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# A morpho-semantic study of the diminutive suffix *–æk* in Persian

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**Abstract**

Diminution is a cognitive-mental process through which a core meaning of "smallness" and other connotative meanings are added to a linguistic form. The diminutive suffix –æk in Persian plays an active role in word-formation and is worthy of consideration. This study aims to provide a morpho-semantic and pragmatic analysis of –æk. The theoretical frameworks used are Jurafsky (1996) and Lakoff's Radial category (1987). The data consists of 212 words ending in –æk which have been collected in two ways: 1) through a comprehensive search of Dehkhoda Dictionary (1998), and 2) based on the authors' native intuition and interviews with some native speakers. The following are the findings of the study: 1) The concepts "child" and "small" are prototypical in words ending in –æk, and can be considered the core meanings. Other meanings, such as "similarity", "a small type of", "relating to", "place name", "type of disease", "affection", "body jerks", "disdain", "plant name", "mockery", "bird/insect name", "agent", and "sympathy" are extensions of the core meanings through the use of metaphor, inference, or generalization. 2) The suffix –æk is derivational and its input and output are mostly nominal; however, in some occasions, adjectives and verb stems can be inputs to word-formation processes involving –æk. 3) Jurafsky's framework accounts for Persian data to a great extent. Nevertheless, some of the suggested concepts in his network are not applicable to Persian, and there are concepts in Persian that have not been included in his proposed semantic network, and thus his framework needs to be slightly modified.

Keywords: diminution, radial category; Jurafsky, central meaning; peripheral meaning; meaning change mechanisms; Lambda abstraction

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## 1. Introduction

Diminution exists universally and contributes to arrays of meaning being created. Diminutive elements take various forms in different languages. They are often polysemous and rid languages of the need to create entirely new words by attaching to already existing stems. Jurafsky (1996) states that "the diminutive function … is among the grammatical primitives which seem to occur universally or near-universally". Like in other languages, diminution plays an important role in word formation processes in Persian and the suffix –æk seems to be more prominent among Persian's diminutive suffixes due to its relatively high frequency of occurrence and range of meaning it produces. Previous studies on diminution in Persian are often too broad in scope and lack in precision; they mostly provide lists of the affixes used in this process along with the additional meanings they convey. Thus, the present study aims to answer the following questions: 1) How can word-forms ending in –æk be categorized morphologically and semantically? 2) What is the nature of the semantic network for the diminutive suffix –æk, and how are peripheral meanings to be distinguished from core meanings? 3) Can Jurafsky's proposed framework account for the semantic network for the suffix –æk in Persian?

For the purposes of this study, 347 words were collected through a comprehensive search of the 15 volumes of Dehkhoda Dictionary (1998), and by interviewing a few native speakers of the language and benefiting from the authors' intuitions. Then, simplex and complex words were separated from each other and 212 complex words were further categorized based on their stems and then analyzed according to Jurafsky's radial category framework. To provide a more refined description of the data, the frequency of each category was also calculated.

## 2. An overview of previous research on diminution

Kasravi (n.d., as cited in Samsami, 1985) states that the suffix –æk is one of the marvels of the Persian language and although it is no more than a single letter of the alphabet (in writing), it obviates the need for thousands of words. He goes on to say that the suffix –æk is used in 18 cases: smallness, unimportance, sympathy, similarity, the derivation of adjectives from verbs, the derivation of nouns from adjectives, the generation of names for tools based on verbs, the creation of nouns from interjections, status, howness, femaleness, and showing certain kinds of relation (pp. 298-299). Other grammarians such as Zulnoor (1964), Panj Ostad (n.d.), Shari'at (2005), Natel Khanlari (1990), Anvari and Givi (1991), Sadeqi (1993), Kalbasi (2001), Arzhang (2002), and many others have tried to elucidate the nature of such suffixes and their meanings through rather personal perspectives. Since their conclusions are much similar to others', we may safely skip them here. Peisikov (1973) and Lazard (2005) are the only non-Iranian scholars, to the best of our knowledge, who have studied diminution in Persian.

Peisikov states that the suffix –æk (along with its variants like –væk, –fæk, –æke, etc.) are used in diminutive constructions to mean smallness, to express feelings, or to show sympathy or contempt. It also attaches to the root of some adjectives to add nuances of meaning (e.g. "a weak form of," or "weakened"). According to Peisikov, the suffix –tʃe is also utilized to add the meaning of smallness to word forms, and other more or less frequent suffixes such as –e, –i, –u, and –ule (or sometimes –ul or –le, borrowed form Turkish) are used to convey the concepts of contempt, endearment, or smallness.

Lazard (2005) states that –æk derives from nouns or adjectives words with (more) concrete meanings. For instance, pær (= feather) / pær-æk (= a type of plant), mi:x (= nail) / mi:kh-æk (= carnation), æru:s (= bride) / æru:s-æk (= doll), and the like. He assigns the same use and meaning to the suffix –e and provides examples such as ti:q (= razor blade) / ti:q-e (= edge), jæva:n (= young) / jæva:n-e (= sprout or bud), etc.

Bialy (2013) goes through the range of connotative meanings resulting from diminution in Polish using literary texts such as stories and poems for children, and plays and novels intended for adults, demonstrating that connotative meanings are more frequent than denotative ones and then, after

introducing diminutive prototypical meanings and shedding some light on the concept of polysemy, goes on to argue that Taylor's (1995) framework –with an emphasis on the role of metonymy in the semantic expansion of diminutives– can better account for Polish than can Jurafsky's (1996).

## 3. Theoretical framework

Jurafsky (1996) is of the opinion that diminution originates as words relating to children. Thus, the semantic characteristics of the notion of "child" as the core concept in diminution historically precede practical, metaphorical, and referential meanings that are evoked from it. This stance dates back to Wierzbicka (1984) which declared the semantics of "child" responsible for pragmatic uses of diminution –an approach which was not satisfactorily developed at the time, but was expounded in Jurafsky (1996) and turned into a cardinal framework to be benefited from in accounting for synchronic and diachronic aspects of meaning of diminutives. Jurafsky (1996) first introduces two outstanding frameworks in the study of diminution, one aiming to benefit from the concept of polysemy to answer for the different meanings associated with diminutive forms, and the other, considering different meanings of diminutive forms as a direct result of meaning change (and its direction) in languages. The two can be combined by postulating a unique, universal radial category as in Lakoff (1987).

The radial category consists of a prototypical, core meaning and its conceptual extensions in a network of nodes and connections. The nodes are prototypes of meaning and the connections represent metaphorical extensions, shifts in mental schemas, shifts to other areas of meaning, and inferences. Thus, radial categories interpreted synchronically describe relationships evoked between different concepts relating to a polysemous form, and when construed diachronically, they reflect different processes involved in meaning change. Figure (1) represents Jurafsky's proposed radial category for diminution. There, the nodes are named after concepts and the connections are named after different processes responsible for meaning change, such as inference (I), metaphor (M), generalization (G), and Lambda abstraction (L). The area of semantics has been shown discretely from that of pragmatics and within each, different functions of diminution have been represented.

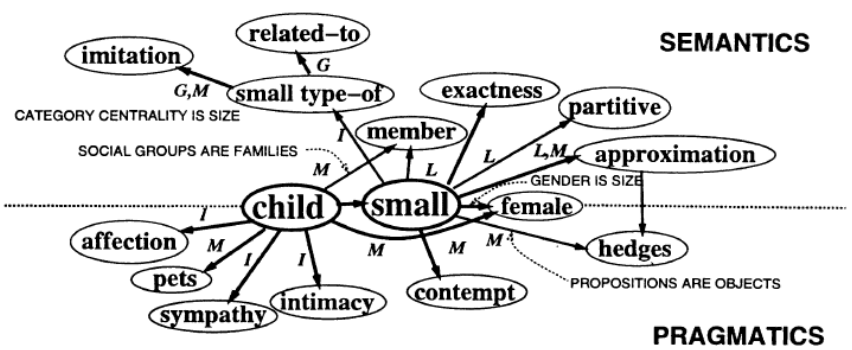


**Figure 1. Proposed universal structure for the semantics of the diminutives**

The radial category's greatest achievement is its ability to provide us with different ways to connect the various meanings of a polysemous word. From a diachronic point of view, each of the connections actualizes meaning change.

## 4. Analysis of the data and discussion

Here, the words ending in the suffix –æk have been categorized based on type and semantic category. Some examples have been provided.

### *4.1. Classification of words ending in the suffix –æk*

#### *4.1.1. Names of places*

Here, the words refer to the names of some places. For example: Væn-æk, Pu:n-æk, Velendʒ-æk. The words have no distinguishable meaning and with the removal of the suffix, the remaining parts are meaningless as well.

#### *4.1.2. Clothes*

In this category, the words refer to items of clothing. For example: ʃælva:r-æk (shorts), pu:ʃ-æk (diapers), eyn-æk (glasses). The stems often have meaning: ʃælva:r (pants), pu:ʃ (wear), eyn (Arabic for eye).

#### *4.1.3. Toys*

The words in this group refer to toys. For example: ba:dba:d-æk (kite), ba:dkon-æk (balloon), æru:s-æk (doll). The stems are sometimes bound and sometimes free, but they have conceivable meanings: ba:dba:d (wind-wind, bound), ba:dkon (wind-do, bound), æru:s (bride, free).

#### *4.1.4. Proper nouns*

These words are mostly names of people or products. For example: Hæssæn-æk, Roʊʃæn-æk, Ra:m-æk.

#### *4.1.5. Foods*

For example: sæng-æk (a type of bread), pæʃm-æk (cotton candy), rængi:n-æk (a type of dessert). The stems are usually free morphemes: sæng (stone), pæʃm (wool), rængi:n (colorful).

#### *4.1.6. Names of tools or devices*

For example: tʃang-æk (rake), kola:h-æk (warhead), na:rendʒ-æk (grenade), sæg-æk (buckle). The stems are mostly free morphemes: tʃæng (claw), kola:h (hat), na:rendʒ (sour orange), sæg (dog).

#### *4.1.7. Parts of human or animal body*

For example: qu:z-æk (ankle), ʃa:x-æk (antenna [as in the ones on a bee's head]), mærdom-æk (pupil).

#### *4.1.8. Names of insects*

For example: sændʒa:q-æk (dragonfly), kæfʃdu:z-æk (ladybird), sha:hpær-æk (butterfly).

#### *4.1.9. Body movements and jerks*

For example: tʃeʃm-æk (wink), si:xu:n-æk (nudge), qelqel-æk (tickle).

### *4.2. Categorization of the stems accepting the suffix –æk:*

***4.2.1. Nouns***

***4.2.1.1. Abstract nouns***

For example: mehr-æk (affection + -æk), nega:h-æk (look + -æk)

***4.2.1.2. Names of items of clothing***

For example: ʃælvar-æk (pants + -æk), kola:h-æk (hat + -æk), kafʃ-æk (shoe + -æk).

***4.2.1.3. Names of materials***

For example: sæng-æk (stone + -æk), bærf-æk (snow + -æk), pæʃm-æk (wool + -æk).

***4.2.1.4. Names of animals***

For example: boz-æk (goat + -æk), xoru:s-æk (rooster + -æk), sæg-æk (dog + -æk).

***4.2.1.5. names of numbers***

For example: dæh-æk (ten + -æk), sæd-æk (hundred + -æk).

***4.2.1.6. Names of parts of the body***

For example: ʃa:x-æk (horn + -æk), na:xu:n-æk (nail + -æk), tʃeʃm-æk (eye + -æk).

***4.2.1.7. Names of food***

For example: ʃekær-æk (sugar + -æk), berendʒ-æk (rice + -æk), pæni:r-æk (cheese + -æk).

***4.2.1.8. General nouns***

For example: pu:l-æk (money + -æk), æru:s-æk (bride + -æk).

***4.2.1.9. Proper nouns***

For example: Hæssæn-æk (Hæssæn + -æk), Ru:dbar-æk (Ru:dbar + -æk).

***4.2.2. Adjectives***

For example: zærd-æk (yellow + -æk), sorx -æk (red + -æk), roʊʃæn-æk (bright + -æk).

***4.2.3. Verbs***

For example: pu:ʃ-æk (wear + -æk), roʊroʊ-æk (go + go + -æk).

***4.3. Morphological processes involved***

***4.3.1. Derivation (frequency: 189)***

For example: ænbor-æk (pliers + -æk), mi:x-æk (nail + -æk), pu:ʃ-æk (wear + -æk).

#### *4.3.2. Compounding (frequency: 5)*

For example: zærd morq-æk (yellow + hen + -æk, the name of a plant), do ku:h-æk (two + mountain + -æk, the name of a place), se pær-æk (three + feather + -æk, the name of a plant).

#### *4.3.3. Synthesis (frequency: 6)*

For example: ba:d kon-æk (wind + do + -æk, balloon), qa:yem ba:ʃ-æk (hide + be + -æk, hide and seek).

#### *4.3.4. Reduplication plus derivation (frequency: 12)*

For example: roʊroʊ-æk (go + go + -æk), ba:dba:d-æk (wind + wind + -æk), pærpær-æk (feather + feather + -æk).

### *4.4. Category of the resulting words from the combination of stems and –æk:*

#### *4.4.1. Nouns (frequency: 203)*

For example: pi:tʃ-æk (screw + -æk), xær-æk (donkey + -æk), mu:ʃ-æk (mouse + -æk).

#### *4.4.2. Adjectives (frequency: 8)*

For example: mælu:s-æk (cute + -æk), si:ya:h-æk (black + -æk).

#### *4.4.3. Adverbs (frequency: 1)*

For example: nærmnærm-æk (soft + soft + -æk).

### *4.5. Grammatical categories of the stems to which –ak can attach*

#### *4.5.1. Nouns (frequency: 152)*

For example: bæxt-æk (luck + -æk), pæʃm-æk (wool + -æk), ʃa:x-æk (horn + -æk).

#### *4.5.2. Adjectives (frequency: 42)*

For example: gærm-æk (hot + -æk), sefi:d-æk (white + -æk).

#### *4.5.3. Verbs (frequency: 5)*

For example: pu:ʃ-æk (wear + -æk), roʊroʊ-æk (go + go + -æk).

## 5. The semantic network for the suffix –æk in Persian

After categorizing the words containing –æk into different groups based on semantic and syntactic categories, we applied Jurafsky's framework to the data and the results show that the two meanings "small" and "child" are central while the other meanings are derived from them through the processes of metaphor, inference, generalization, and Lambda abstraction. The different meanings of the suffix –æk which comprise a network of meaning are child, small, small type of, similarity, disease, place, body movements and jerks, names of birds or insects, plant names, agents, female reproductive organ, howness, affection, disdain, sympathy, and mockery.

From the above meanings, "similarity" with a frequency of 53 is the most common and it is followed by "small," "small type of," "place," "name of disease," "affection," "body movements,"

"names of plants," "disdain," "mockery," and "names of birds and insects," with frequencies of 48, 16, 15, 12, 9, 8, 8, 6, 3, and 2 respectively. Thus, the following diagram is suggested for the suffix –æk in Persian.

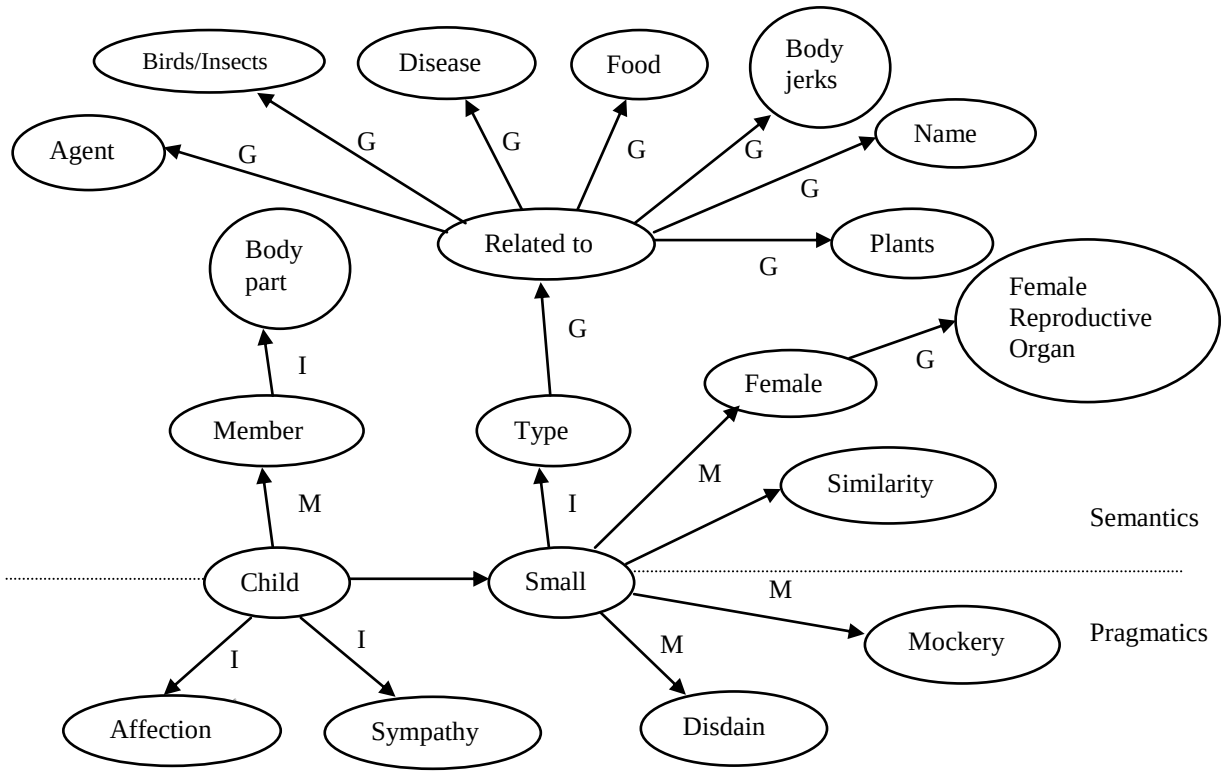


**Figure 2. The proposed semantic network for the suffix –æk.**

## 6. Conclusion

The following results were found after the analysis of the data: Complex words ending in –æk can be semantically categorized into the following 21 groups: 1) names of places, 2) foods, 3) howness, 4) general nouns, 5) animal names, 6) names of birds, 7) clothes, 8) number fractions, 9) names of insects, 10) toys, 11) tools, 12) names of disease, 13) abstract nouns, 14) parts of the body, 15) names of objects, 16) proper nouns, 17) qualities, 18) names of plants, 19) materials, 20) names of games, and 21) body movements. The words can be further categorized based on the morphological word-formation processes they go through into four groups: derivational, compound, synthetic, and reduplicated-derivational.

The diminutive suffix –æk has a semantic network in which the two meanings "small" and "child" are central while the other meanings are derived from them through the processes of metaphor, inference, generalization, and Lambda abstraction. These include: "similarity", "a small type of", "relating to", "place name", "type of disease", "affection/admiration", "body movements/jerks", "disdain", "plant name", "non-seriousness/mockery", "bird/insect name", "agent", and "sympathy".

Jurafsky's proposed framework can account for the Persian data for the most part; however, in the semantic domain, the following nodes need to be added to the diagram: name of disease, female reproductive organ, name of place, body movements and jerks, names of plants, and names of birds and insects. Also, it seems that the following are not applicable to Persian: approximation, exactness, and partitive.

Also, in the pragmatic domain, no examples of prevarication or pets were found. Instead, the concept of mockery was added to Jurafsky's proposed framework. Additionally, it seems that Lambda abstraction plays little or no role in Persian as no examples of it were found in the data.

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