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THE BANTOID DIMINUTIVE VERBAL SUFFIX

IN A COMPARATIVE AND TYPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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DIMINUTION

- **Diminution** defined as any morphological device which means at least ‘small’ (Jurafsky 1996)
- More often marked in **nominal domain**
- But can also be marked in **verbal domain**

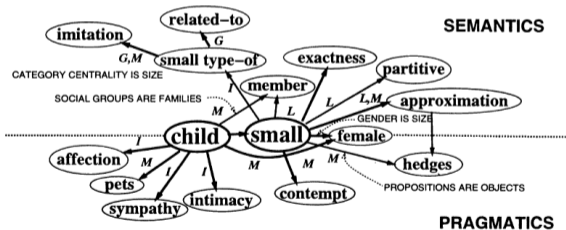


Figure: Proposed universal semantics of diminution (Jurafsky 1996:542)

VERBAL DIMINUTION

- **DIM** = Verbal affix marking diminution
- Found as verbal suffix in various **Bantoid/Bantu zone A** languages (but absent in other Bantu)

TALK OUTLINE

- 1 Case study of DIM in **Tunen** (Bantu A44)
- 2 Comparison of DIM extension across **Mbam Bantu** (Bantu A40a/A60) and **non-Bantu Bantoid**
- 3 Bantoid DIM within **typological perspective** of verbal semantics

TUNEN CASE STUDY

METHODOLOGY

- Examples taken from **previous work** on Tunen (Bantu A44, Cameroon) (Dugast 1967, 1971; Boyd 2015; Kerr 2024a,b)
- **Targeted elicitation** with 8 Tunen speakers in Ndikiniméki, Cameroon + natural speech data, (5 months: Feb-Apr 2025, Jul-Aug 2025, Apr-May 2026)
- + fieldwork on **surrounding Mbam Bantu languages**



Figure: Elicitation with Tunen consultant in Ndikiniméki, 2025.

TUNEN DIM

- (1) a. -tāt ‘attendre’ [‘to wait’]
b. -tātɛl ‘attendre un peu’ [‘to wait a bit’]
- (2) a. -sèm ‘vendre’ [‘to sell’]
b. -sèmɛl ‘vendre en petit quantité’ [‘to sell in small quantity’]

(Dugast 1971:233-234)

FOUR FORMS IN TUNEN?

- Dugast (1971:233): “Cette forme est employée très fréquemment : l’action n’est accomplie qu’une fois, ou en partie (un peu), ou faiblement. L’affixe de cette forme est *-l* (*-ɛl*, *-al*, *-əl*, *-il*) placé en suffixe au radical.”
 - Given Tunen’s **ATR vowel harmony** (Boyd 2015), this suggests two alternations: *-ɛl/-il* and *-al/-əl*
 - However, there is **dissimilation in backness** within stacked DIM, also with last vowel of root
 - This results in the following sequences (first V = last vowel of root):
 - a-ɛ-a
 - ɛ-a-ɛ
 - i-ə-i
- ⇒ DIM is not specified for frontness; has opposite value of previous vowel

ONE SUFFIX, FOUR ALLOMORPHS

- One extension /-Vl/, where the frontness and ATR of V is predictable based on the height and ATR value of the (final element of) the verbal stem:
- DIM: /-Vl/, where
 - $V \rightarrow \text{ə} / V_{[+ATR, +front]}(C)_1$
 - $V \rightarrow \text{i} / V_{[+ATR, -front]}(C)_1$
 - $V \rightarrow \text{a} / V_{[-ATR, +front]}(C)_1$
 - $V \rightarrow \text{ɛ} / V_{[-ATR, -front]}(C)_1$
- (DIM is underlyingly L-toned, HTS applies from H-toned verbs, as with other extensions)

APPARENT COUNTEREXAMPLES ARE LEXICALISED

! **Apparent counterexamples** from Boyd (2015:348) and Dugast (1967, 1971):

(3) $\grave{u} \neq \text{m}\acute{\iota}\eta.\acute{\iota}\lambda\text{-}\grave{\alpha}$ ‘polish’

(6) $\text{-}\acute{\epsilon}\text{m}\acute{\epsilon}\lambda$ ‘be pregnant’

(4) $\grave{u} \neq \text{s}\acute{\alpha}\lambda.\acute{\alpha}\lambda\text{-}\grave{\alpha}$ ‘whistle’

(5) $\grave{u}\text{-p}\acute{\iota} \neq \text{h}^{\text{j}}\acute{\alpha}\eta.\acute{\alpha}\lambda\text{-}\grave{\alpha}$ ‘soar’

- Fieldwork results show these are **lexicalised**: the VI sequences are not productive derivations but are treated as part of the root
 - Forms without the VI do not/no longer exist: $*\grave{u} \neq \text{m}\acute{\iota}\eta$, $*\grave{u} \neq \text{s}\acute{\alpha}\lambda$, $*\grave{u}\text{-p}\acute{\iota} \neq \text{h}^{\text{j}}\acute{\alpha}\eta$, $*\text{-}\acute{\epsilon}\text{ma}$
 - To express diminutive, need other strategy (e.g. adding adverbial ‘small’)
- cf. *si $\acute{\alpha}$ lin $\acute{\alpha}$* ‘to visit’ (long or short time) as lexicalised DIM of *sin $\acute{\alpha}$* ‘to see’

ADVERB 'SMALL' NOT NEEDED FOR DIMINUTIVE MEANING

- Adverb 'small' can co-occur with DIM but is not obligatory:

(7) a. Context: You are waiting for a friend, who hasn't arrived.

Mba mé wéeya táté^lá té^lté.
/mba mé wéeya tát-VI-a té^lté/
so SM.1SG.SBJV PRN.1 wait-DIM-FV little
'I'll wait a bit for him.' (then I will leave)

b. Context: You are waiting for a friend, who hasn't arrived.

Mba mé wéeya táté^l.
/mba mé wéeya tát-VI/
so SM.1SG.SBJV PRN.1 wait-DIM-FV
'I'll wait a bit for him.' (then I will leave)

ADVERB 'SMALL' NOT NEEDED FOR DIMINUTIVE MEANING

- Adverb 'small' is only dimensional; **diminutive extension is broader** in meaning

(8) ɔtanɛla

/ɔ-tan-VI-a/

INF-wound-DIM-FV

'blesser' / 'to wound' (can be a small or a big wound, but a single one)

(9) a ná tanéla té!té.

/a ná tan-VI-a té^Lté/

SM.1 PST2 wound-DIM-FV little

'He is lightly wounded.' (small wound, single one)

TUNEN DIM + PLUR + ADV

- DIM is compatible with adverb ‘small’ and combinable with durative/pluractional, but contributes diminutive (short time) meaning on its own; not used for a single jump

- (10) Mɔ́ná ə ná hámǎ́lóká té!té.
/Mɔ́-ná a ná hám-VI-ak-a té!té/
1-child SM.1 PST3 jump-DIM-DUR small
’The child took lots of little jumps.’
- (11) Mɔ́ná ə ná hámíl.
/Mɔ́-ná a ná hám-VI/
1-child SM.1 PST2 jump-DIM
’The child has jumped a bit.’
- (12) Mɔ́n(á) é ná hámé ikuílí émɔ́tɛ.
/Mɔ́-ná a ná hámé ɛ-kuílí é-mɔ́té/
1-child SM.1 PST2 jump 7-time 7-one
’The child has jumped once.’

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

MBAM BANTU LANGUAGES HAVE DIM IN -IT

- DIM *-it* found across Mbam Bantu (except Nyokon A45, where it is possibly fossilized in l [r̥])
- In Tunen A44 DIM has form *-Vl*, but its closest relatives Nomaandé A46, Atomb A461, Yambeta A462 in *t*: *-Vt*
- *t* > *l* is a recent Tunen innovation; **-Vt* as Proto-Mbam DIM

Table 100: Revised classification of the Mbam languages

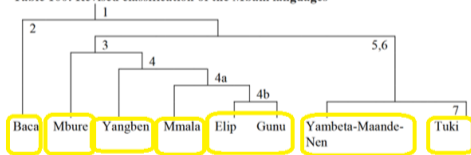
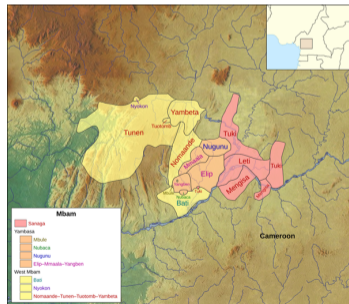


Figure: Internal classification of Mbam Bantu according to Boyd (2015), with languages in which DIM found in yellow.



NOMAANDÉ -VT = TUNEN -VL

Nomaandé base	Nomaandé DIM	Tunen base	Tunen DIM
-táta ‘attendre’	-tátéta	-táta ‘attendre’	-tátéla
-túá ‘vendre’	-túátítə	-lúá ‘vendre’	-lúála
-búmə ‘chasser’	-búmítə	-búmə ‘chasser’	-búmála
-búŋúlə ‘mélanger, tourner; faire salire’	-búŋúlítə	-búŋúlə ‘mélanger (dans un récipient), retourner la terre avec la semence’	-búŋúlála
-fúkə ‘secouer, remuer’	-fúkátə; -fúkítítə	-fúkə ‘secouer’	-fúkála; -fúkálíla
-huə ‘récolter’	-hətitə	-huə ‘récolter’	-huəla; -huəlílə
-húúnə ‘ouvrir (un couvercle)’	-húúnítítə	-húúnə ‘essuyer’	-húúnála; -húúnálíla

⇒ Nomaandé -Vt in cognate forms to Tunen -Vl

! **Challenge in correspondences:** In row 1: Nomaande -tátéta = Tunen -tátéla: t > l in derivational suffix but not in root, but t > l in root in row 2 Nomaande -túá = Tunen -lúá (see Appendix)

DIM -IT ACROSS MBAM BANTU (A40B/A60)

Language	Example	Source
Tunen A44	<i>u-búm-əl-ə</i> ‘chasser un peu’ (short duration)	Kerr field notes
Nyokon A45	No verbal DIM (possible fossilised examples in <i>-l [ɾ]</i>)	Kerr field notes
Nomaandé A46	<i>o-búm-ít-ə</i> ‘chasser un peu’ (short duration)	Kerr field notes
Atomb A461	<i>-púm-ít</i> ‘chasser un peu’ (short duration)	Kerr field notes
Yambeta A462	<i>ù ≠ fɔg-ít</i> ‘shake’ <i>-it kù ≠ tɪp-ít</i> ‘scratch, claw’	Boyd (2015:75)
Tuki A601	<i>-it, -it</i> (no description)	Welaze (2016)
Baca A621	<i>kù ≠ fú n-ít</i> blow (a little) <i>kù ≠ púr-ít</i> ‘lie (a little)’	Boyd (2015:216)
Elip A62C	<i>gù ≠ bón-íd</i> sharpen, file; <i>gù ≠ búm-íd</i> chase	Boyd (2015:130)
Gunu A62	<i>-nák-íd-à</i> lick (a little); <i>-núùn-íd-è</i> glance, look (a little)	Boyd (2015:112)
Mbure A623	<i>≠ áh-ít</i> yawn; <i>≠ tɔŋ-ít</i> sing; <i>≠ hò"d-ít</i> lie (v); <i>≠ púm-ít</i> inflate	Boyd (2015:196)
Mmala A62B	<i>g^w[ǎd]èḍ</i> casser (ponct); <i>-dá^mb-èḍ-</i> ‘trap-DIM’; <i>-dím-íd-</i> ‘dig-DIM’	Boyd (p.c.)
Nuasué A62A	<i>kù-kál-èt</i> INF-parler-SGL-SIT ‘parler une fois’	Bébiné (2018)
Yangben A62A	<i>kù ≠ sù k-èt</i> wash <i>kù ≠ fúk-ít</i> blow	Orwig (1989:301); Boyd (2015:176)

No DIM IN OTHER BANTU (?)

- No diminutive found in Basaa A43, Bafia (Rikpa) A53, Eton A71, and probably Ewondo A72, nor reported for other Bantu
 - Other ways to express verbal diminution: adverbials, reduplication of verb stem, predicate doubling, etc.
- Possible Ewondo A72 example (Essonno 2000:358):
 - tsíg-il-i* > *tsígili* 'couper morceaux'
 - (cf. -*tsíg* 'couper', -*tsígi* 'être coupé')
 - But this is considered on p369 to be an "itératif"
- But non-Bantu Bantoid languages have diminutive/pluractional of form *tV-* (Hyman 2018)

DIM IN NON-BANTU BANTOID

- Hyman (2018:178): the -*id* and -*tə* diminutive extensions in zone A and Bantoid “has no obvious source in [Proto-Bantu] or cognates in [canonical Bantu] and can therefore be an areal innovation”
- Assumption: Bantoid and Grassfields diminutive extension in -*tV* and Mbam diminutive extension in -*Vt* are cognate. [not yet strictly shown]

		PLUR	DIM			PLUR	DIM
Kenyang	Btd	<i>ti, ka</i>		Yamba	NE		
Mbe	Btd			Bafut	Ng	<i>tə, kə</i>	<i>tə</i>
Tikar	Btd	<i>k/ga'</i>		Mankon	Ng	<i>kə</i>	<i>tə</i>
Vute	Btd			Ngombale	Bk	<i>té</i>	
				Ngwe	Bk	<i>te</i>	
				Yemba	Bk	<i>ti</i>	
				Ngiemboon	Bk	<i>te</i>	
				Bangwa	Bk	<i>sə</i>	
Kemezung	Btd			Shingu	Bk	<i>sə</i>	
Noni	Btd	<i>ye ken</i>	<i>ce</i>	Balong	A10		
				Mokpe	A20		
				Bakoko	A40		
Babanki	Ring	<i>tə, kə, lə, m'</i>	<i>tə, nə</i>	Basaa ^a	A40		
Kom	Ring	<i>tə, lə, nə</i>	<i>tə, lə</i>	Tunen	A40		<i>VI</i>
Lamso ^a	Ring	<i>kir, ti(n), ri</i>	<i>ti</i>	Nomaante	A40		<i>It, lit</i>
Babungo	Ring			Bafia	A50	<i>tə, kə</i>	
Isu	Ring	<i>i, lə</i>		Gumu	A60	<i>an</i>	<i>id</i>
Meta	Mo	<i>ri, ni</i>	<i>ri, ni</i>	Tuki	A60		
					A70		
Mundani	Mo	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>		A80		
Baba I	Nun	<i>tə</i>			A80		
Limbun	NE	<i>ni, shi, se, te, nger</i>	<i>ri</i>	Mpompon	A80		
				Kako	A90		

Figure: Hyman (2018) overview of Bantoid extensions, with DIM forms highlighted.

DIM IN -TV IN NON-BANTU BANTOID

- (13) ᵑǵóʔ
knock
'give one knock'
- (14) ᵑǵóʔ-**té**
knock-DIM
'knock slightly several times'

(Men; Akumbu & Kiesling 2020:270, adapted)

DIM IN -TV IN NON-BANTU BANTOID

- Differences from Mbam Bantu:

- 1 Form is **-CV rather than -VC** (presumably in relation to syllable structure/FV)
- 2 **Cannot stack DIM** in non-Bantu Bantoid (related to maximality restrictions on stem size)
- 3 **Overlap between DIM and pluractional/frequentative** (cannot co-occur as separate markers)
- 4 Appears to be **less productive**

POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF DIM

- **Origin of DIM** is the “most puzzling question” (Hyman 2018:194):
 - Maybe DIM.PL class 13 *ti-*, but no precedent of nominal marker becoming verb extension
 - Instead, Basaa (A43) *títígí* ‘small’ and **sound symbolism??**
- Possibly from a **diminutive adverb** such as Tunen *té^ltéá* ‘a little, small’; Nomaandé *-tíkítíki* ‘small’; Atomb *-títíákən* ‘small’; Tuki *dekéíí* ‘peu (de)’
i.e. V#Adv → V-DIM
- Akumbu and Kießling (2020:269) on **parallels with nominal diminution**:
“-*tV* and -*lV*, which accompany diminutive derivation of nouns in Central Ring resemble the verbal extensions -*tV*, and -*lV* commonly found in Bantoid and in Grassfields (Watters 2003:245, Hyman 2018:180)”
 - Compare to **Khoekhoe** which has a verbal diminutive suffix *-ro* and a nominal diminutive *-ro* (Olpp 1977:120-122)

TYPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

DIMINUTIVE VS SEMELFACTIVE/PUNCTUAL

- **DIM is wider in function than semelfactive.** Semelfactive can only mean one instantiation of an action. Diminutive can express manner and time.

(15) Mɔná ə ná hóm-ɪl-ə té!té.
/mɔ-ná a ná hóm-VI-a té!té/
1-child SM.1 PST2 jump-DIM-FV little
‘The child has jumped a bit’ (not high, not far)

- **Semelfactive/punctual could only mean ‘once’**

(16) Mɛ ná mɔná nyék-ál-ál-én.
/Mɛ ná mɔná nyék-ál-ál-én./
SM.1SG PST2 1-child push-DIM-DIM-APPL
‘I pushed the child a bit’ (gently, once)

- cf. **semelfactive in Konso** (Cushitic, Ethiopia) (Orkaydo and Mous 2017):

(17) ʔorrasid dakaasiʔ ʔituukkay
ʔorra-siʔ dakaa-siʔ ʔi = tuukk-ay
people-def.m/f stone-def.m/f 3 = push:sg-pf[3m]
‘The people pushed the stone once’

DIMINUTIVE VS SEMELFACTIVE/PUNCTUAL

- **The verbal DIM differs from the semelfactive.** It indicates less intensity or affect in the event. It can also impose quantification on the event but for the value “fewer” not only “once”:

- (18) Mi ná kotil.
/mɛ ná kot-**VI**-a/
SM.1SG 2 crunch-**DIM**-FV
‘I crunched.’ (small quantity). [semelfactive would mean ‘once’]
- (19) Mi ná kotok.
/mɛ ná kot-ak-a/
SM.1SG 2 crunch-**PLUR**-FV
‘I crunched.’ (long duration or large quantity)

CROSS-LINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY OF VERBAL DIMINUTION

- Audring et al. (2021) present a **cross-linguistic typology** of verbal diminution, arguing for a certain set of meanings cross-linguistically, with 9 (21%) out of 42 African languages showing verbal diminutives [42 = 17% of the sample]
- They identify three sets of functions of verbal diminutives:
 - a) **reduction in quantity** of the action
 - b) **reduction in quality** of the action
 - c) **affective** meanings
- Audring et al. consider **diminution of participant non-central** in characterisation of verbal diminutive
 - ! but this meaning is important for Mbam Bantu DIM: semantics of event = affects **objects in transitive phrases**
- this is parallel to **pluractionals** few or partitive: Central is **gradation**, not just **quantification**

FUNCTIONS

- Mbam Bantu DIM has a range of functions, dependent on verb semantics:

Verb meaning

- a) short period of time
- b) once or a few times
- c) close to completion/property

Participant

- d) short quantity
- e) small part of object

Manner

- f) halfheartedly

FUNCTIONS

Verb meaning

- a) short period of time
- b) once or a few times
- c) close to completion/property

Participant

- d) short quantity
- e) small part of object

Manner

- f) halfheartedly

- (20) Context: You are a passenger in a car and fall asleep for just a second.

Με ná hinó

SM.1SG PST2 19-sleep

húlólíó ɔ matóá númə.

remove.DIM PREP 6.car inside

‘I slept briefly in the car.’

FUNCTIONS

Verb meaning

- a) short period of time
- b) once or a few times
- c) close to completion/property

Participant

- d) short quantity
- e) small part of object

Manner

- f) halfheartedly

- (21) Bá ná kumbáɬə u
/bá ná kumb-Vɪ-a ɔ
SM.2 PST2 knock-DIM-FV PREP
niki.
nɛ-kí/
5-door
'There was a knock at the door.'
(one knock, could be loud or soft)

FUNCTIONS

Verb meaning

- a) short period of time
- b) once or a few times
- c) close to completion/property

Participant

- d) short quantity
- e) small part of object

Manner

- f) halfheartedly

(22) hɔ / hɔnal

‘finish’ / ‘finish soon’

(23) ɔmbala wɔ̃ lɛ lɛŋɛ-ál-éátɔ

3.bag sm.3 be lean-DIM-PTCP

ɔ ɔ-mbambal.

PREP 3-wall

‘The bag is leaning slightly against the wall.’

FUNCTIONS

Verb meaning

- a) short period of time
- b) once or a few times
- c) close to completion/property

Participant

- d) **small quantity**
- e) small part of object

Manner

- f) halfheartedly

- (24) Context: you spend all day at the market, but you only sell 3 quantities of peanuts.

Mi ná lúól(ó té!té).

‘I sold a little.’

- (25) Με ná tɔmbaŋa luəl.

‘I sold a small quantity of peanuts.’

FUNCTIONS

Verb meaning

- a) short period of time
- b) once or a few times
- c) close to completion/property

Participant

- d) small quantity
- e) small part of object

Manner

- f) halfheartedly

(26) Mε ná μεnyama
/mε ná με-nyama
SM.1SG PST2 10-animal
búmóló νεῶfén.
búm-VI-a νεῶféné/
hunt-DIM-FV today
'I hunted some animals today.'

⇒ small duration / small quantity (not that the animals themselves are small)

DIM ON TRANS V AFFECTING OBJECT

d) small quantity

e) small part of object

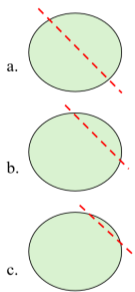


Figure: Visual stimuli for a-c.

a. Mε ná nε-mbea bés.
SM.1SG PST2 5-melon cut
'I cut the melon.'

b. Mε ná nε-mbea
SM.1SG PST2 5-melon
bés-ál.
cut-DIM
'I cut a little bit of the melon.'

c. Mε ná nε-mbea
SM.1SG PST2 5-melon
bés-ál-él.
cut-DIM-DIM
'I cut a tiny little bit of the
melon.'

FUNCTIONS

Verb meaning

- a) short period of time
- b) once or a few times
- c) close to completion/property

Participant

- d) small quantity
- e) small part of object

Manner

- f) halfheartedly

- (27) Context: A man ties a goat to a tree with a rope.
Θ ná tíηól.
/a ná tíη-VI-a/
SM.1 PST2 attach-DIM-FV
'He attached it (but not tightly).'
- (28) Context: Amina flicked through the pages.
Áminá a ná hiəfulə
/Aminá a ná hε-əfulə
1.Amina SM.1 PST2 19-book
fané.
fan-VI-a/
read-DIM-FV
'Amina skimread the book.'

AFFECTS PROPERTY PROVIDED IT IS GRADABLE

- (29) a. Ɔmbándʒε wó ná fakál-él.
'The stick got a little stuck.'
- b. Mɔ́ná a ná kɔ́m-ál.
'The child has grown a bit.' (not many cm, but slightly taller)
- c. Context: The children look related, but there are some differences, e.g. the nose.
Bónúó baná bá ndɔ́ húán-él.
'Your children look a little alike.' [Speaker comment: c'est un légère rassemblement.]
- d. Niása moŋgolo má nyú-ál!
'Let the mangoes ripen a bit!' (they are about to become a little ripe (not too ripe))

AFFECTS PROPERTY PROVIDED IT IS GRADABLE (CONTD.)

- (30) a. Context: You are pregnant.
Tṓá¹míá tóna tó n(á) áḡán-él.
'My belly has grown a bit.'
- b. Με λε έμέλ-átɔ.
'I am pregnant.'
- c. Context: You are early on in the pregnancy.
*Με λε έμέλ-ál-átɔ.
Intd.: 'I am slightly pregnant.' [Speaker comment: you're pregnant or you're not.]
- d. cf. *ə nó húl-ét.
Intd.: 'He arrived a bit.' [Speaker comment: you arrive or you don't]

CONTEXTS WHERE DIM IS INFELICITOUS

- Property is not gradable:

(31) Context: You are early on in the pregnancy.

*Με λε έμέλ~~άλ~~άτο.

Speaker comment: you're pregnant or you're not.

- Action is not gradable:

(32) *to miss + DIM

(33) *to throw + DIM

CONTEXTS WHERE DIM IS INFELICITOUS

- Short time or small quantity/part does not make sense, e.g.:

a. Tuɔ́fó tú boko o nuíy.
/tɔ-ɔ́fó tú bok-a ɔ nuíyi/
13-fish SM.13 live-FV PREP 5.river

‘Fish live in the river.’

b. *Tuɔ́fó tú bokilə o nuíy.
/tɔ-ɔ́fó tú bok-VI-a ɔ nuíyi/
13-fish SM.13 live-DIM-FV PREP 5.river

Intd.: ‘Fish live a bit in the river.’ (?)

- ⇒ Similarly, ‘to write a bit’ is OK in an intransitive sentence (meaning: short duration) but not in ‘to write a book’, because it is not possible to write a bit and complete a book (a letter may work)

DOUBLE DIMINUTIVE IN MBAM BANTU

■ 1. There is no single DIM, double acts as one

(34) Me ná mɔná nyék-**ál-ál**-én.
(*nyék-**ál**-én)
'J'ai poussé l'enfant un peu.'

(35) ɔkɔ-a / ɔkɔ-**al-el**-a
'tomber' / 'tomber un peu'

■ 2. Double DIM has no apparent semantic effect

(36) a. Mɔná a le téném-**ál-átɔ**.
'The child is almost but not
completely standing.'
(between standing and
crouching)'

b. Mɔná a le téném-**ál-ál-átɔ**.
'The child is almost but not
completely standing.'
(between standing and
crouching)'

DOUBLE DIMINUTIVE IN MBAM BANTU

■ 2. With no apparent semantic effect (contd.)

(37) Context: The children look related, but there are some differences.

Bónúó baná bá ndɔ húán-él.

Comment: c'est un légère rassemblement

(38) Mɔná a l(ɛ) isó húál-él-átɔ.

'L'enfant ressemble le père un peu.'

⇒ But 3rd has an effect!

(39) Mɔ-ná a l(ɛ) isó húá-l-él-él-átɔ.

1-child SM.1 COP 9.father resemble-DIM-DIM-DIM-PTCP

'L'enfant ressemble le père un très petit peu.'

DOUBLE DIMINUTIVE IN MBAM BANTU

■ 3. extra DIM = smaller

(40) ɔmbala wó ɛ lɛ́ŋé-**ál-él**-átɔ ɔ ɔmbambal.

3.bag sm.3 be lean-DIM-DIM-PTCP PREP 3.wall

‘Le sac est un peu penché sur le mur.’ (almost upright)

(41) a. Mɛ ná fak**é**la u míimə na buəl.

‘J’étais un peu occupée dans la maison avec le travail. (e.g. for a minute)

b. Mɛ ná fak**élálél** (u míimə na buəl).

J’étais un peu occupée dans la maison avec le travail. (e.g. for a couple of seconds)

■ with two different dimensions of small:

(42) Yamía ɛŋwáyɛ a ná níkí kúmb-**ál-íl**-ə.

‘Mon ami a frappé à la porte.’ (une seule fois, doucement)

DOUBLE DIMINUTIVE IN MBAM BANTU

- 3. extra DIM = smaller
- Speaker comment: there is no restriction to how many diminutives, you can even have 15 – provided your eyesight is good enough to still see the object!

(43) ɔ ná nɛfɛa bésálálélála!
/ɔ ná nɛ-fɛa bés-Vl-Vl-Vl-Vl-a/
SM.2SG PST2 5-melon cut-DIM-DIM-DIM-DIM-FV
‘You cut a *VERY* small bit of the melon!’

(44) mɛ ná nɛfɛa bésálálálálálálálél.
/mɛ ná nɛ-fɛa bés-Vl-Vl-Vl-Vl-VL-VL-VL-a/
SM.1SG PST2 5-melon cut-DIM-DIM-DIM-DIM-DIM-DIM-DIM-FV
‘I cut a very very very small bit of the melon’ (so small it’s basically invisible)

DOUBLE DIMINUTIVE IN MBAM BANTU

■ 4. impossible (semantic reason)

(45) Mɔ́ná a ná bembɔ́nɔ́bɔ́ŋɔ́ afálél.

L'enfant a partagé juste un peu des bonbons (there are still a lot left in the box).

⇒ DIM gives sense of small quantity of object

(46) */?mɔ́ná a ná bembɔ́nɔ́bɔ́ŋɔ́ afálélál.

Intd.: L'enfant a partagé juste un peu des bonbons (bad to have DIMx2 in context of sharing just one sweet)

PLURACTIONAL -AK AS COUNTERPART

- (47) a. Tóá!míá tóna tó n(á) áñán**él**. (49) a. Mɔkáta wó ná mianjó ány**él**á u
= 'My belly has grown a bit' buolí. = 'My hand was
getting tired a bit at work'
b. Tóá!míá tóna tó n(á) áñán**ák**. (not too much / it didn't last
too long)
= 'My belly has grown a lot'
- (48) a. Niŋgolo né le nua**l**átɔ. = 'The
mango is slightly ripe'
(beginning, not completely) b. Mɔkáta wó ná mianjó ány**áka**.
= 'My hand is getting tired'
- b. Niŋgolo né le nuak**á**tɔ. = 'The
mango is ripe'
- (50) a. Me ná menyama áñg**él**a
neɔfén. = 'I roasted a bit of
meat/fish today.'
b. Me ná menyama áñg**áka**
neɔfén. = 'I roasted meat
today'

DIMINUTIVE + PLURACTIONAL CO-OCCURRENCE

- Can combine dimension (**DIM**; -Vl/Vt) and space (**PLUR**; -ak) in Mbam Bantu:

(51) Mɔ-ná ə ná hám-**ál-ák-é** té¹té.
1-child SM.1 PST2 jump-**DIM-PLUR-FV** small
'The child took lots of little jumps.'

(52) a ná tan-**ál-ál-ák**.
SM.1 PST2 wound-**DIM-DIM-PLUR**
'Il a blessé un peu un peu.' (small wounds, in multiple places)

PRAGMATIC USE OF DIM

- Cross-linguistically, diminutives tend to express attenuation and are commonly used **pragmatically**/affectively as face-softening to reduce face threatening acts

“Verbal diminution is marked [in Karok] by the suffix *-ač* as well as by changes in the stem consonants, here a shift from *r* to *n*. The semantic effect is ‘to *V* a little’, but this type of marking can also “[indicate] a speaker’s familiar or affectionate attitude towards a situation”.” (Audring et al. 2021:229)

NO PRAGMATIC USE OF DIM

- We **did not find** usage of verbal diminutive in Bantu/Bantoid for purely affective/pragmatic reasons
- e.g. in the Tunen examples below a concrete diminution was always implied on top of any attenuation effect:

(53) Context: You are asking for money.

Isób-ǎl-ǎl-íní-ǎ miaṅǎ!

support-DIM-DIM-APPL-FV PRN.EMPH.1SG

‘Supporte moi juste un peu!’/‘Help me out a bit!’

(54) tátélá!

/táta-Vl-a/

wait-DIM-FV

‘Wait a bit!’ i.e. wait for a short time (I will be there soon)

SAME AND DIFFERENT ACROSS MBAM

- Differences **across languages or speakers?** in acceptability depending on what is considered gradual
- Differences in interpretation of **stacked diminutives**
 - for Tunen speakers: extra diminution
 - for Nomaandé speakers: no added semantic value
 - for Nuasué speakers *-it-it* indicates repetition (expérientiel) (Bebine 2019)

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS (1/2)

- Verbal diminutive extension occurs in Bantoid/Grassfields Bantu and Mbam Narrow Bantu languages and the extensions in *-Vt* + Tunen's verbal diminutive *-Vl* are **cognate**
- The diminutive extension in Tunen is a **single form /-Vl/**, with **4 allomorphs** conditioned by ATR harmony and dissimilation in frontness
- Tunen verbal DIM is **highly productive** and expresses “**smallness**” in the event by adding senses like 1) **short time**, 2) **few times/once**, 3) **few objects**, 4) **small part of object**, 5) **short of completion** (telic verbs), 6) **close to state/property** (gradable states), and otherwise 7) **manner of execution** of action. Interpretation depends on verb (event) semantics

CONCLUSIONS (2/2)

- **Object affectedness/partitive** is **cross-linguistically less common**
- There is **no pragmatic/affective** use in Bantoid
- Counterpart of DIM is the “plurational”/durational *-ak*
- **Combining** diminutive and pluractional is not impossible but rare; in Grassfields Bantu/Bantoid, the same form may have either meaning
- While **semelfactive** singles out one instance of verbal action, verbal **diminutive is wider** and expresses gradual diminution. Both have **pluractional** as counterpart
- Diminutive suffixes can be **stacked**, which can add sense of more diminution

QUESTIONS TO THE AUDIENCE

- 1 Do you know of **other Narrow Bantu languages** outside of Mbam with a diminutive verbal suffix?
- 2 How should we see the differences in function between Mbam and non-Bantu Bantoid regarding **pluractional + diminutive** vs **only diminutive**? Is one sense primitive/older?
- 3 Can the verbal diminutive (-*tV*) in Bantoid also **affect the object**? (small quantity/part)
 - e.g. I cut.DIM melon = 'I cut a bit of the melon'
 - e.g. She cover.DIM table with cloth = 'She covered part of the table with a cloth'

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APPENDIX

CHALLENGES IN CORRESPONDENCES WRT TUNEN L

- **t** = **t** in C₁ in verbs:

Nomaandé	meaning	Tunen	meaning
-tábónáka	‘réparer’	-tábón	‘réparer’
-táfa	‘choisir, trier’	-téfa	‘choisir, trier’
-tála	‘poser’	-tála	‘poser’
-tíala	‘polir, lisser’	-tèla	‘lisser (terre)’
-tombɔ (n)	‘fatigué’	-tòmb	‘être fatigué’
-tóma	‘goûter (la première fois)’	-tóm	‘consommer les prémices des récoltes’
-tɔsɔ	‘donner des feuilles, verdier’	-tòs	‘pousser des rejets après la taille’

- But **t** = **l** in C₁ in Nomaande -tóma ‘envoyer’/‘send’ = Tunen -lóm ‘envoyer’ “Double reflexes”. Philippson (2022:253) proposed a rule at higher node in tree: “PB *t which exhibits “fortis” /t/ and “lenis” /l/. ... the reflexes in question are tonally conditioned (in C1): “fortis” appears when the V1 is H and “lenis” when it is L.”
- This does not hold for this Tunen item -lóm ‘envoyer’ PB *-tóm (BLR3-3055). Moreover, this cannot be blamed on borrowing from Basaá which has -óm ‘envoyer’ (Lemb and de Gastines 1973).

CHALLENGES IN CORRESPONDENCES WRT TUNEN L

- **t** = **t** in C₂ in verbs:

Nomaandé	meaning	Tunen	meaning
ɔ-kɔt-a	'secher'	-kót	'secher'
ɔ-nàt-a	'être dur, difficile'	-nàt	'être dur'
ɔ-làt-a	'unir'	-làt	'unir, réunir'

⇒ last row: C1 l < PB *t *tat (BLR3-2804) = instance of Philippson rule

- **t** = **l** in C₂ in verbs (Philippson p.c.):

Nomaandé	meaning	Tunen	meaning
wɔt-ɔk-ɔ		-wól-ɔk-ɔ	'bind'
ɔwɔ-ótókɔ	'lier'	ólók	'lier'