

A morphosemantic investigation of diminutive verbs in French and Modern Greek

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1. Introduction

Diminutive verbs are not a widespread linguistic phenomenon as opposed to their nominal and adjectival counterparts (Grandi 2009: 47). As a consequence, most works dealing with evaluation have focused on nominal and adjectival evaluatives, whereas verbal evaluatives have not been sufficiently explored across languages (cf. Greenberg 2010; Grandi 2009; Tovena & Kihm 2008; Katunar 2013; Amiot & Stosic 2014; Weidhaas & Schmid 2015; Efthymiou 2017, among others). Moreover, even in languages in which diminutive verbs display a high degree of productivity (as in Italian, French or Modern Greek), the semantic phenomena and constraints regulating their derivation are far less homogeneous than those of nominal and adjectival evaluatives (Kiefer & Németh 2015: 232). Driven by a shortage of studies on evaluative verbs, this paper examines French and Modern Greek diminutive verbs with the aim of shedding light on their morphosemantic characteristics. This choice is motivated first by the fact that French and Modern Greek are known for their rich evaluative morphology (cf. Fradin & Montermini 2009; Melissaropoulou 2015), and second by the availability of studies presenting comparable data from this language (cf. Amiot & Stosic 2014 for French; Efthymiou 2017 for Modern Greek). The paper is organized as follows: the next section presents the main properties of affixal evaluative morphology and discusses the basic characteristics of verbal diminutives, section 3 offers a brief description of diminutive verbs in French, while section 4 focuses on the description of diminutive verbs in Modern Greek. In section 5, I present an analysis of the similarities and contrasts between deverbal diminutive verbs in French and Modern Greek.

2. Evaluative morphology

Evaluative morphology is a subfield of derivational morphology that forms lexemes expressing some deviation from the “norm” or “standard” denoted by the base. It covers a range of processes (affixation, compounding, reduplication, etc.) which enable to build lexemes whose meaning consists in an evaluation (diminution, augmentation, pejoration, intensification, etc.) with respect to the base lexeme (cf. Scalise 1984; Stump 1993; Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Jurafsky 1996; Bauer 1997; Grandi 2005, 2009; Fradin & Montermini 2009; Körtvélyessy 2014, among others):

Modern Greek

- (1) *spit-áci* ‘little house’ (*spíti* ‘house’)
- (2) *kata-kócinos* ‘totally red’ (*kócinos* ‘red’)
- (3) *spitar-ón(a)* ‘big house’ (*spíti* ‘house’)
- (4) *pext-ár(a)* ‘great player’ (*péxtis* ‘player’)

Italian

- (5) *burro burro* ‘butter, butter, real butter’
- (6) *govern-icchio* ‘very bad government’ (*governo* ‘government’)

2.1 The basic characteristics of affixal evaluative morphology

The basic characteristics of evaluative morphemes include, among others, the following:

- (i) They change the semantics of the base by expressing some deviation from its normal or standard meaning:
 - (7) a. Modern Greek *para-cimáme* ‘to oversleep’
 - b. Modern Greek *ipo-apasxólisi* ‘underemployment’
- (ii) They form lexemes which belong to the same lexical category as their base:
 - (8) a. Modern Greek *kutso-vlépo* ‘to see poorly’ (*vlépo* ‘to see’)
 - b. Italian *casina* ‘little house’ (*casa* ‘house’)
- (iii) The same evaluative morpheme can take as input more than one lexical category:
 - (9) a. French *gentill-et* ‘sweetie, pleasant enough’ (*gentil*_{Adj} ‘kind’)
 - b. French *vol-et-er* ‘to flutter’ (*voler*_V ‘to fly’)
 - c. Modern Greek *psilo-dagóno* ‘to bite slightly’ (*dagóno*_V ‘to bite’)
 - d. Modern Greek *psilo-kócinos* ‘reddish’ (*kócinos* _{Adj} ‘reddish’)
- (iv) They can often function as free variants, hence it is possible to find examples where these morphemes are interchangeable:
 - (10) a. Modern Greek *kutso-vlépo* ‘to see poorly’
 - b. Modern Greek *psilo-vlépo* ‘to see a bit’
 - c. Modern Greek *miso-vlépo* ‘to see but not well’
- (v) They allow recursive application:
 - (11) French *super-mega-génial* ‘super-mega-great’
- (vi) Their meaning frequently contains a quantitative and a qualitative dimension, which co-occur:
 - (12) Italian *sorelli-na* ‘dear little sister’

2.2 The semantics of evaluative morphology

In this contribution, the cognitive model proposed by Körtvélyessy (2015) will be adopted. In short, according to Körtvélyessy’s approach, the key issue of evaluative morphology is the capacity of a language to express morphologically the meaning of “less than/more than the standard quantity”, with the concept of standard quantity being a relative one. The reference point, i.e., the standard or default value, is anchored to the fundamental cognitive categories SUBSTANCE (human beings, material objects, etc.), ACTION (processes, states, etc.), QUALITY (properties, features, etc.), and CIRCUMSTANCE (location, time, manner of action, etc.). By

implication, the specific value of standard quantity and any deviations from it may bear on the quantity of both physical and abstract objects, the quantity of actions, processes and events, the quantity of quality and features, and the quantity of particular circumstances. This establishes four basic categories of evaluative morphology: the Quantity of Substance, the Quantity of Action, the Quantity of Quality, and the Quantity of Circumstance. These cognitive categories may be expressed by nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and also pronouns (cf. also Körtvélyessy 2014: 305).

More specifically, the process of evaluation starts from extra-linguistic reality. The point of departure is a need of the speech community to evaluate an object. This need is reflected on the cognitive level. At this level, quantification is implemented by means of the basic cognitive categories (Quantity of Substance, Quantity of Action, Quantity of Quality, and Quantity of Circumstance).

Based on the metaphorical shifts SMALL IS CUTE and BIG IS NASTY, if there is a need for qualitative evaluation, the quantitative evaluation can shift to a qualitative one, e.g. pejorative, ameliorative, etc. At the level of the language system, cognitive categories are expressed by semantic categories like diminutive, augmentative, pejorative, ameliorative, pluractionality, attenuation, intensification, Aktionsart, etc.

Concrete realization of these semantic categories takes place by means of markers of evaluative morphology. A particular evaluative meaning may be implemented within two different cognitive categories, such as attenuation, which can take the form of a reduced QUALITY (see example in 9), as well as reduced ACTION (see example in 10). The output leaves the level of *langue* (language) and enters the level of *parole* (speech), where it can obtain various additional shades of emotive colouring, depending on the specific context, e.g. admiration, contempt, etc. (cf. also Körtvélyessy 2014: 305 ff.).

(13) English *reddish*

(14) Slovak *skacka* ‘to perform very small jumps’

2.3 Diminutive verbs

Verbal evaluatives are cross-linguistically less diffused than nominal and adjectival evaluative constructions. Moreover, even in languages in which evaluative verbs display a high degree of productivity (as in Italian, French or Modern Greek), the semantic phenomena regulating their derivation are far from being homogeneous (Grandi 2009: 47). According to Kiefer and Németh (2015: 232) the lack of homogeneous semantic behavior is to a considerable extent connected with the fact that verbal evaluatives are always embedded in the aspect and Aktionsart system of a particular language.

Diminutive verbs show a wide variety of meanings. They do not only indicate deviation from the default value denoted by the base, but can also express a range of meanings such as the attitude of the speaker, mitigation, emotional involvement, etc. In addition to these “prototypical” and expected values, deverbal evaluatives express other values, such as pluractionality (i.e. verbal action performed several times, by several people, etc.), action performed with less effort than expected, etc. (see among others Cusic 1981; Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Grandi 2005, 2009; Fradin & Montermini 2009; Katunar 2013; Amiot & Stosic 2014; Weidhaas & Schmid 2015; Efthymiou 2017):

(15) Italian *sonn-ecchiare* ‘to sleep lightly, to snooze’

(16) Italian *dorm-icchiare* ‘sleep poorly’

(17) French *mord-iller* ‘to nibble’

(18) French *nage-oter* ‘to swim poorly, a little’

- (19) Modern Greek *psefto-ðjavázo* ‘to study half-heartedly, from time to time’
 (20) Modern Greek *kutso-tróo* ‘to eat slowly, from time to time’.

As can be seen from the examples 15-20, in diminutive verbs, it is obviously difficult to discriminate between a purely descriptive (or quantitative) interpretation (e.g. ‘action performed in a way which is different from the manner it is usually carried out’) and a qualitative (or connotative) interpretation, capable of expressing the feelings of the speaker (e.g. ‘action perceived to be performed slowly, with less effort than expected, etc.’). These examples do not only show that the same evaluative verb may express more than one semantic value, but also reveal the tight link between evaluation and pluractionality. For example, the Modern Greek verb *kutso-tróo* ‘to eat slowly, from time to time’ conveys both qualitative evaluation and pluractionality. There is increase in frequency and decrease in one or more other dimensions (for similar remarks about Italian, cf. Tovena 2011: 43). To put it in other words, the repetition decreases the size or importance of the units of the action (Cusic 1981: 81-82).

This deviation from the norm (or the standard/default performance of the action), due to internal pluralization (i.e. fragmentation) of the action is what semantically justifies the use of evaluative morphemes to describe such situations in many languages (cf. Stosic 2013: 74; Grandi 2015: 105). According to Cusic (1981: 81-82), event-internal pluractionality can lead to a variety of semantic effects, such as the conative (i.e. ‘repetitive action which falls short of producing some desired result’), the incassative (i.e. ‘plurality of processes in which there is no attempt to do anything in particular, without any particular objective’), and the tentative (i.e. ‘the process is performed half-heartedly, with less effort than expected’) readings (see among others, Cusic 1981: 81-83; Stosic 2013: 72-73). These readings can all be associated with the speaker (Amiot & Stosic 2014: 22).

3. Diminutive verbs in French

Diminutive verbs in French have been discussed in many studies dealing with evaluation in the verbal domain (cf. Amiot 2012; Stosic & Amiot 2011; Amiot & Stosic 2014; Plénat 1999; Tovena & Kihm 2008; Tovena 2011). These studies have shown that diminutive verbs are mainly formed by means of suffixes (e.g. *-oter*, *-iller*), but that there is also one prefix capable of constructing evaluative meanings, namely *sous-* (cf. Corbin 1999; Amiot 2012):

- (21) a. *mord-iller* ‘to nibble’
 b. *viv-oter* ‘to get by’
 c. *dorm-asser* ‘to sleep lightly, for a short period of time’
 b. *sous-estimer* ‘underestimate’

The most typical diminutive morphemes attached to verbs in French are listed, along with examples in Table 1:

Table 1: The most typical verbal diminutives in French

Affix	Example
-ot(er)	<i>nage-ot(er)</i> ‘to swim poorly, a little’
-aill(er) ¹	<i>philosoph-aill(er)</i> ‘to philosophize about unimportant topics’
-on(ner)	<i>mâch-onn(er)</i> ‘to chew carelessly’
-och(er)	<i>bavard-och(er)</i> ‘to prattle’
-ass(er)	<i>écriv-ass(er)</i> ‘to write but not very well’
-et(er)	<i>vol-et(er)</i> ‘to flutter’
-ill(er)	<i>mord-ill(er)</i> ‘to nibble’
-in(er)	<i>pleuv-in(er)</i> ‘to drizzle’
sous-	<i>sous-exploit(er)</i> ‘to underuse’

French evaluative suffixes are mostly used in informal or spoken (colloquial) speech and show a wide variety of meanings such as quantitative or qualitative evaluation, event internal pluractionality, depreciation, etc. (cf. Stosic & Amiot 2011; Amiot & Stosic 2014):

- (22) a. *pleuv-iner* ‘to drizzle’
 b. *nage-oter* ‘to swim poorly, a little’
 c. *mord-iller* ‘to nibble’
 c. *philosoph-ailler* ‘to philosophize about unimportant topics’

More specifically, with respect to their semantic contribution to derived verbs, French evaluative suffixes typically combine quantitative and qualitative meanings (Amiot & Stosic 2014):

- (i) expressing the low/reduced intensity of the event denoted by the base, e.g. *pleuv-iner* ‘to rain lightly, to drizzle’,
 (ii) emphasizing the lower quality of the action (along dimensions such as amount of result or frequency), e.g. *nage-oter* ‘to swim poorly, a little’, *march-otter* ‘to walk with difficulty’, and/or
 (iii) expressing pluractionality, e.g. *mord-iller* ‘to nibble’.

In other words, under the label “diminutive verbs”, one can find verbs describing plural actions with many short phases (diminutive), with insufficient effort to produce the result (conative), with undirected effort (incassative) or with less effort than expected (tentative) (cf. Tovena 2015: 109).

Furthermore, as shown by Amiot and Stosic (2014: 25), French evaluative suffixes display different semantic profiles: verbs suffixed with *-ot(er)* and *-on(er)* have a diminutive meaning, unlike *-ass(er)*, which forms verbs with depreciative meaning. On the other hand, the prepositional prefix *sous-* ‘under’ is typically associated with quantitative evaluation:

- (23) a. *sous-estimer* ‘underestimate’
 b. *sous-exploiter* ‘underuse’

According to Amiot (2012), the semantic contribution of *sous-* is to express the meaning of insufficiency.

¹ French suffixes have various allomorphic variants, such as *-ouiller* (allomorph of *-ailler*) or *-icher* (allomorph of *-ocher*).

4. Diminutive verbs in Modern Greek

Diminutive verbs in Modern Greek have been discussed in Babiniotis (1969) and Efthymiou (2017). As shown in Efthymiou (2017), Modern Greek diminutive verbs are mainly formed by means of prefixoids, e.g. *kutso-*, *psilo-*, but there is also one prefix capable of constructing evaluative meanings, namely *ipo-*.

- (24) a. *kutso-vlépo* ‘to see poorly’
 b. *psilo-dagóno* ‘to bite slightly’
 c. *psefto-katharízo* ‘to clean something, but not very thoroughly’
 d. *kutso-perpatáo* ‘to walk with difficulty’
 e. *ipo-timó* ‘to underestimate’

The most typical diminutive morphemes attached to verbs in Modern Greek are listed, along with examples in Table 2:

Table 2: The most typical verbal diminutives in Modern Greek

Prefix/prefixoid	Example
<i>miso-</i>	<i>miso-θimáme</i> ‘to remember but not very well’
<i>psilo-</i>	<i>psilo-θimóno</i> ‘to get a bit angry’
<i>kutso-</i>	<i>kutso-vlépo</i> ‘to see poorly’
<i>psefto-</i>	<i>psefto-δjavázo</i> ‘to study half-heartedly’
<i>xazo-</i>	<i>xazo-δulévo</i> ‘to work half-heartedly’
negation + <i>poli-</i>	<i>den poli-katalavéno</i> ‘lit. not+much+understand, I do not understand well’
negation + <i>kalo-</i>	<i>den kalo-kséro</i> ‘lit. not+well+know, I do not know that much’
<i>ipo-</i>	<i>ipo-xrimatodotó</i> ‘to fund inadequately’

Psilo- ‘slim’, *miso-* ‘half’, *kutso-* ‘lame, gimpy’, *psefto-* ‘false’, *xazo-* ‘stupid’, *poli-* ‘many, much’, *kalo-* ‘good, well’ are prefixoids, i.e. elements, which have acquired a new more general and abstract meaning through grammaticalization. As illustrated in the examples in Table 2, all these elements, in their bound use, do not behave like parts of compounds, but function as prefixes expressing a more subjective meaning (Efthymiou 2017; cf. also Babiniotis 1969; Dimela & Melissaropoulou 2009).

As concerns their semantic contribution, in the verbal domain Modern Greek evaluative prefixoids show a wide variety of meanings, such as quantitative or qualitative evaluation, event internal pluractionality, depreciation, mitigation of the force of the utterance, etc. (Efthymiou 2017):

- (25) a. *psilo-píno* ‘I don’t want to tell you that I drink (a lot), but I do so’ (example taken from Xydopoulos 2009)
 b. *kutso-tróo* ‘to eat slowly, from time to time’
 c. *psefto-δjavázo* ‘to study half-heartedly, from time to time’.

Some of them (i.e. *poli-* and *kalo-*) attach to verbs in a quite idiosyncratic way, since they appear only in negative environments (cf. also Delveroudi & Vassilaki 1994):

- (26) a. *den poli-katalavéno* ‘I barely understand’
 b. *den poli-pináo* ‘I am not really hungry’
 c. *den kalo-kséro* ‘I hardly know’

More specifically, with respect to their semantic contribution in derived verbs, Modern Greek evaluative morphemes can be distinguished into three types (cf. Efthymiou 2017):

- (i) those that are typically associated with quantitative evaluation (e.g. *ipo-*, *miso-*)
- (ii) those that typically combine both quantitative and qualitative meanings, indicating the negative or positive attitude of the speaker or (e.g. *kutso-*, *psefto-*), and
- (iii) those that are typically associated with a pragmatic meaning (e.g. *psilo-*)

It is also notable that these morphemes are typically used in constructions which typically function as statements, but are not easily found in commands or requests (see example 27):

- (27) ? *psilo-ánikse tin porta!*
 psilo-open2SG.IMP the door
 ‘Open the door!’

Furthermore, the investigation of the properties of these evaluative morphemes reveals that each deintensifying element is rather potential within a certain semantic domain (Efthymiou 2017): *kutso-* and *psefto-* are typically associated with qualitative interpretations, emphasizing the lower quality of the action, and *psilo-* is typically associated with the pragmatic meaning of mitigation (for the evaluative morpheme *psilo-*, cf. also Giannoulopoulou 2003; Makri-Tsilipakou 2003; Xydopoulos 2009; Savvidou 2012). On the other hand, *ipo-* ‘under’ is regularly associated with quantitative evaluation, expressing the meaning of insufficiency (i.e. ‘under the standard or the threshold denoted by the base’) without any emotional overtones.

Interestingly enough, *psilo-*, which is highly productive in Modern Greek, may share some of its meaning with *líyo* ‘(a) little’ (Canakis 2015: 53):

- (28) *δulévo líyo, típota spudéo*
 work.1SG.PRS.IND a.little nothing special
 ‘I am working, nothing special’ (example taken from Canakis 2015: 53)

According to Canakis (2015: 55), *líyo* ‘(a) little’ can be “interpreted as a hedge, indeed as a verbal diminutivizer comparable to (yet distinct from) the increasingly used prefix *psilo-* [...], as in *psilo-δulévo* ‘- work’, *psilo-tróo* ‘- eat’ [...], which has a trivializing effect”.

Finally, concerning the register properties of the Modern Greek evaluative morphemes under investigation, Efthymiou (2017) identifies three main sets:

- (i) morphemes that typically occur in informal or spoken speech (e.g. *psilo-*, *kutso-*, *psefto-*, *xazo-*),
- (ii) morphemes that typically occur in high register/formal or written speech (e.g. *ipo-*), and
- (iii) morphemes which are stylistically neutral (e.g. *miso-*).

5. Contrastive considerations

The analysis in this paper has shown that there are explicit similarities between French and Modern Greek evaluative verbs:

- (i) Both languages possess a significant set of evaluative verbs for describing actions that are performed in a non-canonical way.
- (ii) Both French and Modern Greek diminutive verbs express various values, such as attenuation, depreciation, pluractionality, etc.

- (iii) In both languages, diminutive morphemes attached to verbs are also used with other grammatical categories (cf. example 9).
- (iv) In both languages, diminutive morphemes attached to verbs display different semantic profiles.

At the same time, both French and Modern Greek have their own specific sub-patterns. For example, the meaning of diminution in Modern Greek verbs is (almost) always expressed by prefixoids and prefixes, while French evaluative verbs are mainly formed by means of suffixes. This asymmetry between the two languages might be related to the diversity of evaluative morphological means in Modern Greek. Indeed, compared to French, Modern Greek has a very high capacity to form and use evaluative constructions, while French uses the same units to form evaluative verbs, and evaluative adjectives and nouns (see examples 21, 24, 29, 30):

(29) French

- a. *gentill-et* ‘sweetie, pleasant enough’ (*gentil*_{Adj} ‘kind’)
- b. *vol-et-er* ‘to flutter’ (*volerv* ‘to fly’)
- c. *frér-ot* ‘kid brother, bro’ (*frère*_N ‘brother’)
- d. *trembl-ot-er* ‘to tremble slightly’ (*tremblerv* ‘to tremble’)

(30) Modern Greek

- a. *kal-útsikos* ‘quite good’ (*kalós*_{Adj} ‘good’)
- b. *aspr-iðerós* ‘whitish’ (*áspros*_{Adj} ‘white’)
- c. *trapez-áci* ‘small table’ (*trapézi*_N ‘table’)
- d. *tsant-úla* ‘small bag’ (*tsánta*_N ‘bag’)
- e. *kukl -ítsa* ‘small doll, dolly’ (*kúkla*_N ‘doll’)

Moreover, the asymmetry between French and Modern Greek might be linked to the fact that these languages differ in their richness in non-evaluative verbal suffixes (cf. examples 31 and 32).

(31) French

- a. *cristall-iser* ‘to crystalize’
- b. *oss-ifier* ‘to ossify’

Given that in French, the derived verbal lexicon is rather poor in terms of non-evaluative derivational suffixes (e.g. *-iser*, *-ifier*, being the only verbalizing suffixes), it can be argued and this leaves the way open for the addition of some more verbal suffixes to the already existing stock.

On the contrary, in Modern Greek, the derived verbal lexicon is rich (cf. Ralli 2005; Efthymiou 2014; cf. also example 32).

(32) Modern Greek

- a. *vurts-ízo* ‘to brush’
- b. *vutir-óno* ‘to butter’
- c. *ritið-jázo* ‘to wrinkle’
- d. *onom-ázo* ‘to denominate’
- e. *proedr-évo* ‘to chair, to preside’
- f. *kond-éno* ‘to shorten’
- g. *stress-áro* ‘to stress’
- h. *oks-íno* ‘to sharpen’

As a consequence, the occurrence of evaluative suffixes would affect the overall structure of the derived verbal lexicon.

Finally, it can be suggested that a direct correlation between the degree of inflectionality and the richness in the evaluative domain can be established. Greek as a strongly inflecting language has many more evaluative means than French, considered weakly inflecting languages (cf. also Stosic 2013 for similar remarks for Serbian). Crucially, though, what merits further investigation is the cross-linguistic value of our claims.

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