

**Diminutive Expressions in
Mosuli Speech: *A Pragmatic Account***

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Abstract

This paper, which is a limited part of an MA ongoing study, tries to investigate the pragmatic functions of a set of diminutive expressions consisting of ten Mosuli Arabic utterances of different genres. It aims at investigating how the pragmatic functions of diminutives in Mosuli dialect are employed to achieve polite speech. The investigation in this paper is based on Brown and Levinson (1987)'s theory of linguistic politeness. The data samples investigated here are collected spontaneously from everyday stereotype interactions taken place daily in Mosuli Arabic speech-community. The analysis of the data samples reveals that the natural use of diminutive expressions by Mosuli speakers uncovers that, in addition to their primary function denoting smallness, indicates pragmatic functions or strategies that are contextually employed to convey polite utterances concerned mainly with showing compliment, passion and love, intensifying speaker's feelings, lessening imposition, avoiding boasting or contempt, and improving social relationships in ironic situations. The findings show that the diminutive expressions analyzed here are used more frequently by females as a positive politeness strategy that demonstrates emotional and compassionate sense. Moreover, they show that these expressions create a friendly atmosphere for communication, and, in some contexts, function as a negative politeness strategy to minimize the imposition as they are used to mitigate negative utterances.

Keywords: *Diminutives, Mosuli Dialect, Pragmatic Functions, Polite Speech*

المصغرات في اللهجة الموصلية: دراسة تداولية

المستخلص

يحاول هذا البحث، الذي يعد جزءاً محدوداً من دراسة ماجستير جارية ، دراسة الوظائف التداولية لمجموعة من تعبيرات التصغير التي تتكون من عشرة تعبيرات موصلية عربية ذات أنواع مختلفة. يهدف البحث إلى دراسة كيفية توظيف الوظائف التداولية لتعابير التصغير في اللهجة الموصلية لغرض تحقيق خطاب مهذب. تستند الدراسة في هذا البحث إلى نظرية براون وليفينسون (1987) المتعلقة بالتهذيب اللغوي. تم جمع عينات البيانات بشكل تلقائي من تفاعلات التواصل النمطية اليومية التي تحدث يومياً في كلام المجتمع العربي الموصلية. يكشف تحليل عينات البيانات أن الاستخدام الطبيعي لتعابير التصغير من قبل المتحدثين الموصلين يكشف أنه ، بالإضافة إلى وظيفتها الأساسية التي تهدف إلى تحقيق التصغير ، تتضمن وظائف أو استراتيجيات تداولية يتم استخدامها سياقياً بهدف إظهار كلام مهذب يتعلق بشكل أساسي بإظهار المجاملة، العاطفة و الحب ، وتأكيد مشاعر المتحدث ، وتقليل فرض أو إقحام النفس ، وتجنب التباهي أو الازدراء ، وتحسين العلاقات الاجتماعية في المواقف الساخرة. تظهر النتائج أن تعبيرات التصغير التي تم تحليلها هنا تُستخدم بشكل متكرر من قبل الإناث كاستراتيجية مهذبة إيجابية تظهر الحس العاطفي والمرهف. علاوة على ذلك ، هذه النتائج تُظهر أن هذه التعابير تخلق جواً ودياً للتواصل ، وفي بعض السياقات ، تعمل كاستراتيجية مهذبة سلبية لتقليل فرض النفس على الآخر، حيث يتم استخدامها للتخفيف من الأقوال السلبية.

كلمات مفتاحية: التصغير، اللهجة الموصلية، وظائف تداولية، كلام التهذيب

1- Introduction

The speech community in the city of Mosul located in northern Iraq speaks a dialect known as Mosuli Arabic. It is one of the northern Mesopotamian dialects, which are a development of the Arabic dialects. Like other dialects of northern Mesopotamia, the Mosuli Arabic dialect shares some of the standard Arabic language's old aspects, but it also has some distinctive characteristics that set it apart from the others. Chief among these characteristics is those related to the formulation, categories, devices and functions of diminutive structures and expressions.

The word "diminutive" is frequently used in speech. In order to speak concisely and precisely for the users of Mosuli dialect, diminutive expressions are a vital tool. When these users want to say something in a succinct and direct manner with some pragmatic purposes; notably, those related to polite speech, diminutives often become necessary strategies. Therefore, diminutives, in the context of Mosuli Arabic speech-community, can be viewed as a contextual stylistic technique that enables speakers to develop specific extralinguistic meanings or functions that serve the desirable communicative aims of the speakers who involved in

routine stereotype speech. Because they are normally used to describe the emotions and feelings associated with a particular thing or person, diminutive expressions are, therefore, a matter of expressing affection, since they involve the feelings concerning the thing or person described.

In this paper, a limited project of an MA ongoing study, the pragmatic functions of a set of diminutive expressions consisting of ten Mosuli Arabic utterances of different genres are investigated in the light of the theoretical orientation based on Brown and Levinson (1987)'s theory of linguistic politeness. The data samples investigated here are collected spontaneously from everyday stereotype interactions taken place daily in Mosuli Arabic speech-community. From such a pragmatic perspective, the paper argues that the use of diminutive expressions by Mosuli speakers in their daily speech situations uncovers that, in addition to their primary function denoting smallness, implies certain pragmatic functions or strategies that are contextually employed to convey polite utterances concerned mainly with showing compliment, passion and love, intensifying speaker's feelings, lessening imposition, avoiding boasting or contempt, and improving social relationships in ironic situations. The paper also argues that the diminutive expressions considered here are used mainly by females as a positive politeness strategy that demonstrates emotional and compassionate sense. Moreover, the paper tries to prove that, when these expressions are used in appropriate situations, they can create a friendly atmosphere for communication, and, in some contexts, function as a negative politeness strategy to minimize the imposition as they are used to mitigate negative utterances.

1.1 Problem

The speakers of Mosuli Arabic dialect often use diminutive expressions in their daily speech with certain pragmatic nonlinguistic purposes. As a result, there is an intention for using such expressions. In this sense, the problem to be tackled here is that there hasn't been any study in the literature that tried to study such an intention and uncover how the pragmatic functions of such expressions are employed in Mosuli dialect to achieve polite speech.

1.2 Hypotheses

This study hypothesizes that:

1. Diminutives are existed and daily used in Mosuli Arabic dialect.

2. Diminutives are considered as linguistic devices that are employed to serve specific pragmatic functions and strategies.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the pragmatic functions of Mosuli diminutives?
2. Why do the speakers of Mosul speech-community use diminutives?

1.4 Aim

The current study aims at investigating the pragmatic functions that are reached through the utility of diminutive expressions in Mosuli dialect according to politeness framework of Brown and Levinson (1987).

1.5 Scope

1. This study covers the pragmatic use of diminutives regardless of their phonological, syntactic and morphological features.
2. Data samples in this study are limited to Mosuli daily colloquial (informal) speech in different genres.
3. The analysis of the data samples is conducted on the basis of Brown and Levinson (1987) theory of politeness.

2- Theoretical Background

The linguistic term 'diminutive' belongs to late Middle English. It actually comes from Old French *diminutif*, -ive that originated from late Latin *diminutivus*, from Latin *deminut-* 'diminished' (Concise Oxford English dictionary 2006: 403).

The word "diminutive" has historically been used to describe words that convey smallness and potentially an attitude. Depending on the precise interaction of linguistic and contextual elements in a given setting, the conveyed attitude might be either positive or negative, i.e. either affectionate or disparaging (Schneider, 2003:4). They are often supposed to be 'denominal' suffix nouns to convey smallness with a positive attitude (Gorzycka, 2020: 15).

A diminutive is defined in the Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics (1994: 5113) as an affix that carries the sense of implication "little" such as -let in piglet, notelet ...etc. In morphology, Crystal (1990:94) states that diminutive is a term that refers to an affix which

convey the meaning of little that is used literally or metaphorically as a term of "endearment".

According to Strang (1968: 138) "*diminutives are typically forms that started out by meaning "a small of its kind" but have undergone development whereby they come to express not only an assessment of size but also, or even exclusively, the speaker's response to small things, a response ranging from affection through condescension to contempt*". These linguistic structures are prevalent and in use in practically all languages (Jurafsky, 1996: 27).

As for Jespersen (1968: 11), English contains few little utilized diminutive suffixes as compared to Italian, German, and Russian, where diminutive creation is very productive. Other linguists hold even more extreme views, asserting that English contains absolutely no diminutives. English diminutives are created analytically (by adding an analytic marker before the noun) and synthetically (by adding a derivational affix), just like in other languages.

Base words can undergo changes in their phonological or graphological properties when the meaning of the original is modified. For instance, the term "dog" may undergo changes in its phonological and graphological properties. These changes are often influenced by rules that are not found in the language used to describe them.

Schneider (2003, 10) mentions that diminutives "prototypically communicate smallness." In contrast to other characteristics like endearment, which they consider to be its connotation, and its opposite form known as the augmentative, which expresses greater intensity, often in size but also in other attributes. Dressler & Barbaresi (1994, 85) refer to "smallness" as its "morphosyntactic denotation." This is an apparent recognition of the fundamental significance of the meaning "small" of the diminutive. Being very little in size is the quality of being diminutive. It is a phrase that is used to describe the occurrence of diminutive formation and use in linguistic circumstances.

In some cases, the term "diminutive" is only used to refer to the suffix. This means that the base word's meaning remains intact (Schneider, 2003:4).

The words "hypocorism" and "term of endearment," which are closely related to diminutives, should also be mentioned at this point. Although there is disagreement about how these terminologies should be used, most

people consider hypocorisms and phrases of endearment to be "pet names" or shorter versions of names (Concise Oxford English dictionary, 2006: 702).

In Arabic language, diminution is a technique similar to description in other languages. Arabic's diminution of the word aids in more precisely defining the referent. Ibn Usfur (1972:317) claims that *"taṣḡīr is a description by definition. Rujail, for instance, is a vile man"*. If buyayt is substituted for bayt (a house), the emphasis is placed on the quality of size.

According to the majority of Arab grammarians, such as Sibaweh (1988) and Ibn Ya'eesh (643), (cited in Ibn Usfur, 1972), diminution in Arabic language serves a variety of purposes and therefore has a descriptive value. According to Hazimy (2006:37), diminution is ultimately a matter of meaning, and meanings are not exclusive to a particular language or country. Diminution implies a certain meaning and is more than just a change in a word's form, also in Arabic language the morphological processes that form diminutives are called infixation or minor derivation (Abu-Mughli,1987: 411), i.e., the process that means the insertion of an affix within a word's root (See Al-Khuli, 1982: 113 and Crystal,1985: 10).

The majority of Arab linguists agree that the regular rules of forming diminutives are done by three basic patterns as below:

"The first pattern is 'fu'ayl' for the trilateral root, as in: 'jabal' (a mountain) which is diminuted as 'jubayl' (a small mountain). The second pattern is 'fu'ay'il' for the quadrilateral root as in: 'aqrab' (a scorpion) which becomes 'uqayrib' (a small scorpion). As for the third pattern, it is 'fu'ay'eel' and it is used with quinqueliteral roots as in: 'usfur' (a sparrow) whose diminutive form is 'usayfeer' (a small sparrow)" (Nahr, n.d.:179; Al-Ghalayīni, 1971: 87; Wright, 1971: 166; and Sībawayhi, 1999: 460).

With regard to meaning, 'Ibn 'Usfūr (1972: 80) states five principal meanings:

- 1-Minimizing the number of something, as in: 'durayhimāt' (few dirhams).
- 2-Minimizing the status of someone or something, as in: 'shuway'ir (a little poet) and 'buwayt' (a small house).
- 3-Showing contempt, as in: 'rujail' (a little man).

4-Approximating of time, as in: 'qubayl' (a little before) and 'bu'ayd' (a little after).

5-Approximating of place, as in: 'fuwayq' (a little above).

3- Pragmatic Functions of Diminutives

Until relatively recently researches on diminutives focused on grammar, while interest in diminutive meanings and functions was limited. This was in part due to the fact that pragmatics has a shorter history than grammar.

In English the alteration of meaning is often but not essentially conveyed through smaller size. English diminutives tend to be shorter and more colloquial than the basic form of the word.

Diminutives are usually those forms that have opened by meaning 'a small one of its kind', but have undergone a development whereby they have come to express not merely as assessment of size, but also, or even exclusively, the speaker's reaction to small things. Thus, such a response may range from affection through consideration to contempt. Consequently, it might be said that a diminutive is established when it carries only this 'reaction' implication (Al-Azzaawi 2006).

According to Mendoza (2005:169) he states that the meaning of diminutives is associated with the physical status which is smallness, however it might hugely trigger the speaker's intension and attitude relative to the social interaction and relations. These diminutive expressions can carry either positive emotional attitude or negative pejorative meaning by intensifying or attenuating force (Jurafsky, 1996) sometimes they reflect contempt and glorification (Badarneh, *ibid*). It can be said that the diminutives are of great importance to show the pragmatic function in social interaction. Thus, they are prominent linguistic devices that help to improve social discourse and how social issues attributed upon language (Mendoza, *ibid*:171).

Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994, 2001) state that the pragmatic function of dims is prior to semantic one, it means that dims convey more pragmatic feature referred as "non-serious" than the semantic feature of "smallness". They argue that the feature of small works only with the "diminution of the propositional content" (*ibid*:132).

There is an opposite view concerning diminutives by Jurafsky (1996). He (*ibid*:537) claims that diminutive expressions are semantically and

pragmatically attributed to children. This core feature is historically identified, but it also can express other senses in a metaphorical and inferential way (ibid:543). Wierzbicka (1984: 48) also mentions that the central pragmatic feature of diminutives is “child”. Pragmatically, Jurafsky (1996:535) suggests that diminutives can be used to cover the following notions: affection, contempt, playfulness, contexts involving children or pets, and metalinguistic hedges.

Sifianou (1992) studied the pragmatic functions of the diminutive in Greek in requests, offers, compliments, and other speech acts in which politeness is important. She found that Greek diminutives are used as markers of friendly, informal politeness and as a means of establishing or reaffirming a solidarity framework for the interaction, she concluded that these linguistic devices serve the positive politeness.

As for other languages, diminutives can be used as a pragmatic device to convey endearment, persuading the addressee and also for hedging (Terkourafi, 1999). In this sense, Mendoza (2005:171) also stated that diminutives in Spanish can serve as pragmatic hedges to attenuate the illocutionary force of utterance by minimizing imposition.

The diminutive has been discovered to provide an affective purpose in communication. Rudolph (1990), for instance, demonstrated how Portuguese diminutives function as unique indicators of emotions, conveying the speaker's feelings toward what is stated, toward the interlocutor, or employed as emotional expressions reduced to conventionalized intensifiers. Travis (2004) showed that diminutives in conversational Colombian Spanish have adopted the pragmatic roles of expressing affection, hedging speech acts, and conveying contempt in addition to their fundamental uses in regard to children and small size. He postulated that diminutives in Colombian culture are used to express trust and warmth. According to (Wierzbicka, 1992: 33), this cultural role can facilitate the way in which speakers exchange and express their feelings towards the others. Masliyah (1997) studied the morphological origins and use of diminutives in spoken Iraqi Arabic, observing that these words might be employed to convey fondness, contempt, augmentation, or pity.

Brown and Levinson (1987) deal with diminutives as markers for politeness theory. They (ibid) do not tackle diminutives in depth, rather that they consider them as terms used for expressing “function of claiming in-group solidarity”. They (1987:108) also mention that

diminutives forms are utilized to reduce face threatening acts, moreover Brown and Levinson say that diminutives may go beyond their function as “address term”, they can serve as positive politeness strategy to shed light on the emotional relation between the speaker and the addressee, or as a negative politeness strategy to attenuate imposition.

4- Methodology and Data Collection

The current study presents a pragmatic account of diminutives in contemporary Mosuli Arabic colloquial with reference to politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), in an effort to show how the diminutives expressions are used pragmatically as positive and negative markers for politeness. It also tries to create a view of the interactional strategies that can be considered as useful devices to show the pragmatic function of diminutives in general.

Data samples in this study are collected from Mosuli colloquial everyday speech used in spontaneous discourse. Over a period of more than two months, participant and non-participant observation was used to gather and record the data. It is believed that a better foundation for understanding the roles of diminutives in social interaction is provided by the use of real naturally occurring data in the study of the pragmatics of language features like the diminutive. As in many other languages, diminutives are more likely to be used in natural conversational contexts when there is an emphasis on nonverbal communication in Arabic. It is essential to say that the exact translation of diminutive expressions in Mosuli discourse is somehow difficult, as a result the translation presented in the current study is approximate.

5- Data Analysis and Discussion

- Sample (1):

دحقي هاي البنوة سمغا بس حلوي

Look, this girl (Dim) is dark but beautiful.

In this interaction, a woman who is 43 years old is talking to another woman referring to her little girl playing around. Pragmatically, when referring to a female with or as having dark skin tone in Mosuli community is considered to be face-threatening act in which white or fair

skin tone is more preferable as far as beauty is concerned. Thus, the speaker, in this way, is commenting on the little girl's appearance, it actually entails risk to the mother's positive face. As a result, the use of the diminutive is a strategy to reduce this risk by adding affection and warmth to the negative dispraising evaluation. The speaker further softens what is viewed as criticism in social and cultural contexts by utilizing the adversative phrase Hilwee "but beautiful" as a result of being aware of this threat to positive face.

Sample (2):

عبودي زت الموبايل من ايدك وقوم ادرس عندك امتحان

Abd Allah (Dim) put your cellphone away and stand up and study, you have an exam

Throughout this utterance, a 36 years old mother addressing her 17 years old son who is careless and asking him to study hard for the coming up examination. The use of diminutive in the above example pragmatically demonstrates the mother's anger and dissatisfaction as he is not intending to study. The mother here uses the diminutive form of his name rather than the base form of his name as a marker for her dissatisfaction. By using this, the mother has the intention to insult her son for being immature and irresponsible for his future. Although the diminutive here is intended as an insult, employing it in place of overtly offensive language makes the mother's tone of speech mild with little directness and offence. In this case the diminutive is employed as a device to express contempt and ridicule which displays that the mother "has a negative evaluation" of the positive face of the referent and "doesn't like/want one or more" of the referent's "wants, acts, personal characteristics, goods, beliefs or values" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:66).

- Sample (3):

كل من هاي البقلاوة بعد شويوني

Eat (some more) DIM of these sweets

Here in this interaction a woman is offering her guest some more sweets. It is unreasonable to interpret the diminutive in this sentence as specifically requesting that the guest consumes some more food. Instead, the diminutive is typically used by the woman as an 'offer' speech act. The diminutive employed here in this situation is used to show that the

woman is happy because the guest enjoys his being with her, also it is used to not to impose the guest by obliging him to eat more. It is worth to mention that the usage of diminutives of this kind in Mosuli dialect is similar to their usage in Polish language (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1997: 243).

- **Sample (4):**

ممکن اخذ من وقتك شوي؟

Can I take a little (Dim) of your time?

In this situation, a man is talking with another man asking for his help. The diminutive here in this utterance can be employed as speech acts as requests. Requests can be utilized as face threatening acts since they are loaded with specific range of imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Consequently, the diminutive needs to be lessened by the speaker. In most societies like Mosuli one, requests are considered to be as impositions irrespective of their degree of imposition. Therefore, there are some phrases that are used to attenuate the imposition. For instance, phrases, such as "الله يخليك , بلا امر عليك , ما ريد اتعبك", are usually used to lessen the imposition, with request purposes. The use of diminutive in such utterances which contains request presents that the speaker does not want an obvious effort on the part of the addressee, so that the core meaning of (little) is preserved. The diminutive here softens the power of request in an effort to adjust it to be more acceptable, thus it increases the possibility of accepting or approval, consequently, it serves as positive face politeness. Furthermore, as Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994) explain, the use of diminutives for polite reasons "maximizes social distance between recipients and promotes solidarity and intimacy with them." It can enhance loyalty and ultimately benefit both interlocutors." They also mention that "this ability to reduce the social distance between the speaker and the addressee is due to the diminutive adding of a ludic element to the request"(ibid: 251).

- **Sample (5):**

إذا عندك حاجي يم الكلب قلو حجي كليب

If you have business with a dog, call him Sir

In this example a man advises his friend who needs the help of another man to get some work to be done. During the interaction, the man uses the above example which is a Mosuli proverb. The use of the diminutive form (كليب) which means a small dog has a derogatory pragmatic

function. Addressing a human with a dog in Mosuli culture is considered to be very offensive and an insult, but the use of diminutive form here is an attempt to minimize the negative impact of making comparison between human and a dog. The above proverb postulates that one should use tact and diplomacy in order to gain what he needs. Although the above proverb is purely considered to be negative politeness but its use may mitigate the negative force over the comparison of human being with a dog as it can express a strategy by which the speaker uses in specific context to achieve acceptance and give joking sense.

- **Sample (6):**

غجال زغيفون ويقف عالباب

A man but little -dim is standing at the door

In this example, a girl is describing a short man who is standing at the door. The diminutive use in this situation does not change the truth that the man is short, but it actually mitigates the reference to the man's height. Therefore, by attempting to refer to others' usually unpleasant or negative features in a more elevated way, diminutivizing adjectives are intended to preserve the positive face of people. This function comes from the diminutive core meaning of "little size" as well as an implicit cultural association between children and smallness and worthlessness or insignificance on the other side.

Sample (7):

طلعت الشميسة على قبغ عيشة , عيشة بنت الباشا تلعب بالخشخاشة

The sun dim rose on Aiysha's grave, Aiysha is the daughter of Pasha, she plays with baby rattle.

The above example is a popular song usually sang by little girls while they are playing. In fact, there is another area in which diminutives can be used clearly. The diminutive, however, does not refer to the real size of the sun. Instead, it is employed for the sun in the whole utterance with an overt sense of familiarity and affection. The usage of "sun-DIM" in this song conveys the meaning of pleasant as well as the speaker's emotional state, which is equal to "I feel good" as a result of the weather clearing up and the sun reappearing with its warmth and light. The diminutive 'sun-DIM' further lends the phrase a positive politeness orientation and atmosphere.

6- Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that Mosuli dialect is rich with diminutives. These diminutives have an essential role in improving and maintaining social relationships among interlocutors which are considered to be as linguistic devices employed to convey specific pragmatic purposes. It is concluded that the majority of diminutives usage in Mosuli speech, according to the preceding examples, are utilized by females rather than males, this might be associated to some cultural and social matters as females' speech contains much more hedges than males. According to politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), it can be said that diminutives in Mosuli speech play a vital role in showing politeness during everyday speech situation and as a useful pragmatic strategy to avoid negative attitude and imposition in using certain utterances.

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