



## Morphopragmatic Functions of Ironic Diminutives in Arabic

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### Abstract in English

This study investigates the ironic uses of diminutives in Arabic from a morphopragmatic perspective. While diminutives are traditionally associated with smallness, affection, and emotional closeness, the data analysed in this paper demonstrate that Iraqi Arabic systematically exploits diminutive morphology to perform non-affectionate and often critical social actions. Drawing on naturally occurring dialogues extracted from Iraqi television series, the study examines how diminutives are used ironically to express rejection, social control, surveillance, ridicule, and covert criticism. The analysis adopts the theoretical framework of morphopragmatics as developed by Dressler and Barbaresi (1994) and integrates insights from pragmatic theories of politeness and irony. The findings reveal a recurrent pattern of affective inversion: forms that are morphologically marked as affectionate or mitigating function pragmatically as strategies of dominance, face-threat, or social evaluation. . In this context, the diminutives are not a genuine expression of affection, but rather a means of conveying indirect and socially strategic communication, and the study shows that ironic diminutives in Iraqi Arabic are a productive evaluative resource, determined not by their morphological form alone, but by the relationship of speaker to speaker.

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### Abstract in Arabic

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الاستخدامات الساخرة للتصغير في اللغة العربية من منظور صرفي تداولي. فبينما يرتبط التصغير تقليدياً بالصغر والمودة والتقارب العاطفي، تُظهر البيانات المُحللة في هذه الدراسة أن اللهجة العراقية تستغل بنية التصغير بشكل منهجي لأداء أفعال اجتماعية غير عاطفية، وغالباً ما تكون ناقدة. وبالاستناد إلى حوارات طبيعية مُستخرجة من مسلسلات تلفزيونية عراقية، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية استخدام التصغير بشكل ساخر للتعبير عن الرفض، والسيطرة الاجتماعية، والمراقبة، والسخرية، والنقد الضمني. ويتبنى التحليل الإطار النظري للصرف التداولي كما طوره دريسلر وبارباريسي (1994)، ويُدمج رؤى من النظريات التداولية للأدب والسخرية. وتكشف النتائج عن نمط متكرر من الانقلاب العاطفي: فالأشكال التي تحمل علامات صرفية تدل على المودة أو التخفيف تعمل تداولياً كاستراتيجيات للهيمنة، أو تهديد ماء الوجه، أو التقييم الاجتماعي. وفي هذا السياق، لا تعتبر التصغيرات تعبيراً حقيقياً عن المودة، بل هي وسيلة لنقل التواصل غير المباشر والاستراتيجي اجتماعياً، وتظهر الدراسة أن التصغيرات الساخرة في اللغة العربية العراقية هي مورد تقييمي مثير، لا يتحدد بشكلها الصرفي وحده، بل بعلاقة المتحدث بالمتحدث.

## **Introduction**

Language is more than just a way to convey propositional content; it is an important way that speakers can use their language to show their attitude, emotional state, social relationship with their interaction partner and evaluative stance. In everyday speaker-to-speaker interaction, speakers continuously manipulate linguistic forms to position themselves and others within social contexts. Diminutives are one of the most prominent types of linguistic resources that speakers can use to convey interpersonal meaning and evaluative meaning. Diminutives have traditionally been associated with smallness, youthfulness, and reduced physical size. However, there is a body of cross-linguistic research demonstrating that diminutives often function beyond their semantic core and have a variety of pragmatic functions. In many languages, diminutives are also frequently used in non-literal contexts to express affection, intimacy, politeness, mitigation, and sometimes irony, sarcasm, or mockery. This pragmatic versatility is a result of the inherent conflict between the morphological properties of diminutives and the contextually assigned meaning of diminutives by speakers.

### **Aims of the study**

The main aims of this study are:

1. To investigate the ironic uses of diminutives in Arabic.
2. To examine the morphological patterns used to form diminutives.
3. To analyze how diminutives encode evaluative and pragmatic meanings.

### **Hypotheses of the study**

It is hypothesised thatm Arabic diminutives are not restricted to literal meanings of smallness, but frequently convey evaluative and ironic meanings.

## **Literature review**

### **Diminutives in Arabic**

Diminutive formation in Arabic is a very diverse and productive morphological process and is typically achieved through modifying the internal vowels of a base word and through a few fixed morphological patterns overall. Classical grammatical treatments of Arabic have treated diminutive formation morphologically and derivationally for quite some time, specifying between a number of well-known morphological patterns, including fu‘ayl, fu‘ay‘il, and other related patterns. Although there is a great deal of morphological analyses and descriptions concerning diminutive formation, very few studies have examined the pragmatic use of diminutives in natural communication. In most spoken varieties of Arabic, diminutives are used very frequently in everyday conversation and usually occur in contexts where the diminutive's meaning cannot be explained only by its literal meaning of smallness. In most instances, the diminutive functions as an evaluative device that allows the speaker to express their personal feelings toward the referent as well as to negotiate and establish interpersonal dynamics and to express any one of a number of socio-cultural meanings in relation to the context in which the diminutive has occurred.

### **Irony and Morphopragmatic Interpretation**

A diminutive's pragmatic function in ironical communicative contexts is of great interest. Irony involves the discrepancy between the intended evaluation of the speaker and the literal meaning of the utterance. Since diminutive forms typically connote affections, tenderness, or benevolence, using them in critical or mock contexts creates a strong irony. The positive connotations attached to diminutive forms contrast sharply with the negative or critical evaluation expressed by the speaker. This study focuses on this phenomenon within the morpho-pragmatics theoretical framework developed by

Wolfgang U. Dressler and Lavinia Merlini Barbaresi. This framework analyzes how morphological forms (morphology) interact with the pragmatic meaning of the discourse. Therefore, within the morpho-pragmatics theoretical framework, diminutive forms have morpho-pragmatic functions as an expressive marker that encodes evaluative meanings with respect to the speaker's attitude toward an individual, their interpersonal relationship, and the social position of the speaker relative to the individual.

### **Pragmatic Theories of Irony**

Pragmatic Theory has been concerned with studying irony since its creation. As a result, H.P. Grice (1975) created several different theories about how to understand irony. He argued that when a speaker uses irony in his or her communication, he or she is clearly violating the Cooperative Principle (especially the Maxim of Quality) by producing an utterance that is obviously false. Thus, the literal meaning of the speaker's utterance is considerably different than the speaker's intended meaning, and the listener must infer the latter. Leech (2014) extended this idea to describe the social situation surrounding the use of irony. He argued that speakers often produce utterances that violate the Cooperative Principle to express negative judgements about the people or things they communicate about, but to do so in a way that protects the hearer's face and allows for continued social harmony between the speaker and hearer. Sperber and Wilson (1995) take yet another viewpoint on the use of irony and have created Relevance Theory. In this theory, irony is classified as a type of echoic usage in which the speaker produces an utterance to "echo" or comment upon someone else's belief, statement, or expectation while simultaneously signalling disagreement. An ironic statement doesn't just mean saying something that is the opposite of what one really means; it can also express how a person feels in relation to the echoed statement itself. Furthermore, Rebecca (1984) has pointed out that the context in which a conversation takes place, and the knowledge of those involved, can affect the way a person interprets an expression of irony. In other words, it is through the relationship among the structure of language, the context, and the individuals' already held beliefs regarding those who are conversing together that an ironic expression of language may occur.

### **Diminutives and Their Pragmatic Functions**

Research in linguistics has demonstrated that diminutive forms have functions in addition to the fundamental meaning "small". Cross-linguistic studies also show that diminutive forms are often used to express pragmatic meanings (bufone, formal, familiarity) and social meanings (affection, politeness, sympathy) between the speaker and audience (Jurafsky, 1996; Schneider, 2003). Diminutive meaning can be functional in many contexts; as such (depending on the context), diminutives can mitigate requests, soften criticism, and lessen the perceived seriousness of a statement. In addition, diminutive forms can take on a negative meaning or ironic sense. In some contexts, diminutive forms can be used to disparage, /ridicule/ disapprovingly evaluate, or give a negative judgment of the referent or of the interlocutor (Wierzbicka, 1984). Thus, these examples reflect that diminutive morphology is used as a pragmatic device, and interpretation is primarily associated with the context and what kind of interaction is present.

In Arabic linguistics, the majority of research done on diminutives has concentrated on the morphological construction of diminutives in classical and/or standard Arabic (Wright, 1967; Ryding, 2005). While this body of research provides a detailed examination of diminutive morphology, little emphasis has been placed on the pragmatic and discourse uses of diminutives in spoken varieties of Arabic. Therefore,

the interactional/evaluative function of diminutive forms in contemporary varieties of Arabic has not been thoroughly examined.

### **Research Gap**

Currently there is much theoretical discussion on both irony and morphopragmatics, yet comparatively not much research into how diminutive morphology and irony interact. Much of the literature on irony analyses only lexical, semantic or syntactic constructions of irony with little mention of morphology (e.g., diminutives) as markers of irony. Also, within Arabic linguistic literature, there has been little formal empirical examination of the use of diminutives in everyday conversation as an ironic use. Most previous research simply focuses on the morphological structure of diminutives and/or on the pragmatic aspects of irony generally, without combining the two analyses as a cohesive whole. Hence, there has not yet been an exhaustive study undertaken to explore morphopragmatic functions of diminutively used irony in Arabic discourse. To remedy this gap in the literature, the purpose of this research is to provide a morphopragmatic analysis of diminutive forms combined with pragmatic theories of irony, demonstrating there is a contribution to ironic meaning by diminutive forms in the context of Arabic casual conversation.

### **Methodology**

#### **Data Source**

The data for this study focuses on Iraqi television series as a source of spontaneous speech in spoken Iraqi (Iraqi Arabic). Interactional discourse occurring in these series contains diminutive forms used for everyday communication which make them an appropriate resource to explore morphopragmatic evaluations and the use of irony. Television dialogues are widely recognized as representing the conventional or normalized forms of interaction that exist within a speech community (Bednarek, 2010) and therefore they are used extensively in the study of pragmatics. Authentic social relationships and conversational norms are depicted in Iraqi television series. The dataset consists of selected excerpts from Iraqi dramatic and comedic series, including *ولاية بطيخ، حب وحرب، مناوي باشا، ماضي يا ماضي* to capture diminutive forms as they occur naturally in contexts such as workplaces, family functions and neighbourhood interactions. The analysis of the selected scenes is limited to dialogue as this is where diminutives occur most commonly within everyday speech. In addition to diminishing forms of reference to relationships, professions, money and personal characteristics, attention is given specifically to the use of diminutive forms in Arabic dialects for expressing evaluations (Ryding, 2005; Badarneh, 2010). Both ironic and nonironic diminutive forms are compiled for use in comparison; they exhibit evaluative inversion as a key morphopragmatic process whereby a positively connotated form may express criticism or irony (Dressler & Barbaresi, 1994). The use of publicly available forms of television material allows for ethical, non-invasive data collection methods to provide culturally valid linguistic evidence.

#### **Analytical Framework**

The analytical framework was based on Dressler and Barbaresi's (1994) morphopragmatic theory. Dressler treats diminutives as evaluative morphological devices where the pragmatic meanings of the diminutive arise from their interaction with the contextual discourse and the intent of the speaker or hearer. Irony is treated from a relevance theoretical view in treating irony as an inference based upon recognition by the hearer of the difference between the literal meaning of an utterance and the speaker's evaluative attitude/intention behind it. In this understanding of irony, the irony of the utterance is how it makes available to the audience an optimal level of

relevance to help them come to an evaluative, comedic or dissociative conclusion regarding what they just have said and done in an ironic manner (i.e., the use of an ironic diminutive). The focus here is on how politeness theory, in particular models advanced by Leech (2014); Brown and Levinson (1987), can be used to analyse the way that ironic diminutives work in managing relations between speaker and listener through the use of politeness strategies such as the mitigation of face-threatening acts; humorous criticism; and evaluation of each other's work or ideas. Using the typology developed by Polak to describe this phenomenon, along with the morphopragmatic framework of Dressler and Barbaresi (0994), the analysis identifies four categories of irony in the use of diminutives:

- 1- Arrogant irony: Mocking, offensive, meant to humiliate or disqualify.
- 2- Protective/defensive irony: indirect criticism, used by speakers who feel threatened.
- 3- Constructive-critical irony: friendly, humorous criticism.
- 4- Affectionate irony: jocular, non-offensive, used among close friends or family.

However, the study does not rule out the possibility of finding other patterns of irony in diminutive use specific to Arabic discourse. The combination of these frameworks provides for the simultaneous analysis of ironic diminutives as a morphological form; as a pragmatic inference; and as an interactional strategy.

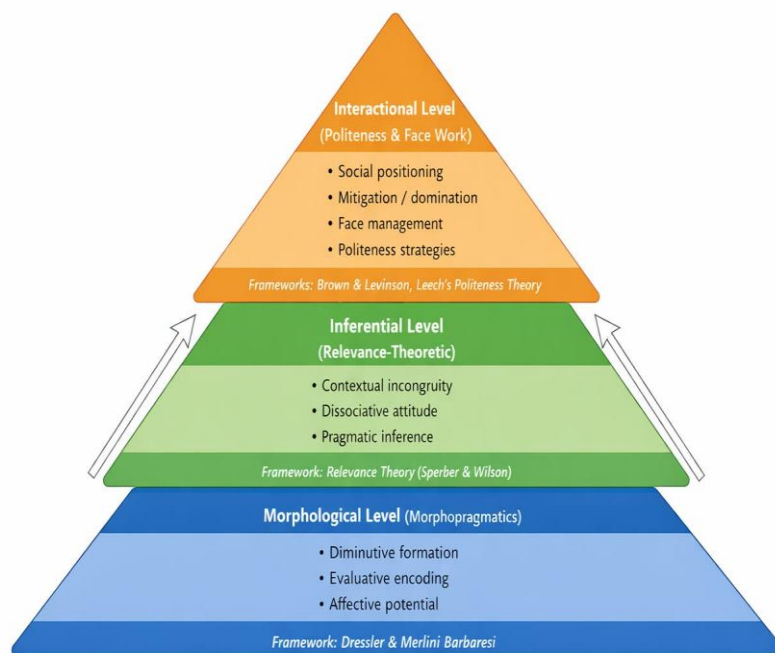


Figure1. Integrated analytical framework for the morphopragmatic analysis of ironic diminutive  
**Procedure of Analysis**

For each example, the following procedures were implemented during the analysis process:

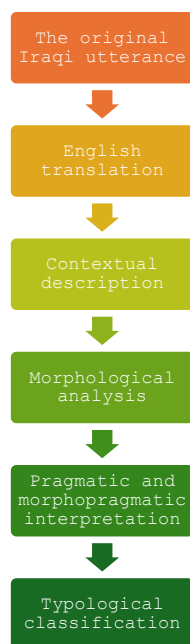


Figure2. Procedure of Analysis

## Data Analysis

The following extracts are collected form differnt Iraqi series:

### Example 1

شفيق: انتي بس وافقي وبطلني من هالشغلة اني مستعد اعيش احسن عيشة.  
 حورية: ليش متروح لبيتكم وليدي، حجايتك هاي باليوم اسمعها الف مرة .  
 شفيق: بس انا اختلف حورية واريدج الج صدكيني.

**Shafiq:** Just say yes and stop this job . I'm ready to give you the best life.

**Houriya:** Why don't you go home, my son-DIM? I hear this kind of talk a thousand times a day.

**Shafiq:** But I'm different, Houriya. I truly want you, believe me.

The scene occurs in a nightclub. Shafiq, a young man, confesses his love for Houriya and trys to convenience her to marry him. Instead of a genuine answer, she dismisses him with the quotation above, calling him “walēdī”, which means (my little boy). The balance of power in the interaction is not equal; Shafiq is committed emotionally, while meanwhile Houriya has the upper hand in the social encounter.

Base form: walad (ولد boy/son)

Diminutive form: walēd (وليد)

Pattern: fu‘ayl (فُعَيْل)

Suffix: possessive -ī “my”

The form walēdī is a canonical Arabic diminutive derived through internal vowel modification, carrying evaluative meaning rather than literal reference to age or size. This is an application of Dressler and Barbaresi's morphopragmatic framework, where diminutives can be understood as evaluative morphological markers that encode pragmatic evaluations (e.g., affection, mitigation, contempt and irony) as opposed to merely encoding a literal sense of smallness. In this case, the diminutive doesn't indicate the physical age or size of the addressee, but rather assigns a lower social status to the

addressee. Therefore, the morphological form indirectly downplays the status of the addressee.

According to Sperber's and Wilson's Relevance Theory hearers will interpret utterance meaning with respect to both linguistic information and contextual information.

Contextual information includes:

- A) Shafiq's status as a romantic suitor proposing marriage
- B) Houriya's dismissive response was not serious
- C) The diminutive walēdī frames Shafiq as immature/childish
- D) The literal affectionate reading (i.e. 'my little boy') is not compatible in the context of this romantic confession (i.e. it is a contradictory interpretation)

Thus, the substitute diminutive would not be viewed as affectionate but rather construed as denigrating/reproducing infantile forms. This produces an ironic effect, since the speaker is reproducing the idea that Shafiq is a naive/immature child and not a serious adult counterpart. At the interactional/pragmatic level the utterance is indexing the lack of power symmetries between the two interlocutors. The diminutive performs two simultaneous pragmatic functions:

1. Rejecting the offer without directly saying no.
2. Lowering Social Status Of The Person You Are Speaking To.

## Example 2

**خلف:** كالت ما عندي غير جاري العزيز امون عليه

**الجار:** اي عيوني تفضل

**خلف:** رايدين منكم شغلة كلش صغيرونة... نريد بيتكم نسوي بيه العرس.

**Khalaf:** I said I have no one but my dear neighbor whom I can rely on .

**Neighbor:** Of course, my dear, come in.

**Khalaf:** We need something very small- DIM from you... we want to hold our wedding in your house.

The scene takes place in the neighbours' garden. Khalaf and his wife visit their neighbours because Khalaf's brother's wedding is approaching. Khalaf is known in the series for being extremely stingy. He first asks the neighbour's wife to prepare sweets, then asks the neighbour to tell his brother to cook the food for the guests. Finally, he introduces another request using the phrase shaghla killish ṣghayrūna (a very tiny little thing), which turns out to be asking the neighbours to vacate their house so that the wedding can be held there.

There is a clear discrepancy between the linguistic framing of the request and its real magnitude.

-Base form: ṣghīra (صغيرة small)

-Diminutive form: ṣghayrūna (صغيرونة)

-Pattern: colloquial Iraqi diminutive with -ūna suffix

-Modifier: killish "very."

The diminutive "ṣghayrūna" intensifies smallness and conveys an expectation of minimal imposition. Morphologically, the form encodes strong attenuation and informality.

According to the morphopragmatic framework proposed by Dressler and Barbaresi, diminutive forms frequently signal expressive evaluation, rather than actual magnitude.

In this example, the diminutive form does not characterize an objectively small request. Rather, it is pragmatically used to classify this as a trivial request. The diminutive morphological form, therefore, conveys a diminutive evaluative stance before the request is even made. When first uttered, *shaghla killish sghayrūna* would be perceived by the hearer as making reference to a minor request. However, when they hear the subsequent proposition “we want your house for the wedding,” they realise that the actual request is much larger than they had anticipated and that there is a strong contradiction between the first request and the second request. The realisation that there is a disparity between the linguistic minimisation of the initial request and the actual magnitude of what was requested results in an interpretation of the utterance as ironic in the sense that a large request is presented as though it is very small. At the interactional level, the diminutive acts as a pseudo-mitigating outside of their functions as requests are typically presented; within Leech’s politeness framework, requests adhere to the Tact Maxim, which states that speakers will minimize the cost incurred by others while also maximizing the benefit incurred by others.

Khalaf, linguistically, adheres to this maxim with the way he phrases this request: “It is a very small request.”

However, the request for the other person to vacate their premises for a wedding does not hold true to this; the real cost to him/her to vacate the premises is a high one. Therefore, the diminutive does not actually reduce the level of imposition created by the actual imposition; rather, it creates ironic politeness, whereby the speaker creates the illusion of minimising the amount of burden placed by making an unqualified large demand upon the other person. The strategy employed in this interaction, as well as the use of diminutives to characterise Khalaf as a frugal and opportunistic individual, adds to the narrative. In accordance with the typology created by Polak, this instance reflects a typology of minimizing irony; that is, by employing diminutives, the speaker is making large or serious inferences seem unimportant. Indicators of such include: exaggerated use of diminutive morphology, mismatch between how the speaker frames the request linguistically, as opposed to the actual cost incurred by the other person humorous exposure of the speaker’s opportunism. In the following instance, the small diminutive form of the word helps to minimize the perceived size of the request being made. When it is revealed what is really being requested, a significant difference arises between how it was linguistically framed and the actual reality in the context. This difference leads to irony, since the speaker(s) appear to impose minimal burdens on the hearer(s) when in fact they are requesting an unreasonable burden. Accordingly, this example demonstrates an instance of the minimization of irony through the use of diminutives to create an ironic distinction between the expectation of a small burden and the reality of imposition.

### Example 3

الزوج : هاي شنو؟ شني هاي الهوسة واللمة ببيني !  
 الزوجة : عيد ميلاد ابننا عبودي وكلت افرجه وعزمت اهلي  
 الزوج : ولج الكيك اني ما اعرف شنو طعمه انوب تعزمين اهليج ؟  
 الزوجة: هي كيكايه هلكدوتها يا عيني.

**Husband:** What's all this noise and gathering at my house?!

**Wife:** It's our son Aboudi's birthday, and I wanted to make him happy, so I invited my family.

**Husband:** I don't even know what cake tastes like, and you're inviting your family?

**Wife:** It's just a tiny cake, my dear.

The husband returns home and finds his wife celebrating their child's birthday with family and friends. The husband is characterized as extremely stingy. Seeing the celebration, he reacts negatively and questions what is happening in "his house." The wife responds by downplaying the event, referring to the cake as *kikāya* (diminutive of *kēk* "cake"), accompanied by further minimization (*halkaddūtha* "this small"). The utterance attempts to frame the celebration as insignificant.

The base noun *kēk* (كيك) is realized as *kikāya* كيكاية, 'a colloquial diminutive formation using the *-āya* suffix common in Iraqi Arabic).

Within the morphopragmatic framework of Dressler and Barbaresi (1994), diminutives convey a speaker's attitude towards something, not its actual size. They indicate that something has been scaled down to an impractical size or is too unimportant to require a larger version. In this case, the diminutive is being used to diminish the significance of the cake as a social object.

According to relevance theory, as defined by Sperber and Wilson, the ironic effect of context circularity in this event relies on the husband's belief in:

1. The presence of others at a birthday celebration.
2. Meeting guests at the birthday celebration.
3. The event resulting in expense.

The conflict (husband) between the wife's diminutive description of cake ("just a small cake") and the scale of the event creates a conflicting scale of apparent expense between her linguistic minimization of cake (small with minimal expense) and the actual size of the cake vs. the event. Thus, the diminutive morpheme suggests that the utterance in question should be reinterpreted as not a literal description but a strategic minimization. From an interactional perspective, the wife uses the diminutive in an attempt to reduce the perceived cost from the husband's standpoint. The diminutive aligns with Leech's Politeness Principle, specifically the Tact Maxim (i.e., use strategies to reduce the cost to others). By using the diminutive "*kikāya*" and softening the potential conflict with her husband through her diminutive description of the cake, she attempts to protect herself from criticism; however, her husband's comment, "you don't even know what cake smells like," demonstrates the hyperbolic situation. The wife's use of a diminutive is therefore ironic because she is, in fact, costing the husband a great deal of expense. In contrast to Arrogant Irony, this does not seek to degrade. It does not create a bond between people. It does not provide feedback for improvement. It does not mock oneself as Polak describes. It resembles Example 2 in terms:

- Morphological downscaling
- Contextual upscaling
- Ironic pseudo-minimisation

This proposes a common gravitational force of Mitigative-Scalar Irony due to diminutive morphology representing significant trivialisation that contradicts contextual magnitude. In this instance, the use of morphological minimisation as a strategy for avoiding conflict produces an ironic effect. The mismatch on the scale between linguistic framing and contextual realities creates irony. The structure of this example matches Example 2 and suggests a possible pattern of recurrent subtype differing from Polak's four categories.

#### Example 4

العم : اكل عمو اكل بلا منية

ابن الاخ :مو كافي هي لحماية هلكدوتها وذليتنا بيها هاي اذا تضيع بعد ما ألكاها  
العم : المهم البركة مو بالكمية.

**Uncle:** Eat, my dear nephew, eat don't be shy.

**Nephew:** Isn't it enough that it's just a tiny little piece of meat-DIM and you've already embarrassed us with it? If it gets lost, I won't even be able to find it again!

**Uncle:** The important thing is the blessing, not the quantity.

An uncle invites his nephew for lunch. Their relationship is warm, humorous, and informal. The table is full of salads and bread but contains only a very small amount of meat. Since everyone wants the meat, the uncle repeatedly encourages them to eat generously. In response, the nephew jokingly complains about the extremely small portion of meat, referring to it with the diminutive laḥmāya ("tiny piece of meat"). Base form: laḥm (لحم "meat"). Diminutive form: laḥmāya (لحماية), the morphological process: diminutive formation through the -āya suffix, which is common in Iraqi Arabic colloquial diminutives.

Morphologically, the base noun لحم is realized as لحماية which is a colloquial diminutive formation using -aya suffix common in Iraqi Arabic, the diminutive laḥmāya expresses a small-meat portion through the use of evaluative minimization. However, the diminutive is not just used as a purely descriptive semantic function, but also for establishing a playful/humorous interpretation. Therefore, morphologically small meat portions provide both recognition of the minimal quantity of food, while simultaneously creating a playful/humorous critique of the minimal amount of food that the nephew has provided. This relationship is created through the interaction between: morphological evaluation (morphologically small quantity expressed through the diminutive) and semantic exaggeration (nephew's claim that the small quantity of meat "humiliated" them). This demonstrates how diminutive morphology in Iraqi Arabic serves as the means for humorous/ironic evaluation in friendly interaction.

According to Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. The nephew manages to reduce the face threat by using playful language and the diminutive to make the critical comment into a humorous/teasing remark. In this case, it shows how using the diminutive form allows for part of the criticism to be made, while also allowing the two to continue their close relationship.

According to the typology adopted by Dressler and Barbaresi and applied by Polak, what is illustrated here can be classified as Constructive-Critical Irony.

### Example 5

الاب : البنية مواليد 2001  
الشيخ : بس هاي صغيرونة عالزواج.  
العريس : صغيرونة شنو شيخنا هاي حتى تخرجت من الكلية.  
الشيخ: الالفينات تخرجو من الكلية؟! اني عبالى بعدهم بالمتوسطة.

**Father:** The girl was born in 2001.

**Sheikh:** But she's too young to get married.

**Groom:** Young? What do you mean "young", Sheikh? She's even graduated from college!

**Sheikh:** People born in the 2000s graduated from college?! I thought they were still in middle school.

The scene takes place during a wedding ceremony where the religious officiant (sheikh) is conducting the marriage contract. When he asks about the bride's birth year, the bride's father replies that she was born in 2001. The sheikh reacts with surprise and comments that she is ṣghayrūna ("a little young") for marriage. The groom immediately

objects, explaining that she has already graduated from university. The humor arises from the generational gap: the sheikh mistakenly assumes that people born after 2000 are still very young.

-Base form: (صغير ṣaghīr) – “small / young”

-Diminutive form: (صغيرة ṣghayrūna)

-Morphological process: evaluative diminutive formation in Iraqi Arabic suffix -- ونة (ūna) intensifies the diminutive sense “very little / quite young”

However, the form is evaluative rather than literal, since the bride is an adult.

The diminutive suffix (-y) is being used to describe the bride’s young age in a way that makes it sound like she is too young for marriage. The irony that is created comes from the disparity that exists between the perception of the sheikh on how young the bride appears to be compared to reality (which is that she has graduated from university and is now an adult). This causes the sheikh’s assumption to be factually incorrect and biases there being a generational gap, thus resulting in the sheikh’s utterance creating an ironic response by creating a humorous effect because of the mismatch between the he, the sheikh, and the actual bride’s age. In addition to the above, the example of the groom’s response demonstrates that the mismatch between the perceptions of the sheikh and bride’s ages results from an exaggeration on the part of the sheikh with his evaluation of her age. From the morphopragmatic perspective proposed by Dressler and Barbaresi, The diminutive morphological marker, “ṣghayrūna” conveys how the speaker feels about the referent and evaluates that word. This diminutive marker does not imply small size but shows how the speaker evaluates it based on how old it is and how socially acceptable it is. The above example is best described as: Constructive-Critical Irony.

Present characteristics include:

1. An evaluative comment is made.
2. Some degree of mildness or doubt is present.
3. A humorous relationship between the two participants exists.
4. There is no hostility between participants.

The sheikh's comment indicates that he feels the bride is "too young"; however, both parties still found their discussion and exchange enjoyable and appropriate enough to participate in light-heartedly.

### Example 6

المختار: ها ماضي اشوفك كاعد شلونك؟  
 ماضي: والله عمي ضوجة كلشي ماكو  
 المختار: لو تشوفلك شغيلة ما أحسن من هاي الكعدة؟

**Mukhtar:** Hey Madi, I see you're sitting here. How are you?

**Madi:** Honestly, Uncle, I’m bored. There's nothing to do.

**Mukhtar:** Wouldn't it be better if you found some work- DIM instead of sitting around like this?

The scene takes place in a village. The village leader (mukhtār) is walking around and notices a man named Mādī sitting idly in a café. Mādī is known for being unemployed. The mukhtār addresses him and suggests that it would be better if he found a shughayla (“a little job”) rather than spending time sitting in the café. The interaction involves a social hierarchy: the mukhtār occupies a position of authority and moral responsibility within the village, while Mādī is socially evaluated as unproductive.

Base form: (شغلة shaghla) – “job / work”

Diminutive form: (شغيلة shaghyla)

Diminutive formation through vowel modification and the -ay- pattern, typical of evaluative diminutives in Arabic dialects.

“a small job” or “a little piece of work.”

However, the diminutive here does not refer to the size of the job, but rather conveys an evaluative and pragmatic nuance. The diminutive term *shughayla* has been used in an attempt to portray finding work as easy and uncomplicated. The speaker’s suggestion that there are small jobs is conveyed in order to highlight the lack of activity by the addressee, *Māḍī* — the speaker further indicates *Māḍī* is being unproductive by implying that any job would be a superior choice than being inactive. This irony arises from the simultaneous contrast that exists between: the minimised language used to frame the small job (“a little job”); and the expectation of society that adult males should find work. The diminutive term conveys both the mitigation of criticism and the strength of the evaluation regarding the behaviour of the addressee at the same time.

At the interpersonal level, it can be inferred that the use of the diminutive term is being used as a mitigation strategy towards *Māḍī*. The *mukhtār* is not directly accusing *Māḍī* of laziness, but instead frames their suggestion of employment in a more polite manner, by describing employment as a little and manageable job. From a morphopragmatic perspective, as proposed by Dressler and Barbaresi, the diminutive *shughayla* operates as an evaluative morphological device. Morphological form signifies either a positive or a reduced position while pragmatic interpretation of the same will suggest a level and the degree of socially inappropriate action and/or a slight disapproving tone. This example illustrates reframing social norms through a form of diminutive morphology - whereby the user is able to offer limiting critical appraisal of 'norm' behaviour, while keeping a level of conversation within the limits of politeness.

The *mukhtār*'s utterance is not intended as a means of humiliation of the addressee but rather, a means of promoting behavioural changes through an ironic appraisal expressed mildly.

### Example 7

القاضي: ليش تريد تتزوج الثانية؟

الرجل: زودو روييتبي

القاضي لزميله: من كد ما صغيرون يكول روييتبي

**Judge:** Why do you want to marry a second wife?

**Man:** they increased my little salary -DIM

**Judge to his colleague:** It’s so tiny-DIM that he called it my little salary

In a courtroom, a judge asks a man why he wants to marry a second wife. The man explains that his salary has recently increased, implying that he can now afford another marriage. However, instead of using the normal word *rātib* (“salary”), he refers to it with the diminutive *rūwaytbi* (“my little salary”). The judge then jokingly comments to his colleague that the salary must be extremely small if the man himself describes it using a diminutive. The humor emerges from the contradiction between: (i) the man’s attempt to present his financial improvement (ii) the diminutive form that actually suggests insufficiency.

Base form: (راتب *rātib*) – “salary”

Diminutive form: (روييتب *rūwaytib*)

with possessive suffix: (روييتبي *rūwaytbi*) – “my little salary”

Diminutive formation through the *fu‘ay‘il* pattern, which is a productive diminutive pattern in Arabic dialects.

“a very small salary.”

In context, the form is clearly evaluative rather than descriptive.

The speaker employs the diminutive *rūwaytbi* in a less direct way when referring to the amount of money he receives as compensation; nevertheless, the judge takes the *samo-rūwaytbi* literally and provides an ironic interpretation by stating that the amount must be incredibly small. The irony arises from the juxtaposition of the man's intention to explain his ability to pay for things he cannot afford and the sentence's form in the diminutive (implying he receives very little income). By stating he has "my little salary," the speaker's comment provides the judge with a humorous contrast to the contrast between his claim to have money and the use of the diminutive in the sentence. The diminutive usage is also interpreted as a self-deprecating form of communication within the sociolinguistic framework developed by Brown and Levinson. The diminutive form of the speaker's salary could also be classified as a negative politeness strategy, thereby limiting the perception of boasting and arrogance. By saying he earns "my little salary," the speaker does not present himself as being proud, boastful or show-off in front of the judge. The judge's reply, however, creates an ironic contradiction between the man's assertion and his use of the diminutive in the speech. Using Dressler and Barbaresi's morpho-pragmatic approach to the analysis of linguistic forms, the diminutive form of the word *rūwaytbi* has evaluative qualities that also contribute to the expression of either humility (modesty) or minimization of an object or event. In this specific example, the morphologically (linguistically) diminutive form interacts with the pragmatic context of the performance of the word so as to produce an ironic contrast (i) the speaker attempts to present financial adequacy (ii) the diminutive morphology simultaneously signals insufficiency (iii) The judge exploits this morphological cue to produce an ironic interpretation. From the examples provided in the data to foreseeable Typologies this would fit into the following Typology:

Constructive-Critical Irony.

The judge is responding indirectly by letting the man know that he has contradicted himself by using a diminutive. However the judge's response is only mildly critical with an air of humour rather than being hostile.

### Example 8

المختار: شلونك صحتك عافيتك؟  
الرجل: الحمد لله بخير.  
المختار: بعد شلونك چنك مهو طويب؟  
الرجل: لا الحمد لله صحتي زينة نعمة من الله .

**The village headman:** How are you? How's your health?

**The man:** Thank God, I'm fine.

**The village headman:** And how are you doing? You don't seem well -DIM

**The man:** No, thank God, my health is good, a blessing from God.

The village chief (*mukhtār*) meets a villager and asks about his health. The man replies that he is fine. However, the *mukhtār* repeats the question using the diminutive *ṭwayyib* ("a little well / somewhat well"). In reality, the chief already sees that the man is healthy. His intention is not to check the man's health but to prolong the conversation in order to gather information about where the man is going and what he is doing. Thus, the diminutive is used as part of a conversational strategy to encourage further talk.

( *ṭwayyib* طويب ) – "well / good / healthy"

Diminutive form: ( *ṭwayyib* طويب )

At the literal level, the diminutive *ṭwayyib* suggests that the addressee may only be partially well or "a little better." However, the speaker already knows that the interlocutor is healthy. It is interesting how apparent care for another person is often

countered by the way a person actually prefers an answer and how those two actions are viewed completely differently. By asking someone else about their health, the original speaker is providing a courteous manner of preserving the civil and polite nature of the conversation, leading to a longer response from the original speaker than if they had simply asked them their current location, as is the case in the example above. The diminutive morphologically expresses a degree of softness in the speaker's feelings, which the speaker uses for the purpose of interactive engagement with another individual. The diminutive therefore provides a linguistic device for managing the continuation of a conversation and, thus, does not provide an indication of physical or true concern. Pragmatic meaning is dependent upon:

1. the morphological form of the diminutive, and
2. the social situation of informal village interaction.

This is not a clear example of one of Polak's four types of irony, because the intent behind the illustrative diminutives has nothing to do with humiliating or condemning another person. Rather, the irony consists of an indirect means of managing a conversation where the diminutive allows the speaker to appear to be concerned about the other person while fulfilling an alternate communicative function.

#### Conversational irony

In this type, diminutives are used not to evaluate the interlocutor but to manage interaction and prolong conversation, often under the guise of concern or politeness. Such uses appear particularly compatible with informal Iraqi conversational culture.

## 6. Results

Based on nine examples taken from Iraqi television dramas, diminutive forms frequently appear as morpho-pragmatic devices for conveying an ironic evaluation and not just a meaning of smallness. In the data, it is evident that diminutive forms used in an ironic sense in Iraqi Arabic have commonly been used to express some form of judgment (including ridicule or humour). The examples analysed exhibit both types predicted by the typology proposed by Dressler and Barbaresi (1994), along with many features which seem to be particular to Iraqi Arabic discourse.

Table 1. Distribution of Irony Types

Irony Type	Example(s)	Function
<b>Arrogant irony</b>	Example 1	Humiliating or disqualifying the addressee
<b>Constructive-critical irony</b>	Examples 4, 5, 6	Friendly or humorous criticism
<b>Affectionate irony</b>	Example 8	Playful interaction among acquaintances
<b>Scalar-minimization irony (potential new type)</b>	Example 2	Minimizing a large request
<b>Ironic understatement through diminutives (potential new type)</b>	Example 3	Downplaying reality humorously
<b>Economic-evaluation irony</b>	Example 7	Evaluating social/economic conditions humorously

The results were that constructive-critical irony is constructed through the use of words with diminutive forms in Iraqi Arabic; these words either function as humorous/socially acceptable criticism or aggressive mockery.

## 7. Discussion

It can also be assumed by the results that the uses of diminutive words in Iraqi Arabic serve to morphopragmatically express judgement with the use of a theoretical framework established by Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi.

### A-Morphological Encoding of Evaluation

The diminutive forms (صغيرة، كيكاية، لحماية، شغيلة، روبيتي، وليدي) examined in this research did not describe physical size. However, they describe the speaker's stance and provide a social evaluation. This finding further supports the claim that diminutive morphology can pragmatically serve as a signal of attitudes (e.g., irony, judging, playful teasing).

### B-Inferential Interpretation of Irony

According to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, diminutive ironic expressions are often considered a way of indirectly evaluating someone. For example, an instance where a major request (the use of the neighbour's house for a wedding) is described as a shaghla killish sghayrūna (meaning 'very little') is a case of minimising the perceived burden/cost of the request, which can be interpreted using Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's inferential mechanism approach to pragmatics.

### C- Interactional Motivation of Ironic Diminutives

Diminutives, therefore, also serve as indirect face-threatening communication strategies within the Brown and Levinson theoretical framework, allowing speakers to maintain social relations by delivering criticism in a humorous way; these strategies enable speakers to lessen the directness of an act that threatens someone's face but still convey criticism. In addition, diminishing words are similarly consistent with the cost-benefit element of politeness set forth by Leech in that they allow speakers to convey their request for assistance in a way that diminishes the perceived cost of such a request.

### D-Emerging Patterns in Iraqi Arabic

The findings indicate that the typology of ironic diminutives put forth by Polak does not capture all ironic uses of diminutives in Iraqi Arabic. The data suggest that there are two prominent patterns of use of diminutives for irony in Iraqi Arabic: (1) speakers may use diminutive forms of a verb or noun to present a large action or request as if it is insignificant; (2) speakers may use diminutive forms of a verb or noun to downplay the significance of what happened by using a diminutive morphology. These two patterns suggest that the diminutive form may have added pragmatic functions for Iraqi Arabic speakers that have not been investigated in previous studies concerning the use of diminutives in European languages.

## 8. Conclusion

This study provides a compelling case for the intended irony that is conveyed using diminutive morphology in Iraqi Arabic. The data analysis, which is illustrated through examples from Iraqi television shows, demonstrates that diminutive forms regularly convey the speaker's attitude to their listener such as criticism, humour, and social judgement. The data demonstrate that numbers of diminutive examples correspond to the previous types of irony identified in other languages, however, there are also numerous additional examples that exhibit the previously identified patterns of sarcastic minimisation and ironic understatement. The data also indicate that the typology of ironic diminutive forms might need to be modified for application in the domain of Arabic discourse. Overall, the results of the findings underscore the need to study diminutive morphology as a morphological phenomenon that illustrates the pragmatic role that diminutives have in shaping interpersonal discourse and social judgment. For future research, the researcher suggests a morphophonemic study of irony in diminutives to be investigated.

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