

# The Pragmatics Of Diminutives In Iraqi Arabic

*Mohammed Taher Jasim, PhD*

English Department, College of Basic Education, Misan University, Iraq

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## Abstract

This paper searches the pragmatic functions of diminutives in Iraqi Arabic (IA) in the light of Brown and Levinson's model of linguistic politeness. Analysis of naturally occurring data of diminutive use shows that, as an extension of their central use with children, diminutives in IA have taken on the pragmatic functions of expressing a pejorative attitude, showing affection and endearment, intensifying the speaker's emotions, hedging an utterance, minimizing imposition, showing modesty and avoiding bragging, and asserting intimacy in joking contexts. A peculiar use of the diminutive in IA is for mild insulting realized through marking the diminutive on a proper name in antagonistic contexts. It is noted that the diminutive is mainly hearer supportive, boosting the force of the utterance in positive politeness contexts while mitigating the force of the utterance in negative politeness contexts. The diminutive in IA is thus used both as a positive politeness strategy, oriented toward expressing affection and endearment and establishing a friendly context for the interaction, and as a negative politeness strategy aimed at minimizing imposition and softening negative statements. These pragmatic functions reflect the role of diminutives in colloquial discourse as a device utilized to mark, establish, or assert social relationships.

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**Keywords:** diminutives, Iraqi Arabic, politeness, social relationships; positive/negative politeness.

## 1. Introduction

The diminutive is a universally interesting feature of language. It basically conveys the idea of 'smallness,' yet it is capable of communicating a variety of pragmatic meanings that extend well beyond the notion of smallness. As Mendoza (2005) explains, the diminutive initially triggers a meaning related to the physical realm, that is 'small,' but "it brings forward considerations of social relations and social interaction where the speaker's intentions and attitudes are the most important meaning that gets across" (2005:169). The appeal of the diminutive in social interaction seems to derive

from its encoding of seemingly contradictory functions, such as its use for both signalling a positive emotional attitude and communicating a pejorative meaning, carrying both intensifying and attenuating force (Jurafsky, 1996), or expressing both contempt and glorification (Badarneh, 1996). This polysemous structure contributes to making the diminutive an interesting and useful multifunctional pragmatic device in social interaction. The diminutive is thus a prime example of a linguistic device that is charged with socially motivated meanings and which stands as a reflection of “how social considerations impinge upon language” (Mendoza, 2005:171).

Theoretical discussions of the diminutive have mainly focused on what constitutes the central feature that motivates and is responsible for the use of diminutives as a pragmatic device. In this respect, Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994, 2001) claim that the pragmatic function of diminutives prevails over the semantic one. In other words, pragmatics is superordinate of semantics in diminutives. According to this view, in addition to the semantic feature of small, diminutives contain a still more basic, common pragmatic feature fictive, specified as non-serious, which is postulated as the feature responsible for the majority of the pragmatic uses of diminutives. As Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi argue, the feature small works for “diminution of propositional content” (1994:132), that is, on the semantic level, but it fails on the pragmatic level, as, for example, when diminutives are used as a cajoling device in requests. An opposite view of the diminutive is held by Jurafsky (1996). According to Jurafsky, “the origins of the diminutive crosslinguistically lie in words semantically or pragmatically linked to children” (1996:537). This is because the feature child, which is the central feature of the diminutive, “is historically prior and metaphorically and inferentially motivates the other senses” (1996:543). This view is also advocated by Wierzbicka (1984) who similarly argues that child is the central feature responsible for the pragmatic functions of the diminutive. Jurafsky proposes the following semantic senses of the diminutive: small, child/offspring, female gender, small-type, imitation, intensity/exactness, approximation, and individuation/partitive (1996:536). In terms of pragmatics, Jurafsky proposes the following uses of the diminutive: affection, contempt, playfulness, contexts involving children or pets, and metalinguistic hedges (1996:535). In this study, it will be shown that the pragmatic effects of the diminutive in IA are motivated by the feature child and that the functions of the diminutive in this variety of Arabic are extensions of this feature.

Based on this Classical Arabic view of the diminutive, Badarneh (1996) investigated diminutives in Arabic– English translation to establish divergences and convergences between the two languages concerning the use of diminutives. Badarneh’s study was based on diminutives occurring in a variety of Classical and Modern Standard Arabic texts. It was found that

diminutives in these texts, in addition to expressing smallness, are used to communicate the following meanings: contempt, endearment, temporal proximity, spatial proximity, paucity, and glorification. The diminutive in these texts was also found to have an aesthetic function. Except for smallness, endearment, and contempt, the English functions to which Arabic diminutives were compared, Arabic and English display divergence in terms of the other functions of the diminutive, which becomes clear in translation. Compared with Arabic, English is far less flexible and productive in communicating emotions or attitudes through diminutives.

The present paper provides an account of the pragmatics of diminutives in Iraqi Arabic (henceforth, IA)<sup>11</sup> within the politeness framework proposed by Brown and Levinson. It is argued that diminutives in this dialect of Arabic are pragmatically utilized as both positive and negative politeness markers, and as acts threatening the hearer's positive face. By investigating the pragmatic value and functions of diminutives in IA, a picture will be drawn of one of the interactional devices in this dialect. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will fill a lacuna in Arabic pragmatics studies in particular and contribute to the understanding of the pragmatic functions of diminutives in general.

The present study is based on data that come from naturally occurring instances of diminutives used in spontaneous colloquial discourse. The material was collected and recorded from participant and non-participant observation for over a one years. The use of authentic, naturally occurring data for the study of the pragmatics of such language feature as the diminutive provides, in my opinion, a better basis for understanding the functions of diminutives in social interaction. In Arabic, as in many other languages, diminutives are more likely to occur in natural conversational settings that involve communicating more than what is being said. The Arabic instances are followed by a word-for-word translation and a freer translation. Needless to say, producing an Essential for functioning in everyday life, Iraqi Arabic is the language of spoken communication in Iraq. It is used in domestic, intimate, and informal settings in the home, in the workplace, and among friends and acquaintances. exact translation of Arabic utterances that include diminutives is difficult, if not impossible, in most cases. Therefore, the translations given in this paper should be seen only as approximations.

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## 2. Analysis

As in other languages, diminutives in IA are utilized in different conversational settings to communicate a variety of functions. As the discussion will illustrate, identifying these pragmatic functions depends crucially on the context and the relationship between the interactants.

### 2.1. Reference to children

The use of diminutives in IA in relation to children does not depart from this universal function of the diminutive. Thus, the diminutive form may be used for either referring to or addressing children, as the two examples below serve to illustrate (the Arabic diminutive is italicized):

(1) [Mother playing with her six-month-old daughter]

tiṭl'elha 'snaynāt

grow-FEM-she teeth-DIM

'My baby is growing teeth-DIM!'

(2) fidiət hal-'waynāt

sacrifice these-eyes-DIM

'I sacrifice for these eyes-DIM!'<sup>12</sup> (i.e. May you live longer than me!)

These utterances clearly show how the speaker, i.e. the mother, communicates her love and affection for her child by diminutivizing her teeth and eyes. Through the use of diminutive body parts, the mother identifies with the small world of her infant. In addition to reflecting the denotative meaning of smallness, the use of the diminutive in these child-focused contexts adds the connotation of affection toward the infant. In this way, the diminutives 'snaynāt 'teeth-DIM' and 'waynāt 'eyes-DIM' can be interpreted as having a positive politeness orientation in the sense that they show the mother's love toward her child. Furthermore, these diminutives show other people who may be present in this context how much the mother loves, identifies with, and cares for her child. Thus, in addition to expressing affection toward her child, the mother in this context attempts to "represent the world as a friendly place" (Sifianou, 1992:158) and create an air of love and endearment that not only affects her and the child positively, but also perhaps those around her. This use of diminutives in IA is consistent with their use in other cultures to establish "attachment and intimacy" and create "emotional bonding" in mother-child interaction (King and Melzi, 2004:257).

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12 This expression fidiətah 'May I sacrifice for him!', 'or fidiətha 'May I sacrifice for her!', is originally used by women in Syrian Arabic, but it is being increasingly used by women in Iraq as a result of increased contact with neighbouring Syrian Arabic. It is an expression of love and affection signalling that the speaker wishes that the addressee live longer than her, as when used by a mother addressing her son or by a wife addressing her husband.

In addition to their use for addressing children, diminutives can be used in contexts involving reference to children.

This use of the diminutive communicates the idea that the interlocutors are interacting in a way that stresses solidarity and friendliness between them, as in the example below:

(3) (A sixty-year-old woman addressing a young lady who has recently got married)

inshalla 'l-waliəd 'l-ṣaliḥ

God willing def-boy-DIM def-good

'May God bless you with a good boy!'

The predominantly masculine Iraqi society has a traditional preference for males, and this preference starts when a married woman is announced to be pregnant; that is, the hope is always that a married woman will give birth to a baby boy rather than a baby girl. In this utterance, the diminutive transcends the notion of smallness associated with children to the broader social goal of establishing a friendly context for the interaction between the old woman and the recently married young woman. In this example, the speaker, the older woman, wants to express her strong wish that the addressee, the recently married woman, become pregnant and give birth to a baby boy rather than a baby girl.

Through this use of the diminutive, the woman's utterance is positively polite, sharing with the addressee the mutual desire that her next baby will be a boy, not a girl. There is a clear communication of sympathy with the married woman in this respect, triggered by social preferences, and the diminutive is being used here to convey this sympathy. The use of the diminutive thus stresses the emotional bond between the two interlocutors rather than literally describing the size of the hoped-for baby boy. In other words, the diminutive affects the illocutionary force of the whole utterance.

The speaker could have simply used the base form *walad* 'boy', which would be understood by expectant mothers as meaning 'baby boy', but in this case the added pragmatic meaning of emotional bonding between the two participants would be lost. The non-relevance of actual size becomes clear if we consider the IA word for baby, namely, the very English borrowing *baybi*, which is used to literally refer to actual size.

Utilizing the diminutive to express affection toward or to refer to one's child may not stop even when the child has grown up and become a man. In such a case, it is clearly the affective rather than the physical dimension that is pragmatically intended. In other words, there is an extension of the feelings that one normally has toward one's little child. This extension of feelings from one's little child to the adult world of the child is evident in the following interaction:

(4) (A man addressing a female college student)

‘indič ‘arūs? ‘indi waliəd ‘irīd ‘zawjah

Have-you-FEM bride? There with-me boy-DIM want-I marry-him

‘Is there any bride that you know? I have a boy-DIM that I want to marry off’<sup>13</sup>

The fact that the man is talking about his grown-up son for whom he is searching for a woman to marry suspends the denotative meaning of the diminutive, namely, small size. The speaker is referring to a man, not a boy, but he chooses the diminutive form to communicate how much he cherishes his son, who will remain in his father’s eyes ‘a little boy’ only in terms of the feelings the father has toward him. The use of the diminutive to refer to a man who is about to get married may be equally motivated by the father’s modesty: he does not want to be interpreted as boasting about his son who has reached an age that makes him eligible for marriage, since in Iraqi society marrying off one’s son is considered a social achievement in many respects. The diminutive thus allows the speaker to establish closeness with the addressee to permit sharing such a personal and socially sensitive topic as searching for a woman for marriage. In its expressing of modesty, the diminutive allows this question to be asked with an affective tone that reduces the sensitivity of the question, which is difficult to achieve with the base form of the word.

As the data above show, the pragmatic function of the diminutive in both addressing and referring to children, whether in a real sense, or in a projected sense as in (4), is similar, namely, expressing affection toward the child and hence showing positive politeness. This, however, does not preclude the use of the diminutive in reference to children in negative contexts, in which case the diminutive pragmatically serves to soften the face-threatening act:

(5) (A woman referring to the child of another woman)

haiya albinya smiayrah bas ḥilwah

this girl dark-DIM but good-looking

‘This girl is swarthy-DIM but she is pretty’

(6) (A woman referring to a group of boys playing nearby)

haḍōl al-’wlaydāt az ‘ajōna kili š

these-boys-DIM disturb-us much

‘These boys-DIM are extremely disturbing us’

Referring to a female as having a dark complexion, or *samra* ‘swarthy’, is a face-threatening act in Iraqi society, where a fair complexion in females is considered a mark of beauty, and therefore referring to a female as ‘swarthy’ or ‘dark’ is socially frowned upon. Accordingly, the speaker’s comment on the girl’s looks in (5) involves risk to the girl’s mother’s positive face. The use

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13 This utterance reflects traditional marriage in Iraqi society, whereby the mother, and less frequently the father, starts searching for a young woman for their son when he decides to marry. The word ‘arūs ‘bride’ in this utterance is used with the meaning of ‘a prospective bride.’

of the diminutive thus counts as an attempt to reduce this risk by adding a tone of affection to an otherwise negative description of the referent's looks. Awareness of this threat to positive face makes the speaker further soften what is socially and culturally perceived as a criticism by using the adversative *bas hilwah* 'but pretty.' Similarly, in (6), the speaker does not want to give the impression that she does not like children, so she softens her utterance with the use of the diminutive. Without the diminutive, her utterance would sound harsher, which would threaten her own positive face in front of others. The use of the diminutive makes the complaint focused on the noise made by the children rather than on the children themselves.

## 2.2. Pejorative function

The use of the diminutive in the world of children to express affection and endearment extends, in a metaphorical way, to the world of adults where the diminutive acquires a rather different pragmatic function, namely, referring to the referent in order to show insult or contempt. This insulting use of the diminutive in IA is realized through addressing or referring to an adult by the diminutivized form of his/her name in an antagonistic context. Since the diminutive in such cases derives and extends from its use with children, it implies, in a rather insulting way, that the world of the adult in question is similar to the world of children, which is characterized by non-seriousness, immaturity, and irresponsibility. For example:

(7) [Mother addressing her eighteen-year-old son]

‘laywi qūm idris

‘laywi -DIM stand up study-imperative

‘Ali-DIM, go and study [for your exams]!’

In the example above, which is an interaction between a mother and her son, the diminutive pragmatically marks the mother's anger and dissatisfaction. Specifically, the diminutive is used in a context where the mother is angry that her 18-year-old son Ali is not studying hard enough for his upcoming exams, which will decide whether he will or will not go to college. As a sign of her dissatisfaction, she addresses her son by the diminutive rather than the base form of his name, i.e. ‘laywi. Through this choice, the mother expresses her intention to insult her son by communicating to him that, like children, he is being irresponsible and immature about his own future. Although the diminutive is understood as an insult, using it as an alternative to explicitly insulting expressions makes the tone of the mother's words less direct and less offensive.

## 2.3. Intensifying function

Utilizing the diminutive to express the speaker's emotionally positive attitude toward the addressee is a clear extension of its use in relation to

children. As Gooch (1970:1, cited in Travis, 2004:250) puts it, the diminutive allows the speaker “to convey those things which belong more to the warmth of the heart than to the coolness of the head.”

Within an emotive setting, the diminutive positively maximizes the speaker’s feelings toward the addressee or the referent, functioning in this respect as a sort of compliment that enhances the receiver’s positive face wants. In other words, the diminutive has the function of “emotional intensification rather than deintensification” (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, 1994:202). This emotively intensifying value of the diminutive in IA manifests itself in the two areas of (fictive) kin terms and popular romantic songs.

Whereas the use of the diminutive with an adult’s proper name serves to express a negative attitude toward the addressee or referent, its use with kin terms in IA conveys the opposite, namely, expressing positively oriented feelings of affection and love. This use is shown in the following examples:

(8) (A fifty-year-old man welcoming his older sister)

’ahlan bīč ḥayti

welcome to-you sister-DIM

‘Welcome, my sister-DIM’

(9) (A young man opening the door to his younger brother)

’tfaḍal ’ḥayii

please-come-in-you brother-my-DIM

‘Please come in, my brother-DIM’

Whereas the base form of the kin terms in the above examples is capable of conveying the speaker’s emotional feelings toward the addressee, the use of the kin term in a diminutivized form strengthens the emotional tone of the utterance and conveys a sense of “in-group membership” (Brown and Levinson, 1987:107). In the examples above, then, the diminutive acts to stress the emotional bond between the participants. In (8) the man uses the diminutive rather than the base form to show that he is most happy that his sister is visiting, which is similarly displayed in (9). In both cases, the diminutive is used in a context of hospitality and guest welcoming, which is an important cultural component of Iraqi society. The use of the diminutive brings the distance between the man and his sister and the young man and his aunt closer, and shows that they are on friendly terms, e.g. suggesting that there are no family disputes. These connotations would be lost if the participants opted for the base, neutral form of the kin term.

The diminutive may be similarly used with fictive kin terms to show the speaker’s friendly attitude toward the addressee, as in this example:

(10) (An elderly woman addressing a young woman whom she just met and talked to)



Allah ywafqič ya bnayti  
 God support-you daughter-my-DIM  
 ‘May God bless you, my daughter-DIM’

Pragmatically, the use of fictive kin terms communicates ‘‘informality and intimacy of a relationship without being rude’’ (Bonvillain, 2003:66), thus serving as a positive politeness marker. The use of the diminutive with a fictive kin term further increases this informality and intimacy, as can be seen in (10) where the diminutive marks the utterance as a positively polite conversation with the newly met young woman. Since the speaker is an elderly woman with grandchildren, the use of the diminutive serves to maximize her motherly feelings of compassion toward the young woman, thus forming the basis for a good future relationship with the addressee. The use of the diminutive with the hearer-supportive expression Allah ywafqič ‘May God bless you’ further emphasizes the positively oriented and emotionally intensifying function of the diminutive.

Also, the diminutive may be used with adjectives such ‘as ḥlayw handsome-DIM’ and nouns such as ṣbāb ‘young-DIM’, used in reference to male adults. The diminutive in this case overtly marks the speaker’s positive emotions toward the referent and acts as a kind of compliment:

(11) (A woman referring to a man who came to see a young woman for marriage)

wallah<sup>14</sup> hiwa ṣabb ḥalyw  
 by-God he young man handsome-DIM  
 ‘He is really a handsome-DIM young man’

(12) (A man talking about what happened to him the other day)

ṭil‘at ‘alaya al- binya wallah kiliš muḥtarama  
 came out to-me a young girl-DIM by-God very kind  
 ‘And a young girl-DIM came out to see me. She was really kind.’

(13) (A woman referring to another woman)

wallah hia ḥaninah kiliš  
 by-God she compassionate-DIM very  
 ‘She is very compassionate-DIM’

The diminutives are used here in reference rather than address, and the purpose of such endearing diminutives is to show the speaker’s positive evaluation of the referent. Accordingly, the diminutive is oriented toward the referent’s positive face, by describing the referent as lovably handsome in (11), and hence possessing a socially and physically desirable quality that is worth

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14 Wallah ‘By God’ is an expression of oath in Standard Arabic. However, it has acquired a different function in colloquial speech, becoming an utterance-initial discourse marker with an expressive function. Colloquial Arabic speech is now liberally sprinkled with this discourse marker.

mentioning, and, as in (12), by describing the referent as young in a cute or lovable way.

Similarly, in (13), the speaker does not imply that the referent is not as compassionate as expected, or showing little compassion, which would not be compatible with the intensifier *kiliš* ‘very.’ Rather, the diminutive strengthens the quality of compassion by adding a sense of liking toward the referent for being so compassionate. In the three cases, thus, the diminutive has the function of adding an overt expression of affection toward the referents. In other words, the diminutive strengthens rather than weakens the force of the utterance.

Finally, it should be noted that the emotive pragmatic value of the diminutive is by no means exclusive to humans. The diminutive can be used to refer to non-human entities to communicate the speaker’s particularly good disposition or positive psychological state at the moment of speaking. This can be seen in (14) below:

(14) (The speaker refers to the sun which has started to appear after days of raining)

ta‘āl iq‘id bhals˘maysah  
come sit in-this-sun-DIM

‘Come and sit with me under this sun-DIM’

Here the use of ‘sun-DIM’ communicates meanings equivalent to ‘nice’ and ‘invigorating’ as well as the speaker’s psychological state, which is equivalent to ‘I feel good’ as a result of the weather clearing and the sun appearing again with its warmth and light. The diminutive ‘sun-DIM’ further gives the utterance a positive politeness orientation as it marks the speaker’s invitation to the addressee to share a nice experience with him.

#### 2.4. Hedging function

As it is the case in a variety of languages, the diminutive in IA can be used as an interactional pragmatic device to minimize imposition on the hearer. In this way, the diminutive is used as a negative politeness marker to reflect the speaker’s awareness of the hearer’s negative face, and thus it is “‘oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H’s [the hearer’s] negative face, his [sic] basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination” (Brown and Levinson, 1987:70). The diminutive accordingly functions as a redressive strategy expressing restraint on the part of the speaker toward the hearer. This hedging function of the diminutive can be seen in the following example:

(15) (A man addressing another man who has just entered the room)

˘šlonak ˘zwayn

how are you good-DIM

‘How are you? good?’

The diminutive in (15) is used primarily to maintain the addressee's negative face wants rather than to indicate that the addressee is slightly upset. In other words, the speaker feels that by asking the addressee about a private matter which he may not be willing to talk about, the speaker senses that he may be imposing on, or meddling with, the addressee's own business. Accordingly, the use of the diminutive in this context indicates that "the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee's negative-face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee's freedom of action" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:70).

A diminutive commonly used in IA with a hedging function is *s`way(ih)* 'thing-DIM' with the meaning of 'a little.' This diminutive is frequently used in negative politeness contexts to show one's awareness of the negative face of others.

For example, it can be used in the social setting involving a good host asking the guest to stay longer during leave-taking:

(16) (The male host addressing the guest, a man, during leave-taking)

*`ubqa ba`ad s`waya*

stay-you more thing-DIM

'Stay a little more!'

In such an utterance, it does not make sense to understand the diminutive as literally asking the guest to stay only a little more. Rather, the guest's use of the diminutive acts on the speech act of offering as a whole. The diminutive 'thing-DIM' in this context is used to show that while the host likes the guest and enjoys his company, the host at the same time does not want to impose on the guest by, for example, taking more of his time or forcing him to stay more than he really wants. It is worth noting here that this use of the diminutive in IA resembles the use of the diminutive in Polish for the same purpose (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1997:243).

The diminutive 'thing-DIM' as a minimizing hedge is used in another speech act, namely requests. Since requests inherently involve some degree of imposition and are intrinsically face-threatening (Brown and Levinson, 1987), they require minimization on the part of the speaker. In Iraqi society, requests are considered an imposition, regardless of the weight of the imposition (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987:176; Sifianou, 1992:170). Awareness of this manifests itself in the use of a variety of softening expressions used before or after making the request, such as *Allah y`halik* 'may God not expose you to any humiliation *bala `amur `alayk* 'and this is not an order for you;' and *ma `rid `ta`bak* 'if I may bother you.' The diminutive 'thing-DIM' belongs to these mitigating expressions in requests, as in the following examples:

(17) *mumkin s`wayy min waqtak?*

possible thing-DIM of time-your

'May I take a little of your time?'

(18) mumkin tsa'idni s'waya?

possible help-me thing-DIM

'Could you offer me a little help?'

The use of the diminutive 'thing-DIM' in these requesting contexts indirectly implies that the request made by the speaker does not require a considerable effort on the part of the addressee. A trace of the diminutive basic meaning of 'small' is thus retained. In both utterances, the diminutive softens the force of the requests and makes them more acceptable to the hearer, and, therefore, increases their chance of ratification. Accordingly, this use of the diminutive is motivated by considerations of politeness and face-saving in relation to the hearer. Furthermore, as Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994) argue, from a politeness perspective, the use of diminutives in requests reduces psychological distance between the speaker and the addressee, reinforces solidarity and intimacy with the latter, which ultimately may benefit both interlocutors. According to Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi, this ability to reduce psychological distance between the speaker and the addressee results from the diminutive adding a ludic element to the request (1994:251). I argue below (see section 2.5) that this ludic element is also responsible for an opposite use of the diminutive, namely, as a positive politeness marker in joking contexts among participants with a close social relationship.

The use of the diminutive as a minimizing hedge extends to its use to minimize one's good deeds or gestures toward others when talking about these acts in front of others, as a way of showing one's modesty and avoiding self-praise or bragging:

(19) (A woman talking about a dish she prepared)

sawayt dawaala 'l-yom/waddayt lĵarti řahin/hus mu řahin řhayn (smiles)

made-I dolmas today/sent-I to-neighbour-FEM-my plate/it not plate plate-DIM

'I made dolmas today. I sent a plate to my (female) neighbour. It was not actually a plate, it was a plate-DIM!'

It is customary among neighbours, specifically women, in Iraqi society to send a plate of food to each other, but without mentioning such acts in public. Being aware of this, the speaker immediately hedges her utterance by resorting to the diminutive, thus implying that what she did was nothing important and that she did not intend to brag about sending food to her neighbour (which is reinforced by the use of the extralinguistic feature of smiling at the end of the utterance). Had she not done that, her utterance would have been a threat to her neighbour's negative face, since this may undermine her neighbour's self-image of independence and self-sufficiency. It is equally threatening to the speaker's positive face since the society looks askance at people who talk about the 'nice things' they do to others, especially when it comes to giving food or lending money. Code-switching to the Standard

Arabic diminutive *Sahan* rather than using the colloquial *Shayn* further mitigates the potentially face-threatening nature of this utterance (cf. example (19)).

Minimizing the value or importance of one's own material possessions is another manifestation of the hedging force of the diminutive in IA. Although the diminutive here may have affective connotations, its primary function is to show the addressee that the speaker is not displaying self-praise and that his/her utterance should not be interpreted as such (cf. Sifianou, 1992). This can be seen in the following examples where the diminutive gives the interaction a positive politeness orientation in the sense that it is used to claim "common ground with the hearer" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:103):

(20) (Two men who met in the street)

A: *wiən rāyih*

where go-you

'Where are you going?'

B: *rāyih lil-bang 'indi 'flīāsāt*

going-I to-bank have-money-DIM

'I'm going to the bank. I have money-DIM there'

(21) (A man talking about his day)

*rihit il-yom lil-sūq s'tarayt 'ḡrayḏāt*

went today to-market bought items-DIM

'I went shopping today. I bought some stuff-DIM'

The speakers in both examples use the diminutive in reference to their material possessions. In (20), rather than referring to little money, the diminutive is used to signal the speaker's modest view of the amount of money he has in the bank. Similarly, the diminutive in (21) signals the speaker's modesty toward what he has bought rather than the actual size of his shopping. In both cases, the diminutive attenuates any potential display of bragging about one's possessions.

In other contexts, the diminutive can be a useful device to communicate awareness of one's social status. In the following example, the speaker, a young man, is aware that he does not fully qualify as *tājir* 'trader' since he does not possess enough capital and assets to be described as such. Therefore, he adversatively uses the diminutive *twayjir* 'trader-DIM' to signal his awareness of his modest financial position:

(22) A: 'š tištuḡul?

what work-you?

'What do you do for a living?'

B: *tājir – mu tājir twayjir*

trader – not trader trader-DIM

'A trader – not a trader actually but a trader-DIM'

In addition to the above settings, the function of the diminutive as a hedging device appears in the use of diminutivizing adjectives to mitigate a potentially negative reference and present it in a rather positive way. As the reference hints at some undesirable quality, the diminutive serves to show that the speaker has good intentions in saying what he/she is saying. Thus, the diminutive simultaneously encodes the speaker's positive attitude toward the referent:

(23) (The speaker is trying to describe a person for the hearer)

zilmah gşayir

man short-DIM

'He is a short-DIM man'

In this utterance, the use of the diminutive does not change the fact that the man in question is short, but it serves to soften the reference to the man's height. In such context, therefore, the use of diminutivizing adjectives is oriented toward preserving the positive face of others by trying to refer to their otherwise negative or undesirable qualities in a rather enhanced way.

In addition, diminutivizing adjectives can be used as hedges to signal relativity of the speaker's statement. More specifically, a diminutivizing adjective may be used to express a relative value, as in the use of the diminutive 'rhayuş 'inexpensive-DIM' to indicate that the price is relatively inexpensive and grayib 'nearby-DIM' to indicate that the place is relatively close.

Another area where the hedging function of the diminutive manifests itself is its use with common nouns to communicate a negative evaluation of the referent, treating it as inferior or insignificant. This function is derived from the diminutive core meaning of 'small size' combined with a culturally implicit correlation between children and smallness on the one hand, and worthlessness or insignificance on the other. This pragmatic function is illustrated in (24), and (25) below:

(24) [A woman referring to a retired army officer]

čān 'đwaybiť biljayš

was officer-DIM in-the-army

'He was an officer-DIM in the army!'

(25) [A man referring to someone who claims to be a poet]

hāsib nafsa šā'ir ? lāzim 'ysami nafsa 'šway'ir

think himself poet? should call himself poet-DIM

'He thinks he is a poet? He should call himself a poet-DIM!'

The role of the diminutive in these examples is to trivialize and express a negative attitude toward the referent. At the same time, the diminutive softens the seriousness of the speaker's attitude, adding overtones of playfulness to the utterance. These overtones would not have been communicated had the speaker opted for direct and explicit statements about

the referent. It is further noted that the diminutives in (25) occur in colloquial speech, but they are derived according to formal Standard Arabic morphological rules. This code-switching to the standard in a colloquial context, i.e. inserting a formal feature into an informal stretch of discourse, seems to be intended to have playful connotations and hence to lighten the effect of criticism, which further supports the idea that using the diminutive for expressing a negative evaluation of the referent serves to add a softening tone to the speaker's attitude. Brown and Levinson (1987:110) describe code-switching as "a potential way of encoding positive politeness when redress is required by an FTA." In such dismissive contexts, then, the diminutive appears to mitigate rather than intensify the illocutionary force of the utterance. This makes the diminutive a pragmatically suitable device for expressing contempt while simultaneously showing restraint. It is this attenuating effect of the diminutive which makes it possible for the speaker to avoid being forthright in his/her negative attitudes in such contexts.

### 3. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to identify and describe the pragmatic functions realized through the use of diminutives in a variety of naturally occurring conversational settings of spoken Iraqi Arabic. This pragmatic analysis of diminutives, carried out in light of Brown and Levinson's politeness model, helps us uncover and understand the use of the diminutive as an interactional device used to establish, maintain, or assert social relationships between the interlocutors.

According to Schneider (2004), pragmatic factors, especially the interactive status and the politeness value of the utterances in which diminutives are employed, are crucial to the choice of the diminutive form and its function in English. These pragmatic factors are equally relevant to determining the function of diminutives in IA. More specifically, understanding the pragmatic function and the politeness value of a particular diminutive form is crucially influenced by the relationship between the speaker and the addressee and the context of utterance in which the diminutive is used.

This analysis has shown that diminutives in IA perform a variety of pragmatic functions which are an extension from the prototypical use of the diminutive to interact with or refer to children. Thus, the available data show that the diminutive in IA is pragmatically utilized to express a pejorative attitude, show affection and endearment, intensify the speaker's emotions, hedge an utterance, minimize imposition, show modesty and avoid bragging, and assert intimacy in joking contexts. Accordingly, diminutives in IA are used for both establishing friendly interactions, thus expressing positive politeness, and for emphasizing non-imposition, which is the essence of

negative politeness. Even in contexts where the diminutive is used to express a negative attitude, it serves to soften such an attitude by adding a tone of playfulness to the speaker's utterance. Therefore, in both cases, the use of the diminutive is primarily hearer supportive.

From a theoretical point of view, the analysis supports the argument that these pragmatic effects of the diminutive are metaphorically and inferentially motivated by the feature child, which is considered to be the central feature of the diminutive (Jurafsky, 1996).

Perhaps typical to the pragmatics of diminutives in IA is the marking of the diminutive on proper names in antagonistic contexts to signal the speaker's negative attitude toward an adult addressee or referent. In such usage, the diminutive itself becomes a face-threatening act, specifically threatening one's positive face, as the use of a diminutivized name signals the speaker's dislike of the addressee or the referent. The reason behind this function seems to lie in the core use of the diminutive in relation to children, as the diminutive seems to be aimed at relegating the adult to the small, irresponsible, and immature world of children, which is considered demeaning in social and cultural terms. This use contrasts with diminutivizing proper names to express affection and endearment in English and other languages.

The politeness oriented functions of the diminutive in IA appear to reflect particular cultural values of Iraqi society. The use of the diminutive as a positive and negative politeness marker is a reflection of the emphasis placed on maintaining good relationships with others and, at the same time, avoiding imposition on others as much as possible, since imposition would contravene the two cultural concepts of *ḥifat al-dam* '(having) light blood' and *ḥifat al-ḍill* '(having) light shadow', which collectively emphasize non-imposition and avoiding invading the personal space of others. The diminutive seems to be a convenient linguistic resource capable of realizing both strategies. That is, it boosts the illocutionary force of the utterance in positive politeness contexts and weakens the illocutionary force in contexts requiring negative politeness. This double function manifests itself most clearly in the use of diminutives in IA to express affection, i.e. as a positive politeness marker, and in their use to minimize imposition in requests, i.e. as a negative politeness marker.

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