

A MORPHOPRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF DIMINUTION IN THE ÈDO LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This paper focuses on diminution, which is the general term for any evaluative process that modifies a word by adding the sense associated with decreased size. Previous studies on the Èdo language identified several morphemes which convey this meaning of smallness and categorized them based on their roles as diminutive markers, kinship and body-part terms amongst other functions. However, research is yet to discuss the contribution of contexts to the interpretation of expressions where diminutive markers occur. To address this research gap, this study was designed to investigate diminutive constructions in the language with the aim of describing the connotation of units which constitute such evaluative expressions. The study set two objectives. The first is to describe the structure of diminutive constructions. The second is to discuss the pragmatic interpretations of these constructions. These objectives provide a significant contribution to the knowledge and understanding of evaluative processes not only in the language under study, but also in related African languages. Data were collected via interviews and participant observation. This study also used secondary data extracted from a corpus of textual and audio-visual materials. The analysis was based on the model of Morphopragmatics outlined in Barbaresi (2015) and Barbaresi & Dressler (2020). In terms of structure, data analysis revealed that diminutives can be marked morphologically and syntactically. Morphological marking uses affixation and compounding, while syntactic diminutives rely on adjectival modification for nouns and aspectual distinction in verbs. With respect to pragmatics, the study found that diminutive constructions perform a range of interpersonal communicative functions including the expression of fondness, making requests and stating one's disapproval without insulting the addressee. These results show that diminutive markers connote positive and negative emotional attitudes; as such, they should be considered as strategies for conveying appreciative and pejorative evaluation in the language.

Keywords: Appreciative evaluation, connotation, diminution, Èdo language, meaning, morphopragmatics, pejorative evaluation,

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1. Introduction

This paper examines *Diminution* in Edo from a morphopragmatic perspective. Edo is a Nigerian language from the Edoid genus (Elugbe, 1979) in the Benue-Kwa group of African languages (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Guldemann, 2018). Following Eberhard et al. (2022), the population of speakers in the country is 2,030,000. The language has three distinct tones: High, Low, and Down-stepped High. (Omozuwa, 2013). The order of constituents in a sentence is Subject-Verb-Object.

Morphopragmatics can simply be defined as the sub-field of linguistics which studies the relationship between pragmatics and morphology. *Pragmatics* deals with context-dependent aspects of meaning (Horn & Ward, 2006, p. xi). It involves the language users' ability to communicate effectively in different social contexts (Brahimoh, 2024, p. 206), using shared terms and culture-specific expressions (Al-Saidi & Salman, 2025). *Morphology* studies the structure of language at the level of words. It is traditionally conceived as having two branches: *Inflectional Morphology* which deals with the change words undergo when they occur with other words, and *Derivational Morphology* which focuses on word creation. Following Scalise (1984), morphology has a distinct third branch - *Evaluative Morphology*, which is concerned with the expression of evaluation.

Evaluation refers to the quantitative (objective) or qualitative (subjective) appraisal of entities, contexts and events. As a field of study, Evaluative Morphology deals with linguistic constructions which have the function of assigning to an existent word one of four semantic values: BIG, SMALL, GOOD, BAD; such constructions "employ morphological processes and must contain an overt, lexically independent exponent of the concept under evaluation as well as an evaluative marker which assigns it a value" (Fornasiero, 2018, p. 16; Kortvelyessy, 2015, p. 21 and Grandi, 2009, p. 46).

Diminution, which is the focus of this paper, is the general term for any evaluative process which modifies the interpretation of a root by adding the sense associated with decreased size i.e. SMALL. The marker which introduces this value changes neither the word class nor meaning of the root (Schneider, 2013, p. 138). There are different strategies for marking Diminution including processes like reduplication, affixation, compounding, internal modification, suppletion and other non-morphological means like sound symbolism, truncation, grammatical displacement, periphrastic constructions (Kortvelyessy, 2015, p. 21; Stekauer et al., 2012, pp. 267-269 and Schneider 2003, p. 7-10).

The literature shows the Edo language has several evaluative morphemes. The researchers who identified these morphemes focused on their internal structure, morphological processes and their inherent meanings. However, studies on evaluation in other languages show that context also plays a role in the interpretation of such expressions. This study re-examines Edo with the aim of identifying context-dependent meanings associated with Diminution in the language. The research has two objectives.

- To describe the structure of diminutive constructions in the Edo language.
- To discuss the pragmatic interpretations of these constructions.

2. Literature Review

This section outlines the concept of Diminution, its functions and morphosyntactic strategies. The section also discusses existent studies on the subject in the Edo language, and provides more information about the theoretical orientation adopted in the study.

2.1 Diminution and the Functions of Diminutive Morphemes

Diminution is an evaluative function which modifies the meaning of an existent word, resulting in expressions for a smaller version of the same entity. For example, in English, *micro-chip*, *mini-van*, *book-let* refer to a *van*, *chip* or *book* that is considered less than the regular size. Reference to smallness is not the only purpose of Diminution. Studies have observed that diminutive morphemes perform the following functions cross-linguistically.

- They specify physical, quantifiable attributes of the referents such as their size and age (Jurafsky, 1996; Kortvelyessy, 2015; Schneider, 2013).
- Diminutive morphemes denote kinship, group membership and femininity (Appah & Amfo, 2011; Usenbo & Yuka, 2025).
- Diminutive morphemes can have connotative meanings, and are used to express a wide range of emotions including admiration, compassion, disapproval and love (Appah & Amfo, 2011; Jurafsky, 1996; Ponsonnet, 2018).
- Diminutives also perform pragmatic functions such as upgrading and downgrading of illocutionary force, intentional understatement, politeness and sarcasm (Barbaresi & Dressler, 2020; Eshreteh, 2017; Polak, 2023; Yuka, 2020).

2.2 Previous Studies of Diminution in Edo

There are two journal articles which touch on Diminution in Edo: Omoruyi (1986) and Usenbo & Yuka (2025). Additional resources include grammar books (Imasuen, 2010) and dictionaries (Agheyisi, 1986; Melzian, 1937). The articles by Omoruyi focus on the internal structure of words and the strategies for expressing number in nouns, pronouns and verbs. The author mentions that the word *òvbi* “child” functions as a diminutive prefix when it occurs with non-human nouns (Omoruyi, 1986, p. 65).

Similarly, Usenbo & Yuka (2025) focused on morphological strategies. However, their study explored a wider range of evaluative values and adopted the unified radial model of Evaluative Morphology (Kortvelyessy, 2015) for data analysis. The results showed formal expressions for four evaluative values: Diminution (DIM = small), Augmentation (AUG = big), Intensification (INT = more of an attribute) and Approximation (APR = resemblance). As shown in the examples below, these evaluative values are marked morphologically using three processes: affixation (example 1), compounding (example 2) and reduplication (example 3).

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| 1. | à - | tínnìé | |
| | NMLZ. | be_small | |
| | ‘A small-sized person’ | | (Usenbo & Yuka 2025, p. 5) |
| 2. | ògiè | énìtàn | |
| | king | prawn | |
| | ‘Large sized prawn’ | | (Usenbo & Yuka 2025, p. 5) |
| 3. | ò yé dìmwi~dìmwi | | |
| | 3SG seem be_deep.INT | | |
| | ‘It seems very deep.’ | | (Agheyisi 1986, p. 18) |

The paper mentions that the Edo language uses syntactic strategies for evaluation. In such cases, the language does not rely on morphological processes. Instead, native speakers use adjectives and adverbs as modifiers in phrases which have equivalent meanings as the morphologically marked expressions. Also, diminutive and augmentative markers like the nominaliser and king in examples 1 and 2 can be used to express Appreciative (positive) and Pejorative (pejorative) Evaluation.

2.3 Morphopragmatics

Morphopragmatics has been defined as the aspect of linguistics which deals with the “regular pragmatic changes obtained when moving from the input to the output of a morphological process, both within inflection and derivation” (Barbaresi & Dressler, 2020, p. 409). As a model of analysis, “Morphopragmatics addresses issues at the interface where morphological operations interact directly with pragmatic conditions such as speech acts and interactional strategies” (Barbaresi, 2015, p. 34). The model retains the basic semantic meanings associated with diminutive and augmentative morphemes, but proposes an invariant pragmatic feature [fictive]. This feature represents the speaker’s disposition in speech events, where evaluative markers are extended to convey qualitative values.

A relationship is established between morphology and pragmatics when interpretation of an utterance differs from its inherent (or morphosemantic) meanings. This distinct meaning arises from pragmatic operations such as narrowing and metaphorical extension, involving the speakers, addressees and their interpersonal relationships. The English diminutive suffix *-let* provides an example of how meaning differs from the morphosemantic and morphopragmatic perspectives. These examples are based on the discussions in Schneider & Strubel-Burgdorf (2012, p. 17); they identified the following patterns in the use of this diminutive marker.

4. Morphosemantics and Morphopragmatics of the suffix – *let*

- a) Object + *let* (e.g. *booklet*, *cubelet*, *hooflet*)
- b) Animal + *let* (e.g. *eaglet*, *froglet*, *owlet*)
- c) Plant + *let* (e.g. *flowerlet*, *fruitlet*, *nutlet*)
- d) Social roles + *let* (e.g. *wifelet*, *starlet*, *princelet*)

In examples 4 (a), (b) and (c) evaluation is quantitative; each word denotes a small size of the roots to which the diminutive suffix is attached. In these cases, the denotation of the roots and the semantic value SMALL suffices for interpretation. However, much more is needed for the interpretation of example 4(d). The evaluation expressed by words like *wifelet*, *starlet* and *princelet* is qualitative and reflects a negative appraisal of the referent’s social status rather than their physical size.

Observe that the words in examples 4 (a) – (d) have the same morphological structure i.e. noun + *let*. In examples 4 (a) – (c), there is a clear mapping between this structure, the denotation of the roots and their diminutive forms. To get the small-sized meaning associated with Diminution in those expressions, one can simply combine the meaning of the root and the value of the evaluative marker. This analogy cannot be extended to the morphopragmatic meanings in example 4 (d). The word *princelet*, for instance, refers to a young male of royal descent. Beyond this diminutive meaning, the term is derogatory when used in reference to a prince in charge of a place which is considered insignificant. This kind of meaning does not follow the clear mapping between morphology and semantics, as shown with similar words in 4 (a) – (c).

Barbaresi & Dressler (2020, p. 420) explain that such meanings cover the entire speech act not only the diminutivized word. It is obtained from contextual factors such as the type of discussion, the degree of formality, participants’ closeness and other specific circumstances which guide the language user’s assessment of an entity or event as desirable (i.e. GOOD) or undesirable (i.e. BAD).

3. Methodology

3.1 Description of the Research Design

The study adopted the qualitative approach to research. Creswell (2009) describes this approach as “a means for investigating and understanding the meanings ascribed to a

problem”. Qualitative research works study the manner in which a given phenomenon occurs and the reasons why it is so. It relies on non-numerical data collected using a variety of techniques including interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, participant observation, open-ended questionnaires and archival search of existent data.

3.2 Data Collection, Presentation and Analysis

This study collected data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained via interviews and participant observation. Twenty-one key informants participated in the interview sessions; they were purposively selected from three local government areas with large population of speakers. The interviewees were aged 30-80 years and their occupations are student, civil servant, retiree, cleric and palace chief. The study selected the interviewees using two criteria: frequency of language use and the purpose. Frequency allowed the study to target participants who communicate regularly in the language. The purpose criterion was to include persons who use Edo in both informal and formal settings.

For secondary data, we conducted an archival search of textual and audio-visual materials. The ones used for this paper include journal articles which discuss Diminution in the Edo language (Omoruyi 1986; Usenbo & Yuka 2025), textbooks and reference materials. The study selected textbooks which have been vetted and approved for teaching at the secondary and tertiary levels of education (Imasuen, 1996; Omoregie, 1983) and two dictionaries (Agheyisi, 1986; Melzian, 1937). The corpus of audiovisual materials comprises documentaries and movies. The one included in this article is a two-hour movie (Ikponmwosa 2009). These sources of secondary data were chosen because they contain relevant examples of diminutive morphemes and syntactic diminutive expressions.

The data collected were categorised using the functions identified by Agheyisi (1986) and Melzian (1937). As detailed in both dictionaries, Edo diminutive morphemes function as markers of the following; (i) kinship relationship, (ii) the smaller form of animate and inanimate nouns, (iii) group membership, (iv) body parts, (v) part-whole relation for instruments and (vi) a measure of distance and duration. The focus of this paper is the second function; we have illustrated this function with thirty examples.

The study differentiated the sources of the examples using the term ‘elicited’ as well as the dates when the interviews were conducted for primary data and in-text citation for secondary data. Data obtained from interaction with other language users is unmarked. The data is presented in the official orthography of the language. Currently, it does not include tone marks, but this study added them to make the work more accessible. Interlinear glossing follows the Leipzig Glossing Rules. For data analysis, the study adopted the morphopragmatic perspective outlined in the literature review section.

4. Results

4.1. On the Structure of Diminutive Constructions in the Edo Language

Diminutive constructions may be classified into two types: synthetic (or morphological) and analytic (or syntactic) diminutives (Schnieder, 2013, p. 138). Synthetic diminutives are formed by attaching a diminutive marker to a root using morphological processes like affixation, reduplication and compounding. Depending on the language, these processes may be class-maintaining or class-changing (Grandi, 2015, p. 76; Stekauer, 2015 p. 53). Analytic diminutives have a phrasal structure. They consist of a root word and another free morpheme which serves as a modifier. In the Edo language, Diminution uses both the morphological and syntactic strategies.

4.1.1. Morphological Diminutive Constructions

5.	<i>à</i> - <i>tínnié</i> NMLZ be_tiny 'A small sized person'	(Usenbo & Yuka 2025, p. 5)
6.	<i>ikù</i> <i>èrhàn</i> DIM log of wood 'Firewood chips'	(Melzian 1937, p. 91)
7.	<i>ikpè</i> <i>òkùtá</i> seed rock 'Gravel'	(Agheysi 1986, p. 70)
8.	<i>òlùkù</i> <i>èsì</i> offspring pig 'Piglet'	(Melzian 1937, p. 144)
9.	<i>òsómwè</i> <i>ìnyá</i> fragment yam 'Piece of yam'	(Agheysi 1986, p. 114)
10.	<i>òvbì</i> <i>ábè</i> child knife 'Pen knife'	(Agheysi 1986, p. 116)

11. (a) *bě́ě òghèdè nà*
 Slice plantain this
 ‘Slice this bunch of plantain.’ (elicited, 10/2023)

(b) *bě-lě òghèdè nà*
 Slice-IT plantain this
 ‘Slice this bunch of plantain.’ (elicited, 10/2023)

12. (a) *èvbò má yè èvbá*
 People crowd LOC there
 ‘People have formed a crowd there.’ (Agheysi 1986, p. 94)

- (b) *èvbò hié nè vbè èvbá*
People be_less ASP LOC there
'People are now fewer there.' (Agheyisi 1986, p. 60)
13. (a) *sá àmè mè yá kpé òbó*
Fetch water 1SG use wash hand
'Get water for me to wash my hands.'
- (b) *imòtò nà sàmwé-ò àmè kùò mwè*
Car DEM splash-PST water on 1SG
'This car splashed water on me.' (Agheyisi 1986, p. 135)
- (c) *àmè nònó yè òtò*
Water drop on ground
'Water is dropping on the floor.' (elicited, 10/2023)
- (d) *àmè hié-rè nè*
Water be_less-PST ASP
'The rain has subsided.' (elicited, 10/2023)

In examples 12 (a) and (b) the interpretation of a smaller crowd size comes from the direct contrast in the meanings of the verbs *má* and *hié*. In examples 13 (a) – (d), one can infer a reduction in the quantity of water. For instance, a scoop of water is less than whatever is left in the container from which it was taken. Also, a splash from a moving vehicle is less than all the water that might accumulate in a pothole. Similarly, the expression in 13 (d) is used to describe the kind of rainfall which is considered less heavy than the typical one which compels individuals to seek shelter or use an umbrella.

Each sentence in example 13 contains the word *àmè*. The Edo language uses that word for both “water” and “rainfall”. If the water is from a source other than the rains, the term is modified with the name of the source. For example, pipe-borne water is referred to *àmè-ògbá*; here, water is modified with the term for tap (or faucet).

4.1.2. Syntactic diminutive constructions

Syntactic diminutive constructions are also referred to as analytic diminutives. In terms of their structure, analytic diminutives “comprise two constituents: the base word and an independent marker, which may be an adjective like the word *little* in phrases such as *little house* and *little chat*” (Schneider, 2013). Syntactic diminutive constructions are common strategies for evaluation in languages where inflection is sparse or non-existent. For such languages, “one may interfere evaluations by using syntactic constructions with evaluative adjectives or adverbs” (Barbaresi, 2015, p. 40).

Like synthetic (or morphological) diminutives, analytic diminutives also belong to the word field ‘SMALL’. They may be distinguished using their status as lexically free morphemes (Aboh, 2025, p. 16). In the Edo language, SMALL is expressed using several words.

14. *òmwá nòkàmwá ghá sètín yó éwù nà*
Person small FUT AUX wear dress this
'A small-sized person will be able to fit into this dress'.
15. *Enọrẹnse viọ àlùbárhà nègièghé nè iràn*
Enọrẹnse give.ASP onion small to 3PL
'Enọrẹnse gave them small-sized onion bulbs.'
16. *Osagie fián ékà khérhé nè Isibor*
Osagie cut akara small for Isibor
'Osagie gave a small quantity of akara to Isibor'. (Imasuen 1996, p. 69)

17. *ò rhìé - íghó tùèin -rré*
 3SG bring money very_small come
 ‘He/she brought a very small amount of money’. (elicited, 8/2019)
18. *mwàán òwè órè nètínniè nǚ ù ké dè íbàtà*
 measure feet 3SG tiny those 2SG before buy shoe
 ‘Measure his/her tiny feet before you buy shoes’.

Examples 14 – 18 show Diminution that is marked using different adjectives. The adjectives differ in terms of the degree of smallness: small > very small > tiny. There is also a distinction in the nature of constituents they occur with. Data shows that *khérhé* and *tùèin* can be used attributively as in 16 and 17; they may be used predicatively as in example 19 and 20.

19. *ékà Isibor yé khérhé*
 akara Isibor be_like small
 ‘Isibor’s akara is small.’ (Imasuen 1996, p. 69)
20. *íghó nè ò rhìé-rré yé tùèin*
 money REL RP bring-come.PST be_like very_small
 ‘The money he/she brought is very small.’ (elicited, 8/2019)

A third distinction is the range of meanings associated with analytic diminutives. In this regard, *khérhé* and the derived form *nèkhérhé* may be considered the most widely used forms, given their extended meanings.

21. *ò bọ òwá nèkhérhé*
 3SG build.PST house small
 ‘He/she built a small house in the village.’ (Agheysi 1986, p. 100)
22. *òtén mwè nèkhérhé nà khín*
 relative 1SG small DEM be
 ‘This is my younger sibling’
23. *ò bàlọ khérhé*
 3SG hurt small
 ‘It hurts a little.’ (Melzian 1937, p. 17)
24. *ò kàán énrèn khérhé*
 3SG touch 3SG small
 ‘It touched him/her slightly.’ (Agheysi 1986, p. 86)

Examples 21 – 24 show that *khérhé* and *nèkhérhé* are used for size, quantity, the gravity of an action, the intensity of a sensation and other meanings such as the younger person among relatives. Data supports the idea that there is a difference in the interpretation of *khérhé* and *nèkhérhé*. This was noted in Yuka and Evbuomwan (2016), and this study agrees there is need for a detailed analysis of the Edo adjectival category. This kind of analysis lies outside the scope of this paper; but it is hoped that future research studies will pursue this line of inquiry.

4.2. On the Pragmatic Interpretation of Edo Diminutive Constructions

Previous examples discussed with respect to the first objective of the study show that Diminution is marked with a null morpheme in the category of verbs; for nouns, it may be marked on the verb in the sentence or with several overt morphemes that attached to the noun through processes like affixation and compounding. Irrespective of the morphological status of the diminutive marker, its meaning remains constant i.e. smaller in size or quantity of a substance or an action. In certain contexts, this basic meaning can be extended such that the diminutive expresses an appreciative (endearment) or a depreciative (pejoration) value. Consider the following utterance.

25. à - tínniè làrrè vbè èmwá
 NMLZ be_tiny come LOC here
 ‘Little one, come here!’

In example 25, a mother instructs her child to come closer to her, without referring to the child by a proper name. This conveys the mother’s endearment towards the young one. Other diminutive expressions that could be used for positive evaluation in this sense are *àwéké* and *òvbi-àwéké*; both expressions translate to “little one” or “smally”. These expressions are commonly used to address children; but they can also be used for anyone who is slightly built. When they are used to address adults, the sense is only deemed appreciative when the interlocutors are in a relationship that does not require obeisance. Thus, Diminution is depreciative in adult-directed speech, when age or social status matter.

A mismatch of features is another way the inherent semantics of Diminution can be replaced by a pragmatic interpretation. Such expressions reveal the speaker’s Pejorative Evaluation of an entity as illustrated in the following.

26. (a) à - kàmwá - ùdù
 NMLZ be_small heart
 ‘A small-sized object’ (Melzian 1937, p. 6)
- (b) ù yévbè òvbi à-kàmwá-ùdù
 2SG seem child small-sized object
 ‘You appear to be the odd one.’ (Melzian 1937, p. 6)
- (c) ù kàmwá sẹ́ẹ́ òvbi ẹ̀rẹ̀
 2SG be_small than child 3SG
 ‘You are younger or smaller than his/her child.’ (elicited, 8/2019)
- (d) ù yévbè òvbi ẹ̀rẹ̀
 2SG seem child 3SG
 ‘You look or act like his/her child.’ (elicited, 8/2019)

In example 26 (a), *à-kàmwá-ùdù* is an expression which denotes the size of an object; in 26 (b) it describes a person. The sentence in 22(a) can only be interpreted as Diminution, and 26 (b) a veiled form of pejoration. The sentence contains two diminutive markers – *òvbi* which is used for living things and *à-kàmwá-ùdù* which is used for objects. Usually, one draws similarities between entities of the same kind; in this case another nominal which refers to a person. If the attitude towards the referent is positive, native speakers would use sentences like examples 26 (c) and (d) depending on what they are trying to communicate. Both sentences are suitable for describing a person’s age, comparably smaller physical size or childlike disposition. By referring to a person as a diminutive object, the speaker is using 26 (b) to express a negative evaluation without using derogatory words.

27. òvbi àmìí né àmẹ́ èrù má ré kàá
 child infant REL water fetal NEG ASP dry
 vbè ùhúnmwù ẹ̀rẹ̀
 LOC head 3SG
 ‘An infant whose amniotic fluid has not yet been cleaned off ...’ (Ikpomwonsa, 2009)

Example 27 is an excerpt from a dialogue between a married woman and her husband’s mistress. Here, the speaker likens a young adult engaged in the amorous affair to an infant. Infants i.e. *àmìí* are the smallest forms of the human species; By using these diminutive expressions, the speaker expresses her contempt for the mistress without literal abusive words.

In addition to Appreciative and Pejorative Evaluation, Edo diminutive constructions can also be used for downgrading illocutionary force of an utterance. Illocutionary force refers to the conventional meaning associated with acts such as making a statement, offering advice, making promise etc (Levinson, 1983, p. 236). These illocutionary acts are sometimes purely communicative; at other times they hold institutional significance. In the communicative sense, illocutionary acts deal with transfer of information. From the perspective of their institutional significance, these acts require a formal procedure to be performed (Reiland, 2024, p. 8). As a strategy for downgrading illocutionary force, it is common for Edo speakers to use diminutives for requests which require the addressee to provide the speaker with something tangible.

28. *sá àmè khérhé m̀è yá khùé*
 fetch water small 1SG use bathe
 ‘Fetch me a little water to bathe.’ (elicited, 8/2019)

Example 28 is a request presented using a syntactic diminutive construction. The speaker asks for a “little quantity of water”, but knowledge of the world tells us that the quantity of water which will suffice for a bath is by no means little. Yuka (2020, p. 195) explains that speakers’ employ diminutive construction for requests like these because they do not wish to be seen as asking for too much. The intention is to persuade the addressee by making the request appear small. The same strategy applies in the following.

29. *rhìé ighó khérhé rrèè nè iràn yá làṣò imòtò*
 bring money small come for 3PL use enter car
 ‘Give them money for transport fare.’
 30. *ẁè ghá mié ighó khérhé rhìé m̀è rà*
 2SG will see money small give 1SG QM
 ‘Can I get some money from you?’ (elicited, 8/2019)

In examples 29 and 30, the speaker is asking for money; but instead of directly stating a figure, the speaker resorts to *hedging*. A hedge can be defined as “any linguistic device by which a speaker avoids being compromised by a statement which turns out to be wrong or a request which is unacceptable” (Matthews, 2007, p. 173). The use of diminutives as hedges has been documented for other languages. One of such studies states that “diminutives are sometimes employed to function as pragmatic hedges by weakening the illocutionary force of an utterance, especially speech acts such as requests” (Eshreteh, 2017, p. 55).

The goal of the speaker in these examples is to make the request more acceptable to the addressee. Though unspecified, the amount described as small could range from a few hundreds to thousands in the local currency. To make this seem less of an imposition, the speaker presents it as a *hedged request* (Barbarese, 2015, p. 38). This facilitates the interaction as the addressee can follow up with either a question about the amount needed for transport fare or a statement declaring how much he/she is willing to give the speaker.

5. Discussion

In recent years, there have been renewed interests in Diminution and other evaluative expressions, as well as a gradual development of Morphopragmatics as an interface in linguistic studies. The studies include Martin Calvo (2019), Kortvelyessy (2015), Grandi & Kortvelyessy (2015) and Kortvelyessy & Stekauer (2011). These works and others listed in the reference section motivated the investigation into Diminution in the Edo language. Prior to this study, there has been only one attempt (Usenbo & Yuka, 2025) at providing a detailed analysis of evaluative constructions in this language. Unlike that study, this article focused on a single evaluative value – Diminution and approached the topic from a morphopragmatic

perspective. It addressed two specific research objectives. The first was to describe the structure of diminutive constructions. The second objective was to discuss the pragmatic interpretations of these constructions.

With respect to the first objective, the study found that Diminution can be marked morphologically and syntactically. Morphological marking uses three processes: affixation, compounding and a combination of both processes. Affixation is the process of adding bound morphemes to free morphemes (Matthews, 2007). Compounding refers to the process which allows the combination of two or more independent morphemes for the formation of a new word (Coulibaly, 2020, p. 6). The processes observed in the data set are part of the ones Stekauer (2015) outlined for Evaluative Morphology. In terms of syntactically marked structures, the study found that the language uses adjectival modification of nouns and aspectual distinction in verbs. These findings are similar to Aboh (2025), Kortvelyessy (2015) and Schneider (2013) who have shown that nominal modification and aspect serve as diminutive strategies in other languages.

The second objective of this study explored the range of communicative functions associated with diminutive constructions in the Edo language. Beyond the semantic meaning of reduced quantity or smaller size, Diminution can be used to perform a range of interpersonal communicative functions such as expressing fondness, stating one's disapproval without denigrating the addressee and making polite requests. The data analysis showed that Diminution serves as a hedging device; speakers' use it as a strategy to make their requests sound less imposing. Other communicative uses of diminutive constructions are the expression of appreciation when speaking with younger people and pejoration in adult-directed speech.

Existent literature (Aboh, 2025; Yuka, 2020; Appah & Amfo, 2011) on Diminution in African languages posit that it can be used to convey one's admiration or affection, contempt and disdain. This study on the Edo language corroborates earlier findings, as it has shown that Diminution serves as a semantic marker of reduced size and a pragmatic strategy for positive and negative evaluation.

6. Conclusion

This paper looked at the expression of Diminution in the Edo language. The study focused on the structure and the possible meanings of these expressions. Data analysis revealed that diminutive markers may be null or overt morphemes. Overt markers are evident in nouns, while null marking was observed in verbs. Besides the use of morphological processes, the language also marks Diminution with periphrastic constructions. In terms of meaning, diminutive expressions inherently denote the smaller size or quantity of something. However, this study has shown that the sense of smallness can be used to express a range of context-dependent meanings. For example, using a diminutive construction as a hedging device can make a request seem less of an imposition. Diminution can also be used to communicate one's endearment of person, typically children and close friends. In certain contexts, Diminution could also be a strategy for subtly pointing out negative qualities and communicating one's disapproval. The paper, thus, concludes that an understanding of the pragmatics of diminutive expressions is essential for effective communication.

It recommends that future research should focus on Evaluative Morphology in other African languages; the scope of such studies may consist solely of Diminution or include other evaluative values, depending on the scale of research. Furthermore, such studies can consider a comparison of the structure and functions of diminutive expressions using the data and theoretical orientation in this paper.

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Symbols and Abbreviations

-	affix boundary	INT	intensification marker
- -	discontinuous morpheme	LOC	locative
1	first person	NEG	negator
2	second person	NMLZ	nominalizer
3	third person	PL	plural
ASP	aspectual marker	PST	past tense
AUX	auxiliary	REL	relativizer
DEM	demonstrative	RP	resumptive pronoun
DIM	diminutive marker	SG	singular
FUT	future tense		

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