

THE COMMON ORIGIN OF DIMINUTIVES IN SOUTHERN CHINESE DIALECTS AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN LANGUAGES

ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss the evolution of the four types of diminutives in Wu, Min, Gan and Yue dialects step by step. Type I uses the syllabic suffix *jian* ㄣ to express the diminutive; type II appends a glottal stop ʔ as the last segment of the syllable, and adds a tonal alternation to carry a diminutive increment of meaning; type III is the diminutive where syllables have the feature of a constricted glottis, plus a tonal alternation; type IV uses only tonal alternations or changed tones to express the diminutive. As far as the relationship between suffixal -ʔ and tonal alternation is concerned, I argue that it was the disappearance of the suffixal -ʔ that caused tonal change. It is my view that these four types of diminutives can be traced back to one common source, the *jian* suffixal diminutive. Having compared the *jian* diminutive in Min dialects with the *con* diminutive in Vietnamese, I maintain that the *jian* word and the *jian* diminutive is related to the Austroasiatic etymon represented by Vietnamese *con* and the *con* diminutive. I consider the *jian* and *jian* diminutive in some southern Chinese dialects to reflect a substratum of the ancient Baiyue languages.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Diminutives indicate small size, and sometimes the state or quality of being familiarly known, lovable, pitiable, or contemptible. From a grammatical viewpoint, a diminutive may also have the function of changing a form class, mainly shifting other parts of speech to the corresponding nouns. The use of the morphemes *zi* 子 and *er* 儿, meaning 'child, son', as markers of the diminutive is commonly found in most Chinese dialects. In some southern dialects, especially in Wu 吴, Min 闽, Gan 赣, Hui 徽 and Yue 粤 dialects, there are some other diminutives in addition to *er* and *zi*. I list some examples from Wu, Gan, Yue and Min as follows:

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1.1. Wu Dialects

In the Ningbo 宁波 dialect, the diminutive is formed by changing the tone and adding the feature of constricted glottis (Chen 1992):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'chicken'	鸡	<i>tɕi</i> ⁵³	<i><u>tɕi</u></i> ³⁵
'pig'	猪	<i>tsɿ</i> ⁵³	<i><u>tsɿ</u></i> ³⁵
'shrimp'	虾	<i>ho</i> ⁵³	<i><u>ho</u></i> ³⁵

Here, I use underlining to represent a syllable with the feature of constricted glottis.

In the Wuyi 武义 dialect, one of the other Wu dialects in Zhejiang, the diminutive is marked by a tonal alternation plus a glottal stop at the end of a syllable (Fu 1988):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'book'	书	<i>ɕy</i> ²⁴	<i>ɕyʔ</i> ⁵ (picture-story book)
'ox'	牛	<i>niəu</i> ²¹³	<i>niəuʔ</i> ⁵
'hole'	洞	<i>doŋ</i> ³¹	<i>doŋʔ</i> ⁵
'bowl'	碗	<i>ŋuo</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ŋuoʔ</i> ⁵

But in the Wenzhou 温州 dialect, the diminutive differs from the basic form by just a tonal alternation (Zhengzhang 1980, 1981):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'child'	儿	<i>ŋ</i> ³¹	<i>ŋ</i> ²¹²
'fish'	鱼	<i>ŋ</i> ³¹	<i>ŋ</i> ²¹²

1.2. Gan dialects

In the Lichuan 黎川 dialect of Jiangxi 江西, the diminutive is marked by just a tonal alternation (Yan 1993):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'old man'	公	<i>kuŋ</i> ²²	<i>kuŋ</i> ⁵³
'nest, den'	窝	<i>uo</i> ²²	<i>uo</i> ⁵³ (pit)
'tingle'	麻	<i>ma</i> ³⁵	<i>ma</i> ⁵³ (sesame)
'yard'	园	<i>viɛŋ</i> ³⁵	<i>viɛŋ</i> ⁵³

1.3. Yue dialects

In the Guangzhou 广州 dialect, the diminutive also shows a tonal alternation (Mai 1995):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'head'	头	<i>t^heu</i> ¹¹	<i>t^heu</i> ³⁵ (leader)
'bag'	袋	<i>tɔi</i> ²²	<i>tɔi</i> ³⁵ (pocket)
'to cut'	凿	<i>tʃɔk</i> ²²	<i>tʃɔk</i> ³⁵ (chisel)
'to sweep'	扫	<i>sou</i> ³³	<i>sou</i> ³⁵ (broom)
'to grip'	夹	<i>kap</i> ³³	<i>kap</i> ³⁵ (clip)

In the Nanxiong 南雄 dialect, a glottal stop and a tonal alternation are attached to words, in order to carry a diminutive or affective increment of meaning (Egerod 1983):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'monkey'	猴	<i>hei</i> ²¹	<i>hei</i> ? ²
'mosquito'	蚊	<i>mum</i> ²¹	<i>mum</i> ? ²
'people'	人	<i>niŋ</i> ²¹	<i>niŋ</i> ? ² (child)

The Nanxiong dialect, commonly called Nanxiong local dialect 南雄土语, is spoken at the extreme northern corner of Guangdong province. Although the classification of the dialect is unclear, there is undoubtedly a very close relationship between the Nanxiong and Yue dialects. Therefore, for convenience sake I subsume the Nanxiong dialect under the Yue group.

1.4. Min dialects

In Min dialects, the *jian* 囡 suffix is used to express a diminutive meaning. Following are some examples from the Fuzhou 福州 dialect of Northern Min (Liang 1989):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'chicken'	鸡	<i>kie</i> ⁵³	鸡囡 <i>kie</i> ⁵³ <i>kiaŋ</i> ³¹
'sheep'	羊	<i>yɔŋ</i> ³¹	羊囡 <i>yɔŋ</i> ³¹ <i>kiaŋ</i> ³¹
'peach'	桃	<i>t^ho</i> ³¹	桃囡 <i>t^ho</i> ³¹ <i>kiaŋ</i> ³¹

In the Datian 大田 dialect of Southern Min, the same diminutive suffix *jian* (with a different pronunciation) is used to represent the diminutive meaning (Huang 1983):

		Basic Form	Diminutive
'carp'	鲤	<i>te</i> ⁵⁵	鲤 团 <i>te</i> ⁵⁵⁻³¹ <i>kĩ</i> ⁴²
'pot'	壶	<i>xu</i> ⁴²	壶 团 <i>xu</i> ⁴²⁻³³ <i>kĩ</i> ⁴²
'pig'	希	<i>xua</i> ⁴²	希 团 <i>xua</i> ⁴² <i>kĩ</i> ⁴²

The diminutives listed above can be classified into four types. Type I uses the syllabic suffix *jian* to express the diminutive, as in the Fuzhou and Datian dialects of Min; Type II appends a glottal stop ʔ as the last segment of the syllable, and adds a tonal alternation to carry a diminutive increment of meaning. The diminutive of the Wuyi dialect of Wu and the Nanxiong dialect of Yue belongs to this type; Type III is the diminutive where syllables have the feature of a constricted glottis, plus a tonal alternation, such as in the Ningbo dialect of Wu; Type IV uses only tonal alternations to express the diminutive. The Guangzhou dialect of Yue, the Lichuan dialect of Gan and the Wenzhou dialect of Wu belong to this type of diminutive. Traditionally, these types of tonal alternation are called *biànyīn* 变音 "changed sound, or changed tone" by most Chinese scholars, which mean the tones of certain diminutive words, chiefly nouns, have a tonal contour different from that of their etymological category when used in everyday familiar speech. I will use the traditional terminology and call them changed tones below. In this paper, I would like to explore the relationship among these four types of diminutives. It turns out, I believe, that these four seemingly disparate types all derive from a common diminutive morpheme.

2.0. DIMINUTIVES IN WU DIALECTS

Among the four types of diminutives, type I, the fully syllabic diminutive morpheme, occurs only in Min dialects and not elsewhere. It seems clear that this one is quite distinct from the other three, and the relationship among types II, III, and IV is closer than the one between type I and these three others, if we assume they have some relationship. So, first, I would like to deal with the relationship among types II, III, and IV.

Since all three types (II, III, and IV) exist in Wu dialects, the following discussion will be focused on diminutive forms in Wu; however, I also will compare the diminutive of Wu dialects with the corresponding forms in Gan and Yue dialects.