

The largesse of diminutives: suppressing the projection of roots

Laura Grestenberger and Dalina Kallulli (University of Vienna)

1. Background and goals: Roots and their categorization make up a fundamental aspect of knowledge about the structure of language. Under a popular view expressed in its most extreme fashion in Borer (2005 et seq.), word meanings are unstructured content that is entirely shaped by the syntactic context in which it occurs. Thus, the lexicon consists of “roots”, which have no syntactic properties of their own whatsoever – i.e. they never project – but are instead categorized by the functional elements they combine with. The question of what blocks the root from projecting has however not been answered conclusively. The general goal of this paper is to contribute to two interrelated questions, namely: (i) whether roots have substantial meaning of their own independent of their syntactic configuration, and (ii) how roots are introduced into their morpho-syntactic environments. Specifically, we investigate so-called “diminutive” verbs (see section 2) and their argument structure in (primarily Austro-Bavarian) German and argue that their syntactic properties follow from the fact that they contain a diminutive nominalizer which blocks the projection of “verbal” arguments.

2. Core data: A number of verbs in German contain a so-called “diminutive” or “intensive” affix *-(e)l* (Elsen 2011, Fleischer 2012, Weidhaas & Schmid 2015), which attaches to adjectival (1a), verbal (1b) and nominal (1c) bases, triggers umlaut, and may be roughly characterized semantically in terms of Jurafsky’s (1996) notion of attenuation.

(1a) deadjectival	(1b) deverbal	(1c) denominal
<i>schwach</i> – <i>schwächeln</i>	<i>kochen</i> – <i>köcheln</i>	<i>Frost</i> – <i>frösteln</i>
weak - to be a little/act weak	to boil - to almost boil/simmer	frost - to be cold/freeze
<i>blöd</i> – <i>blödeln</i>	<i>drängen</i> – <i>drängeln</i>	<i>Schlange</i> - <i>schlängeln</i>
silly - to be a little/act silly	to urge/push - urge/push a little	snake – to move like a snake
<i>fromm</i> – <i>frömmeln</i>	<i>tanzen</i> – <i>tänzeln</i>	<i>Stück</i> – <i>stückeln</i>
pious - to act piously	to dance - to prance/skip	piece - to split into pieces

In the deverbal class (see (1b)), the addition of this morpheme can change the argument structure of the verbal basis. While different verb classes can serve as input for an *-(e)l* verb, the result is invariably an unergative activity verb – see (2a,b) vs. (2a’,b’) and (3a,b) vs. (3a’,b’) respectively:

- (2) a. *Das Wasser kocht.*
the water boils
b. *Hans kocht das Wasser.*
Hans boils the water
- a’. *Das Wasser köchelt.*
the water simmers
b’. * *Hans köchelt das Wasser.*
Hans simmers the water
- (3) a. *Peter drängte sich (nach vorne).*
Peter pushed himself (forward).
b. *Peter drängte Hans zur Seite.*
Peter pushed Hans aside
- a’. *Peter drängelte (*sich).*
Peter jostled/pushed himself
b’. * *Peter drängelte Hans (zur Seite).*
Peter jostled Hans (aside)

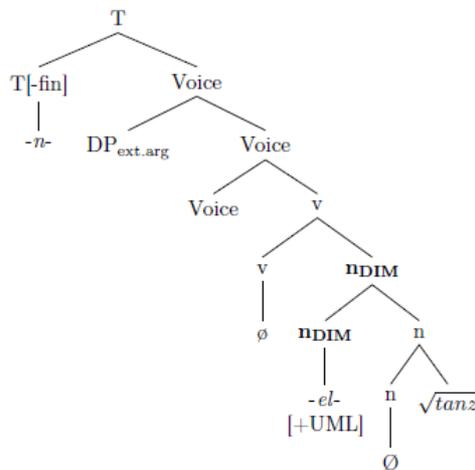
Moreover, in varieties of Austro-Bavarian, a non-umlauting *-(e)l-* or *-(er)l-* (henceforth: *-(e/er)l-*) is productive in deriving (optionally expletive) verbs of emission from nouns:

- (4) a. *Schweiß* *schweiß-el-n* b. *Maus* *maus-l-n* c. *Brand* *brand-l-n*
Sweat smell of sweat Mouse smell of mice burning, fire smell burned
- (5) a. *Der Hans schweiss-el-t.* b. *Es schweiss-el-t hier*
the Hans sweat-DIM-3SG.PRES it sweat-DIM-3SG.PRES here
‘Hans smells of sweat.’ ‘It smells of sweat here.’

3. Proposal: We argue that the verbal *-(e/er)l-*diminutive is structurally denominal, with the affix spelling out the head of a diminutive *nP* that selects nouns (cf. Wiltschko & Steriopolo 2007) and that was diachronically reanalyzed as part of the verbal domain of the structure. Denominal origin for some of these verbs has been proposed before (e.g. Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994), but no theoretical accounts of the various classes and their synchronic syntactic properties exist to date. Our analysis explains the change in argument structure in class (1b): both the fact that *-(e/er)l* is seemingly unrestricted w.r.t. what verb classes it selects, and the fact that the outcome is uniformly unergative, follow if the derivational basis is not actually verbal, but nominal, with *n_{DIM}* suppressing the projection of the arguments of the root. Note that this nominal diminutive suffix is still productive in Austro-Bavarian, sometimes with pejorative or ‘bleached’ meaning, as in: *Kleid* ‘dress’: *Kleid-l* ‘little dress’,

Brett ‘board’: *Brett-l* ‘little board’, *Sack* ‘bag’: *Sack-l/Sack-erl* ‘little bag’. We propose thus that the diminutive affix in (2) through (5) as well as in these nominals is one and the same, and in both cases spells out a nominalizing head n_{DIM} . In the verbs in (1a-c), this projection is then selected by a v [THING] head, as in Harley’s (1999) analysis of denominal location/locatum verbs. This head projects a thematic role, which is saturated by a DP introduced by a higher Voice head (Harley 2017, Wood & Marantz 2017). The structure is illustrated in (6) for the verb *tänzeln* ‘prance’.

(6)



Crucially, the umlaut is triggered by the presence of the diminutive suffix, as shown by examples of denominal verbs from non-diminutive *l*-stems (e.g. *Sattel* ‘saddle’: *sattel-n* ‘to saddle’, *Nagel* ‘nail’: *nagel-n* ‘to nail’). We take this as evidence that the diminutive nominal projection is also present in the apparently deverbal umlauting class (1b), e.g. *tänz-el-n*, *köch-el-n*, *dräng-el-n*, in which the diminutive semantics was reanalyzed as belonging to an iterative/pejorative/approximate projection v . The diachronic development of diminutives into nominalizers is cross-linguistically well attested, as is the development of pejoratives and approximatives from diminutive semantics (Dahl 2006). Our analysis thus readily derives the attenuative and pejorative semantics of the *(e/er)l*-verbs from their denominal origin.

The productive Austro-Bavarian class in (4) represents the last stage of this development, with *(e/er)l*-acting as a verbalizer. However, the affix here is structurally different from the one in the “deverbal” class: it lacks a Voice projection and does not trigger umlaut. We claim that this is because the $n_{\text{DIM}}+v$ structure in (6) was reanalyzed and “merged” as stative v and does not introduce a thematic role.

4. Corroboration: The Old High German (OHG) suffix *-il(a)* formed diminutives from nouns and instrument nouns from verbs (originally: nouns of appurtenance, e.g. *Arm* ‘arm’: *Ärmel* ‘sleeve’ < ‘pertaining to the arm’, *Eiche* ‘oak’: *Eichel* ‘acorn’, etc.) and triggers umlaut of the preceding vowel, its non-umlauting variant *-al(a)* being the source of the non-umlauting Austro-Bavarian diminutive:

(7)	Base	Diminutive	Base	Instrument noun
	a. <i>Busch</i>	<i>Büschel</i> (OHG <i>buskila</i>)	c. <i>*tug/tuh-</i> ‘pull’	<i>*tug-ila-</i> ‘instrument for pulling’ > <i>Zügel</i> ‘rein, bridle’
	b. <i>Auge</i>	<i>Äugel</i> (Austro-Bav.)	d. <i>*wurf-</i> ‘throw’	<i>*wurf-il-</i> ‘instrument for throwing’ > <i>Würfel</i> ‘dice’

Both diminutives and instrument nouns can and do become the basis for (descriptively zero-derived) denominal verbs throughout the history of German, e.g. *(be)äugel-n* ‘to eye sth.’, *würfel-n* ‘throw dice’, *zügel-n* ‘put reins on’. The nominal suffix of these forms was liable to reanalysis as verbal suffix (cf. the development of the Greek verbalizer *-izo*, likewise of denominal origin). Pivot forms for this development might include *tanz-en*: *tänz-el-n*, the latter likely to have originated from the diminutive *Tenz-el* ‘little dance’, which is attested in Middle High German.

5. Conclusion: On the basis of diminutive constructions in German, we have presented a novel, strong case for the constructionist idea that the projection of arguments fundamentally depends on the functional structure in which roots are embedded and not just on the properties of roots themselves.

Selected references: Dahl, Ö. 2006. Diminutives and augmentatives. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* 594–5. Dressler, W. U. & L. Merlino Barberesi. 1994. *Morphopragmatics*. De Gruyter. Elsen, H. 2011. *Grundzüge der Morphologie des Deutschen*. De Gruyter. Harley, H. 1999. Denominal verbs and Aktionsart. *Papers from the UPenn/MIT roundtable on the lexicon*. Harley, H. 2017. The “bundling” hypothesis and the disparate functions of little *v*. *The verbal domain* 3–28. OUP. Jurafsky, D. 1996. Universal tendencies in the semantics of the diminutive. *Language* 72:533–578. Weidhaas, T. & H.-J. Schmid. 2015. Diminutive verbs in German. *Morphology* 25/2:183–227. Wiltschko, M. & O. Steriopo. 2007. Parameters of variation in the syntax of diminutives. *Proceedings of the 2007 Canadian Linguistics Association Annual Conference*. Wood, J. & A. Marantz. 2017. The interpretation of external arguments. *The verbal domain* 255–78. OUP.