

# **The Acquisition of Diminutives in Dutch**

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# The Acquisition of Diminutives in Dutch

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## Abstract

The acquisition of diminutives by a single child between the ages of 1;5 and 2;5 is studied. The data cover the very first uses of diminutives. The child's use of diminutive word forms is analyzed quantitatively and compared with her mother's use. This comparison reveals a high correspondence between the child's and the mother's use, i.a. in terms of the frequency of the various allomorphs in the mother's language and the order of acquisition. The regularities of the allomorphic variation exhibited in the child's diminutive formation is analyzed qualitatively, and the formal and semantic concomitants are scrutinized. The hypothesis is formulated that the formal and semantic aspects of diminutive formation are not yet integrated.

## 0. Introduction

Diminutives are among the first grammatical morphemes used by children acquiring Dutch (Schaerlaekens & Gillis 1987: 139). However, the acquisition of diminutives (the generality of their use, the order of acquisition of the various allomorphs, the age at which these occur, etc.) has hardly received any systematic treatment in the literature. In this paper we investigate one child's use of diminutives from 1;5 to 2;5.

## 1. Diminutives in Dutch

Probably the first description of diminutives in Dutch can be traced back to Te Winkel (1866). He posits two diminutive suffixes (*-je* and *-ken*) and formulates the phonological

conditions under which allomorphic variation takes place. Although Te Winkel's treatment can hardly be said to be accurate, his observation that the suffix shows regional and dialectal variation still holds. In this paper we will deal with diminutives in Standard Dutch and will annotate that system so as to provide the necessary pointers to cover regiolectal variation that occurs in our subject's language. For instance, in Standard Dutch *-(t)je* is accepted as the default form. The *-ken* mentioned by Te Winkel is not considered in recent analyses of Standard Dutch, but at the same time it figures as the default in the Flemish regiolect (and in Flemish dialects).

Diminutives in Dutch are formed by attaching a form of the Germanic suffix *-tje* to the singular or base form of a noun (see below for diminutives of other word classes, which appears much less often and is highly restricted). The suffix shows allomorphic variation: the five variants are exemplified in (1).

(1)	Variant	Example	IPA transcription	Gloss
	-tje (/tʃə/)	<i>kikker-tje</i>	/kɪkərtʃə/	'little frog'
	-etje (/ətʃə/)	<i>roman-etje</i>	/rɔːmanətʃə/	'little novel'
		<i>bal-etje</i>	/balətʃə/	'little ball'
		<i>bar-etje</i>	/barətʃə/	'little bar'
	-pje (/pjə/)	<i>lichaam-pje</i>	/liːχaːmpjə/	'little body'
		<i>pluim-pje</i>	/plœʏmpjə/	'little feather'
		<i>bezem-pje</i>	/beːzəmpjə/	'little broom'
		<i>olm-pje</i>	/ɔl(ə)mpjə/	'little elm'
	-kje (/kjə/)	<i>koning-kje</i>	/koːnɪŋ jə/	'little king'
	-je (/jə/)	<i>wereld-je</i>	/weːrəlʃə/	'little world'

According to recent analyses (Trommelen 1983, Van der Hulst 1984, Booij & Van Santen 1995), the following phonological regularities account for the allomorphic variation (all exemplified in (1) above):

*-je* is used after an obstruent (which always becomes voiceless after the suffix is added, as in *wereld-je* (/weːrəlʃə/))

*-pje* is used after a long vowel, diphthong or schwa followed by /m/ (*lichaam*, *pluim*, *bezem*), and after a short vowel followed by a liquid (/r/ or /l/) plus /m/ (*olm*).<sup>1</sup>

*-kje* is used in multisyllabic words ending in *-ing* (/ɪŋ/) that carry main stress on the penultimate syllable. This is the case of *koning* (in (1)), which is to be distinguished

<sup>1</sup> Note that in this environment a phonological rule inserts /ə/ between the liquid and the nasal, and thus this case is actually covered by the first clause: schwa plus /m/.

from monosyllabic words such as *ring* (/rɪŋ/ , 'ring') that take the allomorph *-etje*. *-etje* is used after a nasal or liquid /l/ preceded by a short vowel (*roman*, *bal*) and after monosyllabic words ending in /r/ preceded by a short vowel (*bar*). The latter restriction distinguishes monosyllabic words from polysyllabic words such as *dollar*, which take the allomorph *-tje*. *-tje* is the default which applies in those conditions not stipulated above.

Three additional peculiarities should be mentioned. First of all, certain nouns adhere to these generalizations, but in addition allow a second form of the suffix. Examples are displayed in (2) and the reader is referred to Booij & Van Santen (1995) for formal specification of these and related cases.

- (2) a. Some words that take *-etje*, also allow *-tje*, *-pje* or *-kje* depending on the final consonant:

E.g.,     *sultan-etje*     *sultan-tje*             'sultan'  
               *consul-etje* *consul-tje*           'consul'  
               *pelgrim-etje* *pelgrim-pje*       'pilgrim'

- b. Monosyllabic words ending in an obstruent allow *-etje*, next to the regular *-je*:

E.g.,     *pop-je*             *pop-etje*             'doll'  
               *kip-je*             *kip-etje*             'chicken'

Secondly, some nouns with a short vowel in their final syllable require vowel lengthening in plural formation. This latter rule applies to varying degrees in diminutive formation: for some nouns vowel lengthening obligatorily applies for the diminutive (3.a), others have two alternative forms, one with and the other without a lengthened vowel (3.b), and for other nouns vowel lengthening (required in pluralization) does not apply in diminutive formation (3.c).

(3) Noun	Plural	Diminutive
a. <i>gat</i> (/ɣɑt/, 'hole')	<i>gaat-en</i> (/ɣɑ:tən/)	<i>gaat-je</i> (/ɣɑ:tjə/)
b. <i>dak</i> (/dɑk/, 'roof')	<i>daak-en</i> (/da:kən/)	<i>dak-je</i> (/dɑkjə/) <i>daak-je</i> (/da:kjə/) <sup>2</sup>
c. <i>hof</i> (/hɔf/, 'garden')	<i>hoov-en</i> (/ho:vən/)	<i>hof-je</i> (/hɔfjə/)

Third, the existence of what we could call 'frozen' diminutives should be noted. We understand these to be diminutives that either do not exist as simplicia or that have a

<sup>2</sup> According to Booij & Van Santen (1995) this form is a possible one.

lexicalized meaning as diminutive (different from the meaning as simplex). The former category consists of words like *sprookje* ('fairy-tale'), *beetje* ('a bit'), *meisje* ('girl') that have no counterpart without the diminutive suffix, although on pure formal grounds they could be analyzed as consisting of a stem plus a diminutive suffix (e.g., *meisje* = *meis* -*je*, *sprookje* = *sprook* -*je*, etc.) The second category consists of diminutives that do have a counterpart without the suffix, but the suffixed words have a lexicalized meaning. For instance, *kattebelletje* (*kat*+*bel*-*etje*) is a diminutive meaning 'scrawl', the form without the suffix does not carry that meaning at all.

The process of diminutive formation applies to morphologically simple nouns, but also to compound nouns as well as derived nouns<sup>3</sup>. Diminutives can be pluralized: the order of the morphemes is invariably diminutive followed by plural suffix (see (4)).

- (4) *boek* ('book') *boek-je* (*boek*-DIM) *boek-je-s* (*boek*-DIM-PL)  
*boek-en* (*boek*-PL)\**boek-en-tje* (*boek*-PL-DIM)

Diminutive formation applies to common and proper nouns: to count nouns without restrictions, to non-counts in more restricted areas. It is also possible with certain verbs (verb stems) (5.a), adjectives (5.b), adverbs (5.c), numerals (5.d), prepositions (5.e), and phrases (5.f)<sup>4</sup>. The formation of diminutives with these source categories is far more restricted.

- (5) a. *zit* ('sit') *zit-je*  
 b. *klein* ('small') *klein-tje*  
 c. *tussendoor* ('inbetween') *tussendoor-tje*  
 d. *tien* ('ten') *tien-tje*  
 e. *uit* ('out of') *uit-je*  
 f. *onder ons* *onderons-je*  
 (lit.: among us, 'a select few')

In all these cases, diminutive formation accompanies or results in nominalization. Moreover there is a change of inflectional class. The grammatical gender of diminutives is uniformly neuter: thus, masculine and feminine nouns all become neuter once

<sup>3</sup> Diminutives of most derived nouns can be accounted for by the regularities spelled out above for simple nouns. Some derivations do however show a more complicated picture (cf. Booij & Van Santen 1995).

<sup>4</sup> These may involve demonstratives, such as *ditjes en datje* ('this-DIM and that-DIM'), which do not occur in isolation, but only in phrases such as these.

diminutivized. This also holds if the source category (base) of the diminutive is a verb, adjective, etc.

As such the Dutch diminutive exhibits the following characteristics, which it seems to share with diminutives in various other languages (Dressler & Merlini 1994:92-3): diminutive formation is (i) derivational; (ii) alterative (subcategorization and selection restrictions are not affected by it, though it is non-prototypical for diminutives in that it entails a shift of the class feature 'gender'). (iii) It has a basic connotative meaning; (iv) it does not have a unique categorical basis. (iv) At least the Standard Dutch variants share "the iconic expression via morphological rules that involve palatal vowels or palatalization" (Dressler & Merlini 1994: 93). The additional variants used in the Flemish regiolect do not adhere to this characterization since they involve a velar stop (*-ke* /kə/, *-eke* /əkə/, *-eske* /ɛskə/, *-ske* /skə/).

## 2. Method

For the present study data were collected from a single subject, Jolien, from the age of 1;5.9 at the first recording to the age of 2;5.14 at the last recording. The child was visited at home approximately twice a month. Audiorecordings were planned bi-weekly, and consist of naturally occurring interactions between the child and her mother. Occasionally other participants took part in the interactions, such as the child's older sister, her father, a.o. However this was kept to a minimum. Interactions were basically unstructured, though in almost every recording the child and her mother were reading a picture book; the remaining part involved various situational setting (breakfast, free play, preparing a meal, etc.) and topics were accordingly varied.

Transcription was done by the research assistant (T. Van den Broeck) who was also present at the recordings. Transcriptions are in CHAT allowing further data manipulation with CLAN. Adult utterances were transcribed orthographically, the child's utterances were also transcribed phonemically. Contextual notes were inserted where necessary. The transcripts were checked by the present author, and an automatic morphological analysis using CLAN's MOR-utility was made. This analysis was manually checked independently by the author and the research assistant.

For the present study, the recordings are grouped per month. An overview of the data, including the number of analyzable utterances, and the child's MLU are displayed in Table 1.

Child's age	Number of utterances analyzed	MLU in Morphemes	SD
1;5	332	1.020	0.221
1;6	615	1.061	0.293
1;7	209	1.153	0.468
1;8	281	1.280	0.688
1;9	381	1.427	0.858
1;10	245	1.946	1.647
1;11	172	2.201	1.670
2;0	304	2.314	1.642
2;1	675	2.243	1.740
2;2	685	2.177	1.633
2;3	263	3.079	2.386
2;4	694	2.911	2.254
2;5	619	2.722	2.343

Table 1: Overview of the data.

### 3. Results

The results of this case study will be presented from both a quantitative as well as a qualitative perspective. The child's use of diminutives over time will be described in quantitative terms: how does the child's use of diminutives as a class develop, and how does the child's use of the various allomorphs develop during the period studied. We will also devote closer attention to the relationship between the child's production of diminutives and their occurrence in the adult's language.

#### 3.1 Quantitative aspects

In the first instance, we wanted to find out the evolution of the child's use of diminutives. This was done by selecting from the transcript the tokens of all nouns and by calculating the proportion of diminutives (both lexicalized and fossilized). Next, the different word forms were tabulated and the proportion of all diminutive word forms was calculated. These results are displayed in Table 2.

Age	Tokens of dir relative to total noun:		Diminutive w relative to total noun word	
	N (Nouns)	% (Diminutives)	N (Nouns)	% (Diminutives)
1;5	57	0	21	0
1;6	286	0	84	0
1;7	164	1.2	107	1.9
1;8	213	6.1	108	2.8
1;9	238	1.7	113	2.7
1;10	181	3.3	86	4.7
1;11	117	5.9	67	10.5
2;0	191	2.6	81	3.7
2;1	342	19.9	125	26.4
2;2	331	15.1	97	27.8
2;3	163	15.9	71	15.5
2;4	336	17.6	161	25.5
2;5	375	18.7	137	27.7

Table 2: Diminutives relative to the number of nouns (tokens and word forms)

The data in Table 2 show two interesting aspects of the child's use of diminutives. First of all, data collection captures the very beginning of the usage of diminutives. In the first two months there are no tokens, the first ones are produced when the child is 1;7. Secondly, the child's use of diminutives shows two quantitatively defined stages. From 1;7 up to 2;0 there is a sporadic use of diminutives. From 2;1 onwards, she uses them very regularly: almost one out of five noun tokens is a diminutive. The picture for word forms is similar: after the acquisition of the first diminutive word forms, that number remains fairly low until 2;1. At that age we notice an important increase, so that almost one out of three word forms in the child's production is a diminutive. Thus, the child does not select diminutive word forms from the adult language at first. Acquiring the use of diminutives is a process that starts after lexical acquisition has taken off, but it soon reaches the level of the adult usage of those forms. By way of comparison, Figure 1 displays the proportion of diminutives relative to the number of noun word forms in Jolien's and her mother's language. It appears that after the onset of what seems to be productive use of diminutives from 2;1 onwards, these attain a level which is only slightly below the level found in the language of the child's mother.

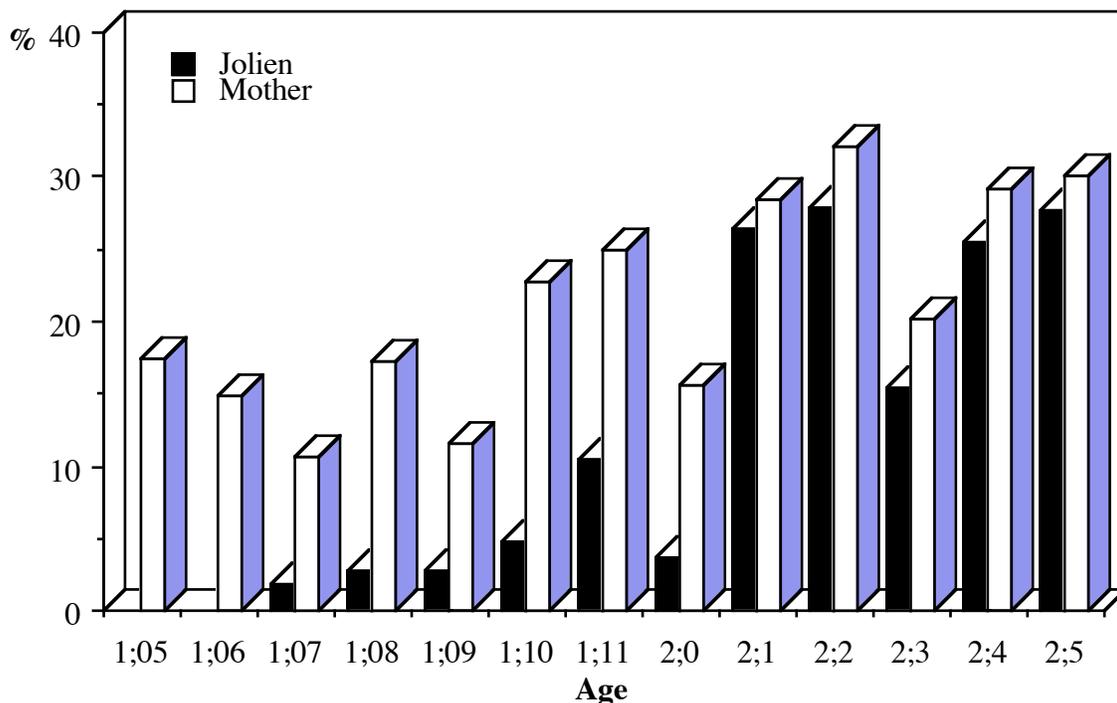


Figure 1: Percentage of diminutive word forms in Jolien's and her mother's language use.

When we analyze which variant of the diminutive suffix the child uses spontaneously, it appears that only two variants account for more than 90% of the diminutives. When we look at the word types (different diminutive word forms) over the entire period of study, 59% of those forms take the suffix *-je* and 30% *-tje*. The remaining 11% are divided over *-etje*, *-pje* and the Flemish variants *-ke*, *-eke*. In terms of word tokens (the individual diminutives in the manuscript), the proportion is almost identical: 58% for *-je*, 32% for *-tje* and the remaining 10% for the other variants. Again, these figures come very close to the mother's use: again viewed over the entire period, in Jolien's mother's language *-je* diminutive word forms account for 57%, *-tje* for 34% and all other variants for 8%.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> When we compare the actual word tokens, the picture is somewhat different: 47% *-je*, 49% *-tje*, and 4% for the other variants. Thus, diminutives with the suffix *-tje* are the most frequently used in the mother's language. However, that figure includes the huge amount of diminutives of just one word form, viz. the child's name: *Jolien-tje*. When we exclude those tokens from the frequency count, the proportion found for word forms is nicely reflected in the tokens: 60% *-je* versus 35% *-tje*. In by-passing it can be remarked that the appearance of the child's name in the mother's language undergoes an interesting development. Contrary to what is expected from the literature on child-directed speech (see Ferguson 1977, Schaerlaekens & Gillis 1987), it is not the case that the child's own

This comparison clearly shows that the child does not start using all the variants at once. Only *-je* and *-tje* (the default form in the adult language system) are used frequently from 2;1 onwards, the age at which productive use appears to take off. These allomorphs are precisely also the ones most frequently found in the mother's language. Moreover, in the child's production the relative importance of the two allomorphs clearly reflects the frequencies in her mother's language (both for word types as for word tokens).

A final question that crops up from a quantitative perspective relates to the semantic basis of diminutives vis-à-vis the simplex forms: to what extent are the child's diminutives in competition with their respective bases. In other words, does the child have words that she uses exclusively in their base form and others as diminutives, or does she have words that occur in both forms? In case the child does not operate with the semantic opposition defined by the diminutive and has not yet mastered the pragmatics of its use (see Dressler & Merlini 1994) there is no reason for the child to use the diminutive alongside the base (simplex) form. Thus we expect little overlap between the two categories.<sup>6</sup>

In Figure 2 the child's noun repertoire (used in the productive stage from 2;1 to 2;5) is investigated. Word types were according to whether they occur as simplex, diminutive word forms or that of the same base both the simplex and the diminutive occur.

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name appears very often as a diminutive. In the period in which the child does hardly use any diminutives, the mother most frequently uses the child's name in its simplex form (*Jolien*): simplex in 55% of the cases versus 45% for the diminutive. But once the child starts using more diminutives herself (from 2;1 onwards) there is an increase in the mother's use of the child's name in its diminutive form (*Jolien-tje*): 71% diminutive versus 29% simplex forms. The difference in the use of diminutives versus simplex forms is highly significant ( $\chi^2 = 24.3824$ ,  $p < .0001^{**}$ ).

<sup>6</sup> Unless she considers them as mere free variants that have an essentially unmotivated variation. This could be interpreted as running counter to the premise that children relate meaning differences to differences of form and/or vice versa (Clark 1993). Though it may well be the case that the existence of two different forms deriving from the same base drives the child to explore meaning differences. In addition, it should be noted that in the present study no systematic analysis of the semantic and pragmatic basis of the child's use of diminutives was undertaken. We leave this as a topic that requires further investigation.

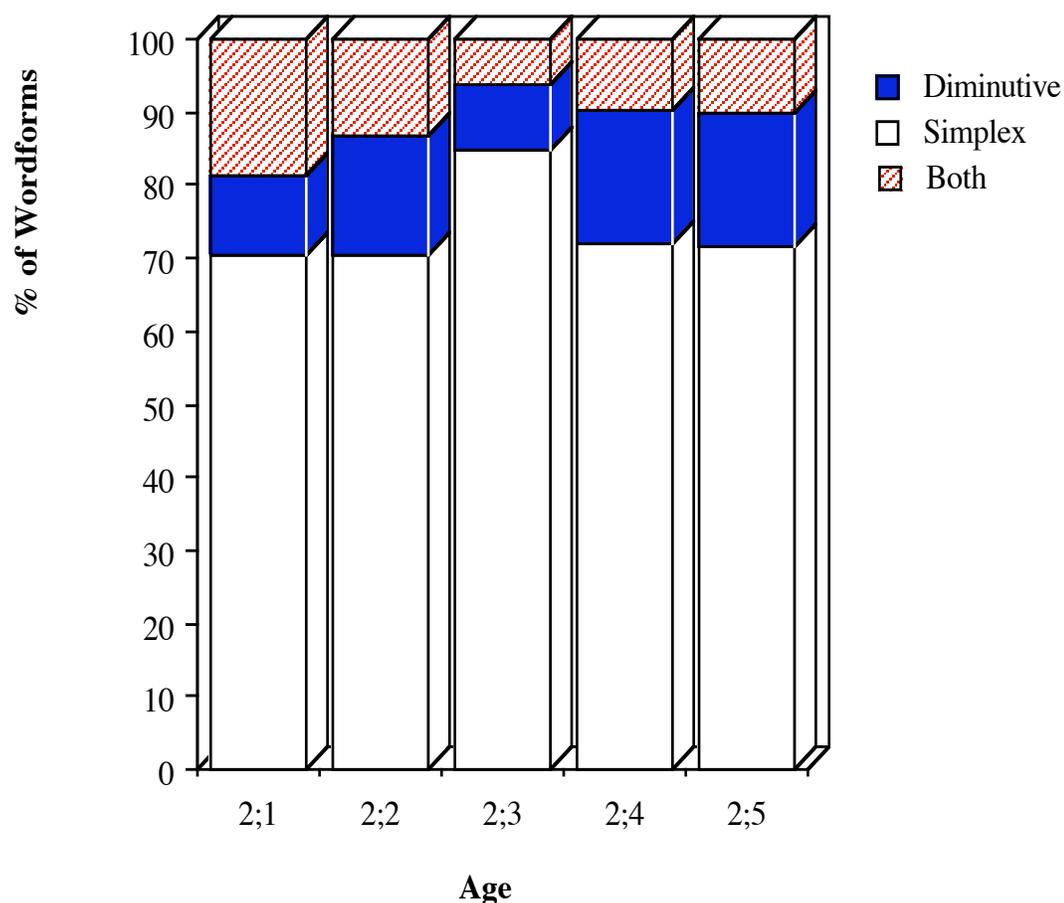


Figure 2: Comparison of word forms relative to their base: percentage of words occurring only as simplex or diminutive and words occurring as both simplex and diminutive.

From these data it appears that there is little overlap: the child uses a word either as diminutive (mean percentage of 14.7 in the period studied) or uses its simplex form (mean percentage 73.8%). Relatively few words (mean percentage 11.5%) are encountered in both forms. This may suggest that for the child the semantic basis for the opposition is not acquired yet or not connected with the use of diminutives. We will discuss this issue further in the qualitative analysis in the next section.

### 3.2 A qualitative look

As we indicated in the previous section, during the first two months of the observation period (1;5 - 1;6), the child does not use diminutives. Even when she imitates an adult utterance that contains one, the diminutive does not occur in her imitation, as illustrated

in (6):

(6) Child's age 1;5 (JOL = Jolien, the target child, ANN = the child's mother)

\*ANN: muisje .  
 %pho: mœYfə .  
 %mor: nlmuis-DIM .  
 %eng: mouse-DIM .  
 \*JOL: een mui(s) .  
 %pho: əmœY .  
 %mor: det:indefleem nlmuis .  
 %eng: a mouse

This example illustrates the child's tendency to truncate words (reduce them to monosyllabics) and thus deleting the diminutive suffix.

From 1;7 to 2;0, an occasional use of diminutives can be noticed. First of all, it should be stressed that in a majority of cases, diminutives occur in the context of direct imitation in this period: the child imitates the diminutive that occurs in the immediately preceding adult utterance. The first example is in (7):<sup>7</sup>

(7) Child's age 1;7

\*ANN: ja # hier kaarsje .  
 %pho: ja: hi:r ka:rfa .  
 %eng: yes here candle-DIM .  
 \*JOL: kaa(r)sje .  
 %pho: ka:fa .  
 %mor: nlkaars-DIM .  
 %eng: candle-DIM .

A striking fact about the child's spontaneous (non-imitative) use of diminutives is that more than half of the examples noted during this period is the use of the diminutive

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<sup>7</sup> A note of caution is in order regarding these early examples: it is sometimes rather difficult to interpret the child's utterances as including a diminutive. In the following example, she appears to imitate her mother's utterance "*boekje lezen*" ('book-DIM read'), but omits the /j/ of the suffix /jə/ so that, at least formally, the child's rendition of /bukə/ ('book-DIM') is identical to the plural /bukə/ ('book-PL'):

Ex.: Child's age 1;8

\*JOL: boek(j)e lezen .  
 %pho: bukə le:zə .  
 %mor: boek-DIM lees-INF.  
 %eng: book-DIM read .

*kindje(s)* (kind-DIM(-PL), 'little child(ren)'). Moreover, with only a couple of exceptions the diminutives all involve the allomorphs *-je* and *-tje*.

In this period there are already some signs of an evolving systematicity in the child's use of diminutives. A glimpse can be found in imitative contexts in which she changes the model imitated, as in (8):

- (8) Child's age: 1;10  
 \*ANN: een bedje .  
 %pho: ə.m bɛtʃə .  
 %eng: a bed-DIM  
 \*JOL: beddeke .  
 %pho: bɛtəkə .  
 %mor: nlbed-DIM .  
 %eng: bed-DIM.

Here the child changes the diminutive suffix of the model *-je* (in *bed-je*) into *-eke* (in *bed-eke*). This may indicate that the model does not fit the requirements of her own system, which dictates the use of *-eke* as the appropriate suffix. But since most instances are immediate and complete imitations, and since there are so few examples, it is very hard to detect the regularities the child appears to entertain in this stage.

When she starts producing diminutives with a fair frequency (from 2;1 onwards) the child predominantly continues to use the suffixes *-je* and *-tje*. These variants account for 90% of the tokens as well as the types (word forms) of diminutives. The regularities that can be detected from the start of this period onwards in the child's spontaneous use correspond very accurately to the adults' language use of these variants of the diminutive suffix (see (1)), although only a subset occurs in productive use:

- i. After an obstruent, *-je* is used.
- ii. After an unchecked vowel, a nasal and the liquids (/r,l/), *-tje* is used.  
 This should be annotated in the sense that of the Dutch nasals /n, ŋ m/ only /n/ occurs frequently in word final position and is used with the appropriate suffix *-etje*.<sup>8</sup> /ŋ/ is completely lacking in that position in diminutives. /m/ offers a very disparate picture: in the diminutive of *boterham* ('slice of bread') the appropriate suffix *-pje*<sup>9</sup> is used (though this form does occur in the mother's language). Other words ending in /m/ show fluctuation: *bloem* ('flower') occurs with the appropriate

<sup>8</sup> Though this is not without exception. For instance *man-eke* (/mənəkə/, 'man-DIM') en *Jan-eke* (/janəkə/, proper name) occur with the Flemish suffix *-eke*.

<sup>9</sup> The *-pje* is an alternative for *-etje* in this case, cf. (2).

Standard Dutch *-etje* and the (also appropriate) Flemish *-eke*. *Boom* ('tree') occurs with the inappropriate *-tje* and *-kje*.

- iii. In monosyllabic words ending in the liquid /l/, Flemish *-eke* is used (in this case the equivalent of the Standard Dutch *-etje*). Note that in her mother's language (as well as in the Flemish regiolect) *-eke* is neither restricted to monosyllables nor to the liquid /l/.

This idiosyncratic regularity opposes, for example, the monosyllables *vel-eke* (/vɛləkə/, 'skin-DIM') and *spel-eke* (/spɛləkə/, 'game-DIM') with the polysyllabic *lepel-tje* (/lɛ:pəltʃə/, 'spoon-DIM') and *wortel-tje* (/wɔrtəltʃə/, 'carrot-DIM').<sup>10</sup>

- iv. The other variants of the suffix (*-etje*, *-pje* and *-kje*) are not yet productively used. Thus the child has acquired part of the system of forming diminutives. The regularities in her diminutive formation indicate that she has mastered part of the adult's rules but at the same time imposed her own idiosyncratic systematicity (cf. the use of *-eke* with monosyllables in /l/). Within these limits it is striking that she does not make a lot of 'errors', i.e., apart from a few exceptions, she applies the rules mentioned above with great accuracy.

In regions where the child's system has not been firmly stabilized, such as the diminutive formation of nouns ending in a nasal, the child appears to be correcting herself (or overtly testing hypotheses), as in (9), where in two consecutive utterances two different variants (*-tje* and *-ke*) are tried out:

(9) Child's age 2;5

- \*JOL: een spintje [: spinnetje] [\*].  
 %pho: ə spɪntʃə .  
 %mor: det:indefleən n|spin-DIM .  
 %eng: a spider-DIM .  
 \*JOL: een spinneke .  
 %pho: ə spɪnəkə .  
 %mor: det:indefleən n|spin-DIM .  
 %eng: a spider-DIM .

A concomitant feature of diminutive formation is a gender shift: diminutives are

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<sup>10</sup> There are a few exceptions to this rule: the multisyllabic *verhaal-eke* (/vərha:ləkə/, 'story-DIM'), and words with the nasal /n/ mentioned in the previous footnote, and the nasal /m/: *boterham-pje* (/bo:tərhəmpjə/, 'slice of bread-DIM') is the only word taking *-pje*, and *bloem-eke* alternates with *bloem-etje* (/bluməkə, blumətʃə/, 'flower-DIM').

neuter, which is overtly marked in the definite article *het* (as opposed to the non-neuter *de*). The opposition neuter versus non-neuter does not hold for the indefinite article (only one form, viz. *een*, is available). It does show up however in the use of the demonstrative: *dit/dat* for neuter nouns, *deze/die* for non-neuters. Thus the contrastive use of demonstratives may indicate the child's awareness of the gender shift, as in *deze/\*dit koe* ('this cow') versus *\*deze/dit koetje* ('this cow-DIM'), *die/\*dat man* ('that man') versus *\*die/dat mannetje* ('that man-DIM').

The evidence for a gender change with diminutive formation is very scanty. First of all, a determiner is still often lacking (even when required). Secondly, there is an overwhelming use of the indefinite article (even in contexts where the demonstrative could have been used). Third, when a definite article occurs with a diminutive, the neuter *het* is to be expected instead of the non-neuter *de*. In a few relevant cases a definite article is used. From these examples it appears that the child does not always use the neuter form and uses the non-neuter instead (see (10)). However, she seems to be aware of the correct article to be used: in (11) the child's mother uses *de* with the simplex *olifant*, and in the next utterance, the child switches to the diminutive *olifantje* and also (correctly) uses the article *het*. Thus the evidence is not unequivocal in this respect.

(10) Child's age 2;5

- \*JOL: in de [\*] stoeltje mama .
- %pho: In də stultʃə mama .
- %mor: preplin det:deɪde nɪstoel-DIM nɪmama .
- %eng: in the chair-DIM mama .

(11) Child's age 2;1

- \*ANN: de olifant .
- %pho: də o:lɪfənt .
- %mor: det:deɪde nɪlɪfənt .
- %eng: the elephant .
- \*JOL: (h)et olifantje en (d)e tar [: kar] .
- %pho: ət o:lɪ:fəntʃə en də tɑr .
- %mor: det:deɪɦet nɪlɪfənt-DIM kɔŋj:koʊrɪn det:deɪde nɪkɑr .
- %eng: the elephant-DIM and the cart .

Finally, a note about the semantic basis of the use of diminutives. Does the child use diminutives with a basic connotative meaning? Does she use them for relatively small or sweet things? First of all, there are quite a few examples in which the child refers to exactly the same object or person using both the simplex and the diminutive (cf. Figure 2). In these examples we find high frequency nouns (and frequently used items) such as

*boek* ('book'), *bal* ('ball'), *ei* ('egg'), *eend* ('duck'), *kaboutertje* ('goblin'), *olifant* ('elephant'), etc. When the child uses both word forms for the same thing in the same situation, it may well be concluded that there is no meaning difference involved.

The best evidence for the apparent lack of a semantic underpinning of the use of diminutives comes from the child's use of the adjective *klein* ('little') and the diminutive *klein-tje* ('little-DIM'). When the relative smallness of something is at stake, the child uses the adjective (in its simplex or diminutive form), even in combination with the diminutive form of the noun. This is exemplified in (12). In (13) an analogous use of the adjective *groot* ('big') occurs: the adjective *groot* ('big') is used together with the diminutive form of a noun (probably) to stress the absolute size of the object. Again the child uses the diminutive *graat-je*, the simplex *graat* was not found in the data.

(12) Child's age 2;4

\*JOL: da(t) (i)s een tlein [: klein] [\*] beertje .  
 %pho: daz ən tleIn be:rtʃə .  
 %mor: pro:deicldat vlzjn&3S det:indefleen adjlklein nlbeer-DIM .  
 %eng: that is a little bear-DIM .

(13) Child's age 2;1

\*JOL: da(t) (i)s een groot graatje .  
 %pho: daz ən ɣrɔ:t ɣra:tʃə .  
 %mor: pro:deicldat vlzjn&3S det:indefleen adjlgroot nlgraat-DIM .  
 %eng: that is a big fish-bone-DIM .

A clear contrastive use is depicted in (14): the child and her mother are discussing toy animals. The child uses *klein-tje* ('little-DIM') to refer to an animal that is indeed smaller than the one her mother is holding. Thus instead of using the word *dier* or *dier-tje* ('animal', 'animal-DIM') which both occur in this context, the child prefers a lexicalized version of the notion "small".

(14) Child's age 2;0

\*JOL: dit hier tleintje [: kleintje] [\*] .  
 %pho: dIt i:r tleIntʃə .  
 %mor: pro:deicldit advlhier nlklein-DIM .  
 %eng: this here little-DIM.

Our hypothesis then is that in this early stage of acquisition, the child is constructing the formal operation of diminutive formation. The evidence indicates that this occurs without the semantic underpinnings of diminutive use, since if the relevant semantic dimension

needs to be expressed, the child uses full lexical means to do so.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it appears that at this stage, lexical items are still fairly independent. The child has acquired diminutives and simplex forms and for some words, both exist side by side. Whether diminutives are rote learned, i.e., memorized, or arrived at by means of analogy or rule application is hard to decide. However, it is only at a later stage that the child appears to link a word's base and its derivations, which results in the occurrence of backformations (Dressler 1994), the derivation of a simplex form from frozen diminutives, such as the ones illustrated in (15) as reported in Schaerlaekens & Gillis (1987:140). In these examples the child starts from a diminutive, 'un-does' the diminutive formation and arrives at a simplex form that in fact does not exist in the adult language. Again, this type of backformation is a late achievement, which occurs in a stage beyond the one reported for Jolien.

(15) (Frozen) Diminutive	Simplex form (non existent)	Child (age)
<i>kind-je</i> <sup>12</sup> ('child-DIM')	<i>kin</i>	Maria (2;11)
<i>Sneeuw witje</i> (('Snow-white'))	<i>Sneeuw wit</i>	Maria (2;11)
<i>Roodkapje</i> (('Little Red Riding-hood'))	<i>Roodkap</i>	Diederik (3;0)
<i>meisje</i> ('girl')	<i>meis</i>	Gijs (2;9)
<i>gaatje</i> ('hole')	<i>gaat</i>	Gerrit (2;10)

#### 4. Conclusion

We followed the initial stages in the acquisition of Dutch diminutives in the language of one child between 1;5 and 2;5. In this period of time, the child progresses from an occasional use of diminutives mainly in the context of immediate imitation, to a more frequent use of diminutives. In the latter stage, the number of types and tokens of diminutives becomes highly comparable to that of her mother.

Two important aspects of the acquisition process were highlighted. First of all a close

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that the semantic motivation for the use of diminutives is always detectable in adult use (Dressler & Merlioni 1994). The point is that the child appears not to have acquired the relevant semantic dimensions yet.

<sup>12</sup> /kɪntʃə/: homophonous with the legal suffix *-tje*.

parallel between the mother's use of diminutives and the child's spontaneous use was discovered: the child is quite selective with respect to the variants of the diminutive suffix that she uses herself. A high correlation was found between those variants most frequently found in the mother's language. Moreover, the relative importance of the two allomorphs that she uses very frequently, accurately reflects the frequencies in her mother's language (both in terms of types and tokens).

The regularities in the child's diminutives can be accounted for by a few simple rules. They reflect the rules formulated for adult Dutch, though their scope is still much narrower: the variety of phonological contexts covered is more restricted. In addition, the child's usage displayed a regularity that appeared to be idiosyncratic.

An investigation of the semantic underpinnings of the use of diminutives revealed no clear-cut evidence for the use of a basic semantic notion. Evidence that the child did not yet have a uniform semantic basis was much easier to find. This led us to the hypothesis that the acquisition of the formal operation of diminutive formation was still divorced from the meaning reflex in the formal distinction between simplex and diminutive word forms. Nevertheless the basic meaning was present in the child's language but it was expressed lexically by the adjective '*klein*' ('small') if needed, and not yet by means of the morphological means represented by diminutive formation.

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