival *-chen*, at least in those cases where the two suffixes occur in free variation and competing forms exist, as is the case for the diminutives derived from the German word for 'mother', and where their choice is not constrained by phonotactic conditions (cf. section 4.3 below). Interestingly, B thinks that *Mütterlein* is *a very old way to say dear mother*, but at the same time believes that speakers who address their mother with this old-fashioned form do not take her *seriously*, which is, again, a matter of attitude, and thus an interactional parameter, rather than a matter of evaluation.

```
B: Ok, maybe oh dear mother how good you were to me

A: But isn't Mütterlein more like granny-ish?

B: Mhm (thoughful) no, I think it's just a very old way to say
dear mother in a

A: yeah

B: uhm didn't a- in a, yeah umph, not really taking her
seriously. Something like this, oh Mütterlein, you know?
```

The dialogue protocols discussed in this section provide at least four insights. First, in their search for a *softer* variant of 'mother' as an English equivalent of *Mütterlein*, the informants consider other German diminutives, namely *Mütterchen*, *Mutti* and *Mami*, and, in comparing them, attempt to determine their respective meanings and the differences between them. Second, some informants are more form-oriented and prefer the English renderings *mommy*/*mummy*, whereas others are more content-oriented and settle for *dear mother*. Third, quantative meaning in terms of size is not an issue. What is crucial is qualitative meaning. Fourth, there are clearly distinctive types of qualitative meaning, which can be referred to as evaluative, emotional, attitudinal, interactional, and stylistic respectively. These should not be confused.

4.3 Kinglet

Finally, the discussion turns to the English sentence, which was in fact the first sentence the informants had to translate: *If this little kinglet of corporate shit thinks he can get away with this, he's greatly mistaken.* Interestingly, translating this sentence created more problems than the translation of the two German sentences. This is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, translating from a foreign language is generally considered easier than translating into a foreign language. Yet, in this case, the opposite was true. Translating from L2 English was found more difficult than translating into English.

Secondly, suffixed diminutives are much more common in German than in English (cf., e.g., Grandi 2011). Hence, a German equivalent of *kinglet* should have been readily available. However, the one-to-one suffixed equivalent *Königlein* ('king-DIM') does not seem to be used any longer in present-day German, while *kinglet* is used relatively frequently (cf. Schneider 2013). At least, *Königlein*, while considered by some informants in the process of translating, is not adopted by any group as the final solution.

The translations of *kinglet* the five groups agreed on are extremely varied, and the final renderings of the entire phrase *this little kinglet of corporate shit* have to be regarded as free translations. None of the target texts includes a suffixed German diminutive, and only two of the five solutions involve explicit reference to a 'king' (groups 2 and 4). The two explicit references are *dieser kleine Scheißkönig* ('this little shit-king'), in which *shit* surfaces as the left component of a compound with *König* ('king'), thus conveying the negative evaluation and anger of the speaker, and *dieser kleine möchtegern King* ('this little would-be King'), in which the meaning of the diminutive suffix is interpreted as 'not quite as' (cf. Schneider 2003: 14), and in which English *king* is retained as a loan word that is commonly used in colloquial German to refer to a person who is playing the boss. Group 1, by contrast, only renders the negative evaluation, without any further modification, by using the swearword *Arschloch* ('asshole'). Group 5, on the other hand, concentrates on the metaphorical meaning of *king* in the given context, which they translate as *Chef* ('boss'), leaving both *little* and the diminutive meaning untranslated. Finally, group 4 decided on *dieser kleine Korporatdings-scheiße* ('this little corporate-thingy-shit'), in which components of the original English phrase have been jumbled into an vague expression, suggesting that the diminutive in the source text was not adequately understood.

The informants in group 2 initially consider *Königlein* ('king-DIM'), but then decide that in combination with *little* the suffix is dispensable. In an attempt to integrate *corporate shit*, they arrive at *dieser kleine Scheißkönig* ('this little shit-king'), but before they adopt this as their ultimate solution, they provisionally try to insert the German suffix *-lein* into this construction (*-lein* is obligatory after <-g>; *-chen* is not an option in this case). The result is rejected

on two grounds, as can be seen in excerpt 12. A thinks that it is *a bit too much*, meaning either the composite semantics of the resulting construction or its structural complexity, or both. B, on the other hand, reminds A of what they had said earlier, namely that *-lein* is too positive and clashes with the intended reading of *kinglet* in the given context, which involves a negative evaluation.

Excerpt 12 (group 2)
```
B: But we said lein is too positive and in in this case, so it
wouldn't work

A: And dieser klei-, dieses kleine Königlein, Scheißköniglein,
that's a bit too much I think
```

Group 4 is not focused on a negative evaluation which could be glossed as 'bad king'; they take a different approach. In excerpt 13, they foreground the fact that the referent of *kinglet* is not a real king, but only a *Möchtegernkönig* ('would-be king').

Excerpt 13 (group 4)
```
B: kleiner König?\\ (laugh)

A: Maybe this is rather meant like Möchtegernkönig? Something
like this?

B: I mean, I I don't think he's an actual king, so (laugh)

A: no, no no
```

A 'would-be king' is, as they then explicate, a person who *pretends to be even better than he is actually*. While this rendering captures important aspects of the English diminutive in the given context, it does, however, ignore the element *corporate* altogether. It is only at a later stage that they attend to this particular aspect and interpret *king* first as *CEO*, then as a person who is *authoritative*, also as *Vorstand* ('chairman' or

'managing director'), as cn be seen in excerpt 14. At an even later stage, they also take into consideration German *Chef*, which means 'boss' (not 'chef').

<u>Excerpt 14 (group 4)</u>
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B: Oh I know what kinglet of corporate shit means, I think.

A: What?

B: Uhm, well. uh, corporation, the king of a corporation? the,
maybe the

A: yeah

B: CEO of a corporation, and the corporation is shit, it's very
authorative, so maybe it's rather meant as uhm dieser Vorstand
von dem Haufen Scheiße, you know? Like the corporate shit
```

The informants in group 1, by contrast, take a more holistic approach, as demonstrated in excerpt 15. They translate the entire phrase *little kinglet of corporate shit* by using a single term, namely the swearword *Arschloch* ('asshole'). Admitting that this solution is different in formal and semantic terms, informant B explains that the phrase in the English source text has the same pragmatic meaning and thus the same communicative function as a swearword, namely to insult the interlocutor (cf. *to offend a person*) and to express emotion such as anger or annoyance (cf. *I'm angry with you, and so on and so forth*).

Excerpt 15 (group 1)

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A: Arschloch. Dieser, mhm, ja, kleinen, dieser kleine

B: Ne, I would, I would just uhm say little kinglet of corporate
shit, like, the whole thing is Arschloch (laugh)

A: Ok, Arschloch

A: Kinglet of corporate shit is like asshole, right?

B: That's not asshole but the meaning is the same, kind of bad
words that you want to offend a person and just say, I'm angry
with you, and so on and so forth, you know?
```

After establishing this type of pragmatic equivalence, the informants in group 1 stick to the German swearword in the written version of their translation, while the informants in group 5 (not quoted here) decide on *Chef* ('boss'), mentioned by group 4 as one possible reading of metaphorical *king*, not translating, however, the specific meaning of the diminutive.

5   Summary and conclusions

The present paper offers a first-order perspective on the semantics of diminutives. It reports on data collected in a collaborative translation task which reveal how language users process and interpret diminutive meaning. Data of this type provide much richer information about their comprehension processes and their understanding than product data, i.e. the translated forms alone. The dialogue protocols were analyzed to show which aspects of meaning are salient in processing, which categories are employed to talk about them, and how an interpretation is established. Essentially, language users focus on issues of size, evaluation and interaction. Size is considered relevant only where a diminutive refers to an entity which is not a person (e.g. *Städtchen*, 'town-DIM'), but not where a diminutive is derived from a word denoting a human social role

(*Mütterlein*, 'mother-DIM'; or *kinglet*). Evaluation, on the other hand, is salient where informants describe the referent e.g. as *idyllic*. Finally, diminutive meaning is interpreted in interactional terms where informants refer to an intention, an attitude, or an emotion, using such expressions as *to offend a person*, *patronizing*, or *angry with*. It is instructive to see which categories are activated in the process of understanding diminutives and which labels are actually employed for the respective evaluations, intentions, attitudes and emotions, also by comparison with the categories and labels found in the research literature.

The present study is limited in several ways. First, only three sentences were used in the experiment, including a total of only three different diminutive forms, because it was assumed that more diminutives would make it too obvious to the informants what the study was about. Second, while the diminutives which had to be translated did not occur in isolation, the context which was provided in each case did not go beyond the sentence in which diminutive appeared. Clearly, more contextual information would enhance the understanding of the diminutive forms. Third, only ten informants were involved, rendering this research a pilot study. Much larger populations are needed to reveal collective patterns and warrant generalizations. Fourth, arguably the informants were not ordinary language users, since they were students in a linguistics program. This program was, however, an applied linguistics program, and the students were not specialized in semantics, lexicology, morphology or word-formation. Moreover, experience from other empirical projects has taught me that language users with a different educational background are often reluctant to get involved in any experiments. Finally, it could be argued that translation experiments generally provide more information about the informants' language proficiency and translation competence than about their understanding of diminutive meaning, but alternative methods for accessing cognitive processes of comprehension are not easily available. Also, in the present project, the findings from the collaborative translation task reported on in this paper have been, and will be, triangulated with findings gained from other types of introspective and retrospective experiments. The results will, however, be reported elsewhere.

It must be emphasized that the present study is purely qualitative and exploratory in nature. Much more experimental work is needed to arrive at a more complete picture. Nonetheless, it seems safe to say, even at this stage, that first-order data from joint translating may contribute to a better understanding of diminutive meaning and may help to clarify some controversial issues found in the research literature on the semantics of suffixed diminutive forms. With this claim, I am not suggesting that a first-order perspective should replace a second-order perspective. What I propose is that the former may inform the latter and complement it in significant ways by offering further relevant information. A first-order perspective may thus increase the adequacy and enhance the validity of second-order conceptualizations of diminutive meaning.

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