

**Morphosemantics of Diminutive Morphemes in C'LELA**

Muhammad Ango Aliero

Department of Modern European Languages and Linguistics Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria

**\*Corresponding author**

Muhammad Ango Aliero

**Article History**

Received: 14.12.2017

Accepted: 20.12.2017

Published: 30.12.2017

**DOI:**

10.21276/sjahss.2017.5.12.23



**Abstract:** This paper deals with the diminutives in C'lela. It examines the morphosemantic features of diminutive morphemes (*-wa*) and (*-i'*) in C'lela. The paper discusses the form and the various meaning associated with diminutives in the language. The information for this research was gathered from unstructured interviews with native informants. Other set of data was sourced from the extant literature on diminutives. The paper explores the basic meaning as well as the evaluative meaning of diminutives in C'lela. The study finds that, like in many other languages, C'lela diminutives primarily express the notion of smallness of size, shape and space, young, female and sometimes, used with negative connotations such as despise, insignificant or emaciation. The study shows that diminutives forms in C'lela can be identified by a regular morphological formation involving the (*wa-*) and (*i'-*) prefixes in most cases attached to the underlying base words that could be analyzed as deriving from a base found in a possibly related animate and inanimate nouns. It reveals that C'lela is an SVO language with masculine and feminine genders; however, these two diminutive affixes are not amenable to these two grammatical genders.

**Keywords:** C'lela, diminutives, morphosemantics, basic meaning, evaluative meaning

**INTRODUCTION**

C'lela (or Dakarci) belongs to Niger-Congo; Benue-Congo, North-Western Kainji group of languages [1, 2]. The language is spoken by a people called Lelna (sg. Klela) predominantly found in the eastern part of Kebbi State, Nigeria. This paper is written using the current C'lela orthography established in some other published works; where an apostrophe /' / is post-posed on the noun class markers, the underscored **e**, represents the phoneme (ɛ), **o** represents (ɔ) and **a** represents the near close-mid central vowel (ə) as has been done in some related Kainji languages like Kambari [3, 4], Tyap (Katab), and Tsuresha [5, 6]. The data for this research was obtained from unstructured interviews with C'lela native participants, the C'lela Dictionary by [7] and also from other literature on diminutives. The analysis for this study will be mainly based on the descriptive model of linguistics which develops a descriptive tools used for expressing morphological patterns as represented in the mental devise of speakers' linguistic knowledge.

Diminutive is a morpheme which is commonly associated the meaning of 'small'. It is a term used in morphology which refers to "an affix with general meaning of 'little', used literally or metaphorically (as a term of endearment)" [8]. Writers on diminutive system in languages [9-12] have a common ground that diminutive construction is far beyond expressing 'smallness', but also encompasses other wide range of meanings evoked by its various uses. For example [11], points out that a diminutive morpheme is a category-neutral evaluative affix, used primarily to create nouns with a positive or negative evaluative meaning. For instance, the Portuguese diminutive noun *avôzinho* means 'dear grand-father'; while in Dutch the diminutive form *baantje* refers to a 'job without prestige'.

Elaborate on the diminutive system for Akan, based upon two semantic groups of words: Diminutive forms of concrete concepts, and diminutive forms with evaluative meanings. In Akan, the addition of the diminutive suffix *-ba/ -wa* on concrete nouns conveys diminutive meanings such as 'small' (e.g. *asekamba* 'a pen knife'); 'child/offspring' (e.g. *abarimawa* 'boy, lad'); female (e.g. *abaayewa* 'young woman') etc.; while affixing the same diminutive suffix to non concrete nouns produces nouns with evaluative meanings such as insignificance / non-seriousness (e.g. *adewa* 'a little thing, trifle'); affection (e.g. *ɔdɔba* 'dearly beloved child'); admiration (e.g. *aniedemba* 'a stubborn person'); disdain (e.g. *abomfiawa* 'a despicable person) etc [12].

A number of cross-linguistic studies show that the term for diminutive originates from the lexical word for ‘child/offspring/son’, for instance, *-vi*; ‘child’ in Ewe [9]; *-ba*; ‘child/offspring’ in Akan [13]; *-lee*; ‘child’; in Dagaare [14, 10] cited in [12]. The application of these diminutive markers results in the basic meaning ‘small/young’.

The diminutive domain for C’lela is in some respects parallel to those in Akan, Ewe and Dagaare. The language essentially makes use of two separate diminutive prefixes; (*wa-*) associated with meaning ‘young/little’ and (*i-*) which also highlights an associative meaning ‘small’. The (*wa-*) diminutive marker in C’lela is associated with the singular diminutives nouns which has corresponding plural marker (*ya-*) and it is as well gender-free. It normally constitutes diminutives for animate human entities, except in very few cases. The (*i’-*) serves to form diminutives of concrete singular nouns, and it takes (*m’-*) prefix to form plural of this class.

Morphologically, the derived diminutive forms constitute trisyllabic words built on consonant initial disyllabic base. Semantically, these words in C’lela correspond to such English words as small, narrow, unimpressive or tiny etc, while some denotes unusual smallness or in effect abnormality. Unlike diminutives in other languages, many of which occur as independent nouns or adjectives, diminutives in C’lela function exclusively as derived nouns.

The paper is organized as follows: The introductory section provides various meanings and a characterization of diminutive system that will serve as working base for the rest of this paper. Section 2.1 lays out a categorization of diminutive (*wa-*) based on its semantic features. Section 2.2 discusses the morphosemantics of (*i-*) diminutive prefix which is used predominantly for describing inanimate singular objects which come in small sizes. Section 2.3 presents diminutives of concrete nouns which are realized by addition of the same (*i-*) diminutive prefix. In section 2.4 we examine derived diminutive forms with evaluative connotation. The paper ends with a short conclusion in section 3.

### Morphosemantics of Diminutives Derived through */wa-/* Prefixation

The C’lela diminutive prefix (*wa-*) has its source from the word for ‘infant/child’. Diminutive derivation in the language is an operation that attaches the prefix (*wa-*), which has a diminutive referent ‘young/little’, to a noun stem. It is worth pointing out that the [*wa-*] diminutive marker in C’lela is gender-free, and it is as well associated with the singular nouns which has corresponding plural marker (*ya-*).

This is to say that the two singular and plural prefixes mainly, although not exclusively, serve to modify nouns referring to humans or other animates and they are often restricted to human of both sexes. For example, in (1a), the diminutive (*wa-*) combines with the noun *kempa* ‘boy’ and the resulting diminutive word is *wakempa* ‘young boy’. The diminutive (*wà-*) basically has a low tone. One may well assert that the presence of this diminutive prefix in the diminutive form triggers tone rising in the initial syllable and the subsequent tone lowering of the final syllable of most noun stems. Consider the following examples as given in (1):

	Noun Stem		Diminutive Form		Gloss
(1)	a. <i>kèmpá</i>	‘boy’	<i>wà-kémpà</i>		‘young boy’
	b. <i>wántá</i>	‘girl/female’	<i>wà-wántà</i>		‘young woman’
	c. <i>ármá</i>	‘man’	<i>wà-ármà</i>		‘young man’
	d. <i>rúsú</i>	‘twins’	<i>wà-rúsù</i>		‘little twins’
	e. <i>gyòzò</i>	‘baby’	<i>wà-gyózó</i>		‘little baby’
	f. <i>màcɾì</i>	‘grandchild’	<i>wà-màcɾì</i>		‘little grandchild’
	f. <i>káçì</i>	‘chicken’	<i>wà-káçì</i>		‘little chicken’

Here are examples in sentences in (2):

(2) a. *wa kempa hɛn-ko wawanta*  
 Young boy see-PST young girl  
 “The young man saw the young girl”

b. *wà ármà el kwɛsɛv ri*  
 Young man is friend my  
 “The young man is a friend to me”

The singular diminutive forms for animate human nouns have corresponding plurals in C’lela. The diminutive nouns form their plural by deleting the singular diminutive prefix which is the derivative morpheme *wa-* and prefixing the diminutive plural morpheme *ya-*, accompanied by suffixation of the animate plural suffix *-nV* (see [15]). Note that in example (3c), the process of metathesis applies, so also the stem-final vowel deletion [15] occurs in examples (3d and e). Additionally, looking at the data in (3a); we can assume that where the stem-initial consonant is a voiceless approximant

w-, it undergoes assimilation to the preceding homorganic sound y- in the plural. Consider the following examples of plurals formed from the derived diminutives in (3) below:

	Singular	Plural	Gloss
(3)	a. wà-wántá	yà-yántá-nà	'young girl/unmarried'
	b. wà-kémpà	yà-kémpá-nà	'young boys/teenagers/unmarried'
	c. wà-ármà	yà-áram-nà	'young men'
	d. wà-rúsù	yà-rús-nù	'little twins'
	e. wà-gyòzò	yà-gyóz-nò	'little babies'
	f. wántá	yántá-nà	'females'
	g. wà-kóróró	yà-kóróró-nò	'nile perches'

### Morphosemantics of Diminutives Derived through /i-/ Prefixation

The diminutive *i-* is a regular nominal prefix used predominantly for describing inanimate singular objects which come in small sizes. The diminutive morpheme *i-* denoting 'small' may apply to human and other vertebrate (non-human) animals specifically mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians to derive their diminutive form. For example in (4a) the prefix diminutive *i-* is added to the noun *zuru* 'lion' and the process yields *i'zuru* 'baby lion'. Consider these examples:

	Noun Stem	Diminutive Noun	Gloss
(4)	a. zùrù 'lion'	i' zùrù	'baby lion'
	b. lògmó 'elephant'	i' lògmó	'small elephant'
	c. músú 'cat'	i' músú	'small cat'
	d. dókò 'horse'	i' dókò	'small horse'
	e. làgù 'rat'	i' làgù	'small rat'
	f. sòbò 'tiger'	i' sòbò	'small tiger'
	g. zòmò 'rabbit'	i' zòmò	'small rabbit'

his process is remarkably similar to the one in Dothraki whose diminutive is equally formed by suffixing the morpheme *-i* or *-ish* to nouns that end with a consonant, as in the following examples in (5) taken from [15].

	Dothraki Noun Stem	Diminutive Noun	Gloss
(5)	a. lajak	'warrior'	lajak-i 'little warrior'
	b. hrazef	'horse'	hrazef-ish 'tiny horse'

[15]

### Morphosemantics of Diminutives of concrete nouns Derived through /i-/ Prefixation

The diminutive vowel morpheme discussed above is a singular prefix which occurs with the only corresponding nasal plural prefix *m'*-. This singular diminutive vowel *i'*- serves to form diminutives of concrete nouns, and the diminutive consonant morpheme *m'*- is assigned to these class of words to form their plural [16]. This class often contains inanimate objects or plants of very small size and round shape. Nouns in this category include household utensils, farm implements and tools:

	Noun Stem	Diminutive Noun	Gloss
(6)	a. i'hònò	m'hònò	'small calabashes'
	b. i'bàró	m'bàró	'small chisels'
	c. i'dòrò	m'dòrò	'small pots'
	d. i'bímá	m'bímá	'small pitchers'
	e. i'tágú	m'tágú	'small shirts'
	f. i'vàná	m'vàná	'small knives'
	g. i'gyùrù	m'gyùrù	'small axes'
	h. i'gwámbá	m'gwámbá	'small ladles'
	i. i'kòmò	m'kòmò	'small piece of iron rods'

### Derived Diminutive Forms with negative Connotation

The diminutive markers / *i'*-; *wa-* / in C'lela may be used to indicate evaluative meaning. They may apply simultaneously to indicate negative connotations. They serve to belittle humans or other animate being referred to. They

apply to describe them as being skinny, tiny, insignificant, inferior, shrimp, short, emaciated etc. Consider the following examples from (7-9):

(7)	a. wà-wántà b. wà-kèmpá	‘young girl’ ‘young boy’	i’wà-wántà i’wà-kèmpá	‘skinny young girl’ ‘skinny / shrimp boy’
(8)	a. nòcò b. nètà	‘man’ ‘woman’	i’ wà-nòcò i’ wà-nètà	‘emaciated /tiny man’ ‘emaciated / tiny woman’
(9)	a. i’gwèlè b. i’dókò c. i’zùrù	‘small goat’ ‘small horse’ ‘baby lion’	i’ wà-gwèlè i’ wà-dókò i’- wà-zùrù	‘shrimp, short / tiny goat’ ‘emaciated / tiny horse’ ‘emaciated / tiny baby lion’

## CONCLUSION

The paper addresses the exact nature and internal structure of diminutive forms in C’lela. It has demonstrated the morphosemantic features of diminutive morphemes (*wa-*) and (*i-*) in C’lela. The study found that diminutive forms in C’lela can be identified by a regular morphological construction which involves attaching the (*wa-*) and (*i-*) diminutive prefixes to the underlying base words. The paper discussed the form and the various meaning associated with diminutive morphemes in the language. It examined the concrete meaning as well as the evaluative interpretations associated with diminutive morphemes (*wa-*) and (*i-*) in C’lela. It revealed that C’lela diminutive basically expresses smallness of size, shape and space, young, and it can also be used in describing such concepts as disdain, insignificant or emaciated. The paper indicated that one of the features of the two diminutive affixes in C’lela is that they are not amenable to masculine and feminine grammatical genders existing in the language.

## REFERENCES

1. Williamson K. Niger-congo overview. The Niger-Congo Languages. 1989; 3-45.
2. Lewis MP, Simons GF, Fennig CD. Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>. 2013.
3. Stark JP. Kambari orthography design. SIL, SIL International. [http://www-01.sil.org/silepubs/52284/stark\\_OrthographyDesign\\_52284.pdf](http://www-01.sil.org/silepubs/52284/stark_OrthographyDesign_52284.pdf) November. 2010; 10:1012.
4. Crozier D. From verb morphology to discourse in Central Kambari. *Advances in Minority Languages in Nigeria*. 2012; 1:325-65.
5. Blench R, McGill S. The kainji languages of northwestern and central Nigeria.
6. Harley M. Unusual sounds in Nigerian languages. *Advances in Minority Languages in Nigeria*. 2012; 1:39-66.
7. Rikoto BD. K’Batksa C’Lela-C’Anasara-C’Gana (C’Lela–English-Hausa dictionary). 2001.
8. Crystal D. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 6th edn. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008.
9. Heine B, Claudi U, Hünnemeyer F. *Grammaticalization: A conceptual framework*. University of Chicago Press; 1991.
10. Jurafsky D. Universal tendencies in the semantics of the diminutive. *Language*. 1996 Sep 1:533-78.
11. Booij G. *The grammar of words: An introduction to linguistic morphology*. Oxford University Press; 2012 Sep 13.
12. Appah CK, Amfo NA. The Morphopragmatics of the Diminutive Morpheme (-ba/-wa) in Akan. 2011.
13. Dolphyne FA. *The Akan (Twi-Fante) Languages: Its Sound System and Tone Structure*. Accra: Woeli Publishing Services. 2006.
14. Grimm S. Individuation and inverse number marking in Dagaare. *Count and mass across languages*. 2012; 75-98.
15. Aliero MA. Morphophonological Processes of the C’lela Noun. *Ghana Journal of Linguistics*. 2015; 4(1):1-4.
16. Peterson D. *Dothraki Derivational Morphology*. Language Creation Society. (LCS): HBO Press. 2011.