

Building Unergatives (Version 2.0)

Insights from diminutive verbs

Laura Grestenberger & Dalina Kallulli
University of Vienna

Core theoretical question

Is the **nominal core of unergatives** a selected argument of the transitive verbalizer v_{DO} (Hale & Keyser 1993, Harley 1999, 2005), or a predicate (or modifier of v , aka a 'manner' root) supplying lexical content to this light verb (Marantz 2013)? Taking our cue from the cross-linguistic behavior of verbs containing diminutive affixes that also attach to nouns, we provide evidence for the former view, specifically showing that the syntax and semantics of 'diminutive' verbs follows from their structure, viz. selection of a nominal layer (here: n_{DIM}) by the verbalizer.

Core observation

➤ **Identical** diminutive morphology in **verbs** and **nouns** across various languages:

- (1) a. *Das Wasser koch-t / köch-el-t.* (German)
the water boil-3SG.PR / boil-DIM-3SG.PR
'The water boils / simmers.'
- b. *fischi-ett-are* (Italian, De Belder et al. 2014)
whistle-DIM-INF
'to whistle, to emit short whistles'
- c. *cixkek* (Modern Hebrew, De Belder et al. 2014)
giggle.DIM.V
'to giggle'
- d. *lul-ëz-øj* (Albanian)
flower-DIM-1S
'I bloom'
- (2) a. *Bund Bünd-el* (German)
bunch (MASC.) bunch-DIM (NEUT.)
'bunch' 'bundle'
- b. *fischi-o fischi-ett-o* (Italian, De Belder et al. 2014)
whistle-S,MASC whistle-DIM-S,MASC
'whistle' (action) 'whistle' (object)
- c. (\sqrt{cxk}) *cixkuk* (Modern Hebrew, De Belder et al. 2014)
laugh giggle.DIM.N
'a giggle'
- d. *lule lul-ëz* (Albanian)
flower (N) flower-DIM
'flower' 'little flower'

Case study of German verbal diminutives (cf. Grestenberger & Kallulli forthcoming)

➤ Classification (in terms of synchronic base):

(3)

a. deadjectival (13 verbs)		b. deverbal (97 verbs)		c. denominal (187 verbs)	
<i>schwach</i>	<i>schwäch-el-n</i>	<i>kochen</i>	<i>köch-el-n</i>	<i>Herbst</i>	<i>herbst-el-n</i>
weak	weak-DIM-INF	boil	boil-DIM-INF	Autumn	Fall-DIM-INF
'weak'	'to be/act a little weak'	'to boil'	'to simmer'	'Autumn'	'to be Fall-like'

➤ Diminutive verbs are unergative activities, irrespective of their 'base':

- (4) a. *das ge-koch-te / *ge-köch-el-te Wasser* b. **die ge-blöd-el-te Cora*
the PTCP-boil-PTCP / PTCP-boil-DIM-PTCP water the PTCP-silly-DIM-PTCP Cora
'the boiled / *simmered water'

➤ Diminutive verbs contrast with their non-diminutive counterparts in class (3b) a.o.t. in terms of argument structure properties, cf. (5a,b) vs. (5a',b'):

- (5) a. *Das Wasser koch-t.* a'. *Das Wasser köch-el-t.*
the water boil-3SG.PR the water boil-DIM-3SG.PR
'The water is boiling.' 'The water is simmering.'
- b. *Der Hans koch-t das Wasser.* b'. **Der Hans köch-el-t das Wasser.*
the Hans boil-3S.PR the water the Hans boil-DIM-3S.PR the water
'Hans is boiling the water.' '*Hans is simmering the water.'

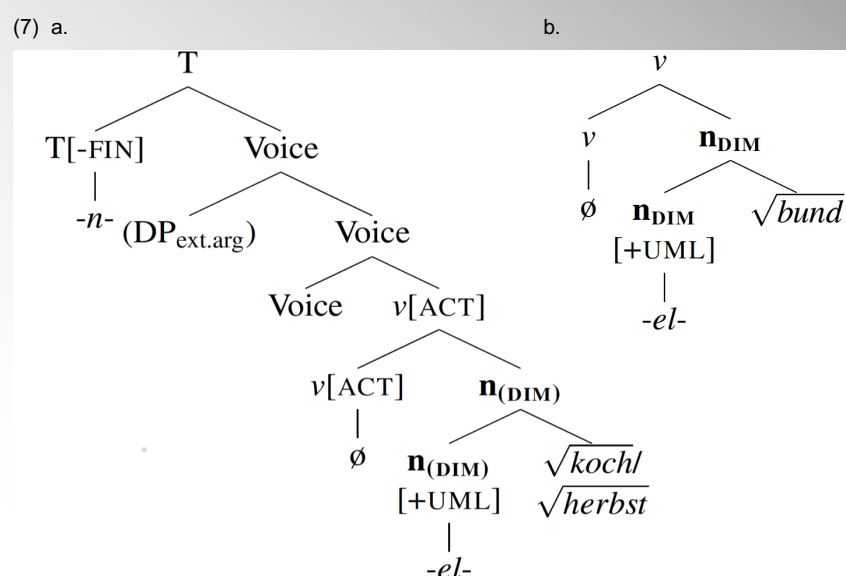
➤ Diminutive affixes often derive (optionally expletive) verbs of emission:

- (6) a. *Es herbst-el-t.* b. *So schön herbst-el-t unser Bezirk.*
it Fall-DIM-3SG.PR so prettily Fall-DIM-3S.PR OUR_{NOM} district_{NOM}
'It is a bit Fall-like.' 'This is how prettily Fall-like our district'

Proposal

Both in nouns and in verbs, the diminutive affix spells out the head of a diminutive nP that selects nouns or roots (note the umlaut of diminutive *-(e)l-* verbs in (1a), triggered by the presence of the nominal diminutive suffix, (2a)). The function of n_{DIM} is individuation, the creation of (countable) units. Embedded under v , this "unit-of" interpretation is reanalyzed as belonging to v and results in an activity verb. The verbalizing head v_{ACT} ($\approx v_{DO}$) classifies the event as action and may introduce an **actor** theta-role (Doron 2003), saturated by a DP introduced by a higher Voice head.

A unified and uniform structure (also for unergative/iterative verbs of emission):



➤ Since actors (unlike agents) can be animate or inanimate, we thus uniformly derive the properties of the expletive/unergative verbs of emission (cf. Rothmayr 2009) such as *herbst-el-n* 'be Fall-like', and of deverbal diminutives such as *köch-el-n* 'to simmer'

➤ Our analysis explains why *-(e)l-* verbs are uniformly unergative activities, independent of their synchronic base: the derivational basis of *-(e)l-* is always a nominal, viz. n_{DIM} , thus no external argument present unless a higher Voice head is merged subsequently

➤ Moreover, the n_{DIM} head can be identified with the 'natural atomic function' of Rothstein (2004), who argues that semelfactives and activity predicates contain a set P_{min} that picks out the minimal events in their denotation; since all semelfactives can be shifted to activity verbs, we argue that n_{DIM} marks the minimal event of 'being Fall-like', while v_{ACT} denotes the set of events P containing P_{min} (see the evidence below)

➤ We argue that a similar analysis also holds for other languages in which verbal diminutives behave as (pluractional) activity verbs (e.g. Italian, Tovena 2010)

Corroboration

➤ Evidence: diminutives denote the "lower boundary" of the event (basic intuition: the meaning of "small", i.e. DIM, in the verbal domain is something like 'start to' / 'start turning into')

- (8) a. *Das Wasser köch-el-t seit einer halben Stunde, aber es koch-t einfach nicht.*
the water boil-DIM-3SG.PR since one half hour but it boil-3SG.PR just not
'The water has been simmering for half an hour, but it just won't boil.'

- b. *Es hat monatelange-herbst-el-t, aber es war nie richtig Herbst.*
it has for.months PTCP-Fall-DIM-PTCP but it was never really Fall
'It has been Fall-like for months, but it was never really Fall.'

Conclusion:

➤ A derivational account *can* handle the apparent structural ambiguity of diminutive verbs (i.e. root vs. verbal vs. nominal base), contra Weidhaas & Schmid (2015), Audring et al. (2017), simultaneously providing support for Hale & Keyser's (1993) analysis of unergatives, and Harley's (1999, 2005) extensions to that analysis.