

AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CONCEPTUAL MODES OF THOUGHT IN THE HAUSA DIMINUTIVES

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Abstract

This study reinterprets Hausa diminutives from a Cognitive Linguistics perspective, demonstrating that they constitute systematic conceptual structures rather than merely expressing notions of physical smallness. Drawing on data collected from speakers within the Kano metropolis and guided by the Generalisation Commitment, one of the central theoretical commitments of Cognitive Linguistics, the analysis reveals that Hausa diminutives instantiate a range of cognitive mechanisms, including metaphor, categorisation, polysemy, metonymy, and the LINK image schema. These mechanisms underpin the extension of diminutive meanings into domains such as identity construction, social roles, geographical reference, and the evaluation of actions and qualities. The study argues that Hausa diminutives form a coherent conceptual category grounded in embodied experience and processes of construal, thereby accounting for their diverse yet systematically related meanings. The findings demonstrate that the semantic extensions associated with diminutivisation are conceptually motivated rather than arbitrary. Overall, the research highlights the extent to which Hausa grammatical constructions encode underlying cognitive structures and underscores the explanatory potential of Cognitive Grammar in morpho-semantic analysis.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, Hausa Diminutives, Conceptual Motivation, Cognitive Grammar, Conceptual Processes

Introduction

The diminutive phenomenon is traditionally regarded as a fundamental component of morphology. It constitutes an important aspect of inflectional morphology, wherein it typically functions as an affix attached to a lexeme in order to modify its meaning, generally conveying the sense of 'smallness' or 'littleness'. The resulting lexical form bearing the diminutive affix is likewise referred to as a diminutive (see Evans & Green, 2006). Notably, in this process, the grammatical class of the base form remains unchanged. In Hausa, the diminutive category comprises three morphological forms, two of which are gender-sensitive and all adhere strictly to the system of concord marked by the agreement suffixes *-n*, *-r*, and *-n*, used respectively in singular and plural contexts. The following illustrations, all drawn from Galadanci (1976; 1999, p. 35), serve to clarify these patterns.

1. **Xan**: occurring with reference to masculine singularity
 - a. *Xán líttáfíi qàrámfí* 'small book'
 - b. *Xán yáarò qàrámfí* 'small boy'
2. **Yár**: occurring with reference to feminine singular
 - a. *Yár góonáa* 'small farm'
 - b. *Yár kàsúwáa* 'small market'
3. **Yán**: occurring with reference to plural'
 - a. *Yán yáráa* 'kids'
 - b. *Yán gídàajé* 'small/little/few houses'

All the examples presented illustrate the case under discussion within the domain of inflectional morphology, as each lexical item bearing a diminutive affix belongs to the nominal category. Consequently, the attachment of the affix does not result in a shift from one grammatical class to another, even though it introduces an additional semantic nuance—namely, the inherent notion of 'littleness'.

Hence, diminutive construction functions as a highly versatile nominalising device, extending far beyond its original genealogical meaning to generate a wide range of socially and conceptually meaningful forms, as demonstrated in Yusuf (2011). To begin with, it is employed to create proper nouns associated with days of the week, thereby indexing birth-date identity, as in *dán Láadì* 'son of Sunday', *dán Liitii* 'son of Monday', and *dán Tàlāa* 'son of Tuesday'. In addition, the construction is used to mark traditional titles, yielding expressions such as *dán ísà*, *dán Ámár*, and *dán Màkwáyò* each signalling institutional or hereditary affiliation.

Furthermore, diminutive forms extend to kinship terminology, where relational ties are encoded through expressions like *dán úwáa* 'brother', *‘yár úwáa* 'sister', and *‘yán úwáa* 'siblings/relations', showing how the construction structures social networks. Equally important is its use in deriving professions and behavioural identities, as seen in *dán jàríidà* 'journalist', *dán dambée* 'boxer', *dán kòókàwà* 'wrestler', *dán bírníi* 'a sophisticated or urbane person', and *dán bóokò* 'elite or Western-educated individual', all of which conceptualise individuals through their occupational or attitudinal domains.

Similarly, the diminutive notion may also be construed as syntactically based, particularly in contexts where a diminutive affix attaches to a verb within a larger linguistic construction. In such cases, the diminutive modifies the meaning of the verbal action, while still preserving the core concept of 'littleness'. This is demonstrated in example (4a-c):

- a. *Yáa xán gyàarà min* 'He adjusted/fixed/corrected it a bit for me'
- b. *Yáa xán wúcè ní* 'He passed by me a bit / He slightly went ahead of me'
- c. *Yáa xán káarà min* 'He added a bit for me'

The diminutive in the constructions under consideration clearly reflects a syntactic assignment. In example (4a), the proposition of the sentence is subtly modified to encode a reduced degree or lesser quality of the action performed by the agent for the benefit of another participant, even though the patient—the ultimate recipient of the action—is not explicitly mentioned. Example (4b) exhibits a similar grammatical configuration, although the lexical content differs significantly, resulting in a distinct semantic proposition. Here, the expression conveys that the action of movement performed by the agent is limited or minimal in extent, and that the patient, as the recipient of the action, is consequently affected by this reduced-scale event. Furthermore, example (4c) presents a grammatical structure broadly comparable to those in (4a) and (4b). Semantically, however, it aligns more closely with example (4b), particularly in the expressive nature of the conveyed meaning. The construction indicates that the agent performs an action that is diminished in quantity, and that the patient, as the recipient, is affected by this lesser-scale activity. Taken together, these observations illustrate the systematic ways in which the diminutive functions in Hausa when examined within a formal linguistic framework.

Consequently, as a grammatical phenomenon, the diminutive in Hausa—as in many other African languages—has largely been analysed through traditional formal approaches, with notable contributions by Galadanci (1976, 1999), Yusuf (2011), Charles and Kirk-Greene (2013), Korecky-Kröll et al. (2023), Abdullahi et al. (2024), and Aboh (2025) among others. These studies have typically focused on morphosyntactic patterns, distributional properties, and structural constraints, thereby illuminating the formal architecture underlying diminutive constructions.

In contrast, the present analysis is devoted specifically to reconceptualising the diminutive as a cognitive–grammar category. It is grounded in the central assumption of cognitive linguistics that linguistic structure reflects the organisation of human conceptual systems—that is, grammar is not an autonomous module but a window into how speakers construe, categorize, and make sense of experience. Within this framework, diminutive forms are understood not merely as structural devices but as expressions of conceptualisations involving scale reduction, attenuation, evaluative stance, and affective nuance.

Accordingly, this study examines how Hausa grammatical resources encode and profile the conceptual characterisation of diminutiveness, paying particular attention to the cognitive principles that motivate the emergence, extension, and functional diversity of the category. By foregrounding meaning, construal, and conceptual motivation, the analysis aims to provide an alternative and complementary account to the existing formal descriptions.

Cognitive Linguistics: The Two Key Commitments

Cognitive linguistics is an approach to language analysis that centres on meaning, conceptual processes, embodied experience, and the ways these elements interact in the study of language and mind (Evans, 2007). It emerged as a reaction against truth-conditional semantics and generative grammar, both of which analyse language primarily through abstract, autonomous linguistic forms—a perspective widely associated with the formal approach to linguistic inquiry.

At its core, cognitive linguistics rests on three key assumptions. First, it rejects the idea of linguistic autonomy, the modular view of language famously advanced by generative linguists. Second, it holds that the linguistic categories constituting grammar should not be treated as separate components representing independent mental modules; instead, they must be examined holistically as products of conceptualisation. Third, it maintains that linguistic knowledge develops primarily through language use rather than being pre-given or innate. From these foundational assumptions, cognitive linguistics establishes two central obligations for researchers: the generalisation commitment and the cognitive commitment (Evans and Green, 2006).

Generalisation Commitment

The generalisation commitment in cognitive linguistics requires researchers to identify broad, unifying patterns that apply across all aspects of language, rather than treating grammar, meaning, and usage as separate and unrelated components. It holds that the same basic mental processes that shape how we speak also shape how we think, remember, and understand the world

(Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987; Evans & Green, 2006). Instead of proposing separate rules for each linguistic domain, cognitive linguistics seeks explanations grounded in a single, coherent system of general cognitive abilities. This commitment encourages scholars to connect diverse linguistic facts, compare structures across languages, and demonstrate that many language patterns emerge from general human cognition rather than from specialised, language-specific mechanisms (Tomasello, 2003; Evans & Green, 2006). Consequently, the generalisation commitment aligns closely with the view that rejects innateness in the form of a distinct, autonomous linguistic faculty—an assumption central to formalist approaches, particularly generative linguistics (Evans & Green, 2006).

Cognitive Commitment

The cognitive commitment in cognitive linguistics holds that any explanation of language must be consistent with what is known about the human mind. In simple terms, it asserts that language is an integral part of general human cognition, and therefore our theories of meaning, grammar, and usage must align with findings from psychology, neuroscience, and real-world patterns of thought and behaviour (Evans & Green, 2006). This commitment requires linguists to demonstrate that the structures they propose are mentally real, cognitively plausible, and grounded in everyday mental processes such as attention, memory, categorisation, and perception. In essence, the cognitive commitment ensures that linguistic descriptions are not merely abstract formal statements but are anchored in the actual workings of the mind. For this reason, it stands in contrast to the formal approach, which focuses primarily on the structural characterisation of linguistic forms. In accordance with this commitment, research in cognitive linguistics is fundamentally an investigation of conceptual structure and conceptualisation (Adamu, 2022a). Within this perspective, the present discussion treats the operational processes of diminutive formation as conceptually motivated phenomena, thereby revealing the multiple structuring principles that emerge when Hausa diminutives are analysed through a cognitive linguistic lens.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected through direct observation of everyday speech and natural interaction with native Hausa speakers across various social domains within Kano Metropolis, particularly in the surrounding local government areas that constitute the core municipal region of the state. In addition, the researcher's status as a native speaker of Hausa provided a significant advantage in monitoring and interpreting the linguistic behaviour of informants. This insider competence ensured a high degree of accuracy and validity in the data collection process, enabling the researcher to confirm that the elicited forms and usage patterns genuinely reflect native-speaker intuition and naturally occurring linguistic practice.

Analysis of Fundamental Features of Language in Diminutive Constructions

The most appropriate and theoretically grounded explanation for the fundamental purpose of language use is that it enables the externalization of thought, ideas, and emotion. This follows from the understanding that human cognition is rooted in embodied experience. Our minds form perceptions and construct concepts through our sensorimotor engagement with the physical world. It is this bodily interaction with objects and events in our environment that allows us to conceptualize experience and employ language in systematic and meaningful ways (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Langacker, 1987; Gibbs, 2006).

Consequently, embodiment provides the basis for a range of conceptual operations that structure linguistic meaning. It enables us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another (metaphor), to organize entities that share perceptual or functional properties into categories (categorisation), to conceptualize a single form as having multiple related senses (polysemy), to refer to one entity by invoking something associated with it (metonymy), and even to conceptualize abstract relations as though they were physically connected in patterned ways (link schema). These cognitive operations reflect the central principles of cognitive linguistics that conceptual structure is embodied, and that semantic structure is a direct reflection of conceptual structure (see Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987; Evans & Green, 2006).

These principles are crucial for the present study, as the Hausa diminutive forms under examination reveal precisely such conceptual processes. Remember that in traditional grammatical theory, diminutives are typically described only in terms of their structural properties and formal functions, reflecting the orientation of formal linguistics and overlooking the conceptual motivations encoded in diminutive constructions. Cognitive linguistics, by contrast, maintains that the mental processes that support general cognition are the same processes that support language. On this basis, the present analysis focuses on uncovering the conceptual mechanisms and semantic functions that emerge from the use of diminutive lexical complexes in Hausa.

Metaphors of Diminutives

With the seminal contribution of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor came to be understood as a fundamentally conceptual and pervasive phenomenon in everyday language use—one that enables speakers to comprehend and structure one domain of experience in terms of another. This cognitive orientation is clearly reflected in routine linguistic behaviour, and particularly in the lexical and semantic complexity of diminutive constructions.

In Hausa, diminutive forms are morphologically derived from the monosyllabic noun *-xan*, which denotes a “son” in both biological and adoptive senses. Its feminine counterpart, *-'yar*, similarly denotes a “daughter,” whether

biological or adoptive. These forms are employed across various contexts to express nuanced diminutive or relational meanings. Consider the constructions in (5a–c) below:

- a. 'Xán máalàm 'son of teacher'
- b. 'Yár máalàm 'daughter of teacher'
- c. 'Yán máalàm 'children of teacher'

However, the diminutive in example (5c) tends to appear in a plural form, representing a multiplex conceptual structure, in contrast to examples (5a) and (5b), which exhibit a uniplex cognitive structure. Although the expressions share similar morphological patterns, they differ in their lexical content. In both (5a) and (5b), the diminutive and the associated lexeme *máalàm* semantically evoke a biological relationship between the two referents. By contrast, example (5c) exhibits a weaker degree of this prototypical semantic specification, as it more readily refers to one's supporters—*followers* rather than individuals connected through genetic relations—thereby signalling a conceptual instance of metaphor. Nevertheless, the underlying sense of a biological relationship is still implicitly preserved.

The emergence of metaphor in these diminutive constructions is grounded in the socio-cultural reality that children are typically expected to live closely with their parents. They are perceived as strongly attached and often inseparable, frequently sitting together, engaging in conversation, and sharing various everyday activities. This intimate social bond and familiarity between parents and children is abstracted and conceptually mapped onto different forms of interaction and economic activity in daily life, thereby shaping how such relationships are linguistically expressed. Consider, for instance, the constructions in (6a–e), where various professions or occupations are metaphorically conceptualised in terms of genetic relations.

- a. Xán sàndáa 'son of stick' (police officer)
- b. Xán kàsúwáa 'son of market' (business man)
- c. Xán makaranta 'son of school' (student)
- d. Xán siyasa 'son of politics' (politician)
- e. Xán fashi 'son of robbery' (armed robber)

Here, the diminutive form used encodes both number and gender, specifically singularity and masculinity. All other diminutive variants that mark feminine gender or plurality can likewise occur in parallel structural environments to those illustrated above. In simpler terms, these forms are interchangeable within the relevant contexts.

Similarly, diminutives are metaphorically employed to indicate a person's place of origin—whether a nation, state, local government area, ward, and so forth. These linguistic expressions are conceptually motivated by

metaphorical reasoning. Biologically, a child enters the world through the reproductive process and is thus understood as emerging from the parents. This child–parent relationship becomes the source domain for conceptualising the relationship between people and their geographical origins. Consequently, the metaphors *a person is the child of his place of origin* and *a place of origin is the parent of those born in it* emerge. Consider the following examples in (7a–c):

- a. Dan Nijeria 'son of Nigeria' (Nigerian Indigene)
- b. Dan Kano 'son of Kano' (Kano Indigene)
- c. Dan Kabo 'son of Kabo' (Kabo Indigene)

Furthermore, as demonstrated earlier, a diminutive element may also occur in syntactic positions preceding verbs in order to convey metaphorical meaning. For instance, consider the structures presented in (4a–c), which are therefore reproduced here as (8a–c) for clarity and continuity.

- a. Yáa xán gyáarà min 'He adjusted/fixed/corrected it a bit for me'
- b. Ya xán wúcèè ní 'He passed by me a bit / He slightly went ahead of me'
- c. Yáa xán káaràa min 'He added a bit for me'

However, the underlying source that triggers or motivates the metaphors observed in these constructions is fundamentally rooted in the physical nature of *smallness* or *littleness* associated with children during early development. At this stage, children are naturally characterised by physical weakness, limited capability, and an inability to sustain activities for extended periods—factors that often result in actions performed quickly, within a short time span, and typically with lower quality. These behaviours reflect their developmental stage of immaturity; only with growth and maturity do children acquire the ability to perform tasks with greater endurance and proficiency. Consequently, activities carried out briefly, within a reduced temporal or spatial span, or with diminished quality, are conceptually associated with the child-like qualities of smallness and immaturity. This motivates the metaphorical use of diminutives in such linguistic contexts. In this sense, the conceptual metaphor at work can be stated as: *smallness/littleness/shortness is childishness*.

From this, it becomes clear that diminutive constructions function as metaphorical devices through which cross-domain mapping occurs. Experiences associated with smallness or littleness are conceptualised and linguistically expressed through the experiential domain of parent–child biological relations. With this understanding established, we now proceed to the next fundamental feature that diminutives serve to specify.

Categorization in Diminutives

In Cognitive Linguistics, categorisation refers to the mental process by which humans organise experiences, objects, and events into meaningful conceptual classes. Rather than relying on strict definitions, categories are seen as flexible, graded, and prototype-driven, reflecting both cognitive economy and embodied experience (Rosch, 1975, 1978; Lakoff, 1987). Cognitive Grammar further situates categorisation at the core of linguistic structure, where symbolic units link to recurring patterns of conceptualisation (Langacker, 1987, 1991). Categories are also characterised by fuzzy boundaries and graded membership, shaping phenomena such as polysemy, metaphor, and mass/count distinctions (Evans & Green, 2006). As such, categorisation provides a psychologically grounded framework that underpins human thought, meaning, and language.

Meanwhile, we are very much concerned about the process in which diminutives specify categorisation. Fundamentally, it is hereby to indicate how the range of the semantic notion inherently encoded by a diminutive constitute a category. However, there is not a single meaning associated with it, but instead constitutes a category of meanings which behave in a variety of distinct ways but nonetheless do appear to be related to one another. Consider some of the instances presented above being demonstrated in (9a-e) below to see how they perform such a function:

- a. Xán máalàm 'son of teacher'
- b. Xán gídáa 'son of house'
- c. Xán kàsúwáa 'son of market'
- d. Ya xán gyáará min 'He adjusted/fixed/corrected it a bit for me'
- e. Ya dan wúcèè ní 'He passed by me a bit / He slightly went ahead of me'

The diminutive construction in (9a) is semantically ambiguous. One interpretation relates to a biological relationship, while the other reflects a notion of followership; both interpretations instantiate a broader *greater–lesser* relational schema. In the biological reading, the contrast is grounded in differences of physical size or age. In the followership reading, the distinction arises from disparities in political, economic, or social status. Conceptually, both the generic kinship relation and the follower–leader relation are structured by the principle of obedience: the follower (or junior member) assumes a subordinate position because the person he follows is perceived as greater in some respect—such as age, kinship seniority, knowledge, economic capability, or political/authoritative power.

In (9b), the construction straightforwardly encodes smallness in physical dimensions. By contrast, (9c) conveys an implicit conceptualisation in which one's occupation is construed as *above* the individual, thereby invoking a metaphor of hierarchical elevation. Similarly, the constructions in (9d) and (9e) share syntactic parallelism, but differ semantically: the former expresses a sense of poor quality, while the latter denotes shortness in temporal duration or distance.

Taken together, these structures exhibit a common formal pattern and a network of semantically related meanings—reductions in size, status, quantity, or quality—thus exemplifying a family-resemblance category. We now turn to the next fundamental conceptual process to demonstrate its operation within diminutive constructions.

Diminutive as Polysemous

Polysemy, within the cognitive linguistic tradition, refers to the capacity of a single linguistic form to develop multiple, yet conceptually related, senses that constitute a systematically motivated semantic network rather than an arbitrary aggregation of meanings. Foundational studies by Lakoff (1987), Brugman (1988), and Tyler and Evans (2003) demonstrate that polysemous expressions form radial categories, organized around a prototype-like core from which extended senses emerge through general cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, image-schematic transformation, and pragmatic inference. These extensions are systematically motivated by shared human conceptual structures, including recurrent patterns of metaphorical mapping (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), metonymic association (Radden & Kövecses 1999), and image-schematic elaboration (Johnson 1987).

From a usage-based perspective, polysemy is understood as emergent, arising through the entrenchment of repeated contextual inferences, as highlighted in Langacker's *Cognitive Grammar* (1987, 1991). Its distinction from homonymy is grounded in conceptual relatedness, consistent with Rosch's (1975, 1978) prototype theory and Geeraerts' (1993) account of graded semantic boundaries. Cross-linguistic research (e.g., Kövecses 2015; Evans 2005) further shows that polysemy reflects universal patterns of embodied cognition while simultaneously permitting culture-specific extensions. Consequently, polysemy exemplifies how meaning is grounded in embodied experience, structured in prototype-based networks, and shaped through recurrent conceptualization and usage patterns.

Importantly, polysemy can also be specified and instantiated through grammatical forms, including diminutives, which exemplify how grammar performs a conceptual structuring function. Consider the following examples in (10a-d):

- a. 'Yan gidaje (small houses)
- b. 'Yan mata (virgin girls)
- c. 'Yan gyare-gyare (settings)
- d. 'Yan tafiye-tafiye (journeys)

In each of these constructions, the diminutive 'yan performs a range of semantically related functions, illustrating grammatical specification of polysemy. In (10a), the diminutive encodes a scalar dimension of size, indicating that the houses are either small in size or limited in quantity. In (10b), the diminutive similarly conveys smallness, but in a social/age-related sense, restricting the reference of the noun to young or virgin girls, thereby maintaining the notion of “littleness” in a non-physical dimension.

In (10c) and (10d), the diminutive precedes total reduplication of verbal nouns, which semantically signals pluractionality. Nevertheless, the constructions differ in their specific semantic implications. In (10c), the diminutive signals that the activity of “repair” is either limited in quantity or brief in duration. In (10d), it similarly indicates smallness, but in the sense that the “travels” are either not far-reaching or habitual. Across all these instances, the diminutive mediates a coherent, polysemous semantic network, illustrating how the grammar interacts with lexical meaning to produce nuanced, contextually sensitive interpretations.

With this understanding, we can now proceed to examine the next fundamental organizing principle of thought.

Metonymy in Diminutive

Conceptual metonymy is a cognitive linguistic mechanism whereby one concept (the vehicle) stands for another related concept (the target) within the same domain, based on contiguity, part-whole, or cause-effect relations, rather than analogy. Unlike metaphor, which maps across domains, metonymy operates within a single conceptual domain to evoke systematically associated meanings. Foundational studies by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Radden and Kövecses (1999) show that metonymy is pervasive in thought and language, structuring semantic extensions, lexical polysemy, and discourse coherence. Cognitive linguistic research emphasizes that metonymy is both a linguistic device and a conceptual organizing principle, shaping knowledge and reasoning. Cross-linguistic studies further demonstrate that metonymic patterns are universal yet culturally conditioned (Barcelona, 2000; Evans, 2005). In this context, our focus is restricted to the examination of diminutives and the ways in which they encode metonymic conceptual relations as part of fundamental cognitive processes. Consider the following illustrative examples in constructions (11a–b).

- '
- a. 'Yan samari ya garin ne 'hello young man how is the city
 - b. 'Yan mata ya kike 'ladies how are you'
 - c. 'Yan yaroki ana baya 'hello baby, are you at the back'

Without the diminutive prefix, none of the structures in (11a–c) would exhibit a metonymic interpretation. In their bare lexical form, the items in (11a–b) simply denote youths—young boys and young girls respectively—while the construction in (11c) refers to an infant carried on the back of the mother or another female relative. The introduction of the diminutive prefix, however, triggers a cognitive operation of multiplexing, whereby multiple conceptual specifications become available. In these syntactic contexts, the diminutive gives rise to a metonymic whole–for–part relation, allowing a broader category (youths or infants) to stand for a contextually salient subset. This illustrates how the diminutive encodes metonymic structure. A further conceptual specification contributed by the diminutive, relevant to the next fundamental feature of

Link Schema

Link Schema is an image-schematic structure representing the embodied experience of connection, whether physical, social, temporal, or conceptual (Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987). As shown in Johnson (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1999), and Hampe (2005), it underlies linguistic expressions of social ties, functional attachment, logical relation, and conceptual coherence, providing a structural template for how entities belong together within a cognitive domain. Diminutives can express this schema indirectly because they often encode relational meanings rather than mere smallness. Cross-linguistic studies (Jurafsky 1996; Dressler & Barbaresi, 1994) demonstrate that diminutives may signal social closeness, kinship, dependency, or subgroup membership—thus instantiating the Link Schema by conceptually binding an entity to a subset, relationship, scalar degree, or habitual activity group. Some Hausa examples illustrate this relational linking, connecting individuals to specific social or activity-based subcategories. Accordingly, the Link Schema explains how diminutives can structure affiliative and group-based meanings beyond simple scalar reduction. Consider these illustrations below in (12a-d) in which the diminutive **ɗan-X** pattern regularly constructs identity by linking a person to:

- a. a place: **ɗan Kano** (a person from Kano)
- b. an activity: **ɗan wasa** (player/performer)
- c. an ideology: **ɗan siyasa** (political actor)
- d. a behaviour: **ɗan iska** (wayward person)

Fundamentally, the Hausa **ɗan-X** construction—originally a diminutive meaning “child/offspring of X”—has developed into a productive relational pattern that encodes affiliation, membership, and association, thereby serving as a clear linguistic instantiation of the **LINK schema**. Notably, the entire set of **ɗan-X** forms exhibits a parallel range of semantic applications and may substitute for one another contextually, depending on the specific conceptual sense to be profiled—whether uniplexing, multiplexing, or gender-sensitive distinctions. In example (a), the prefix establishes a spatial-origin link, conceptually joining an individual to the geographical domain of Kano and grounding identity in place. In example (b), it creates an activity-based link, associating the referent with the domain of play or performance and turning recurrent activity into an identity category. Likewise, in example (c), the construction encodes an ideological link, binding the individual to the socio-political sphere and conceptualising political participation as a form of affiliation, while in example (d), the diminutive prefix forms a behavioural link that attaches the person to a moral or behavioural domain, representing waywardness as the behavioural attribute shaping the individual. Across these patterns, the diminutive operates as a relational operator that systematically links individuals to domains of place, activity, ideology, or behaviour, thereby mapping embodied structures of connection onto the sociocultural and conceptual categorisation system of Hausa.

Further Conceptual Specification of the Diminutive *dǎn-X* form

There is an important and noteworthy observation concerning the Hausa diminutive: while diminutive forms typically encode reduced intensity or the notion of 'a little bit/not too much' in certain linguistic contexts, they can also convey increased intensity in others. This contrast becomes particularly evident in contexts where scalar dimensions—especially those involving the size or extent of physical entities—are explicitly invoked. This pattern is clearly illustrated in the examples provided in (13a–b) and (14a–b).

- a. Mángwàrón bàbbá nè 'It is a big mango.'
- b. Mángwàrón *xán* bàbbá nè 'It is a slightly big mango'

The illustrations presented here share a similar syntactic profile in terms of their syntagmatic construction, differing only minimally at the lexical level. Their semantic nuances, however, diverge considerably with respect to the conceptual content they encode. In (13a), the construction straightforwardly indicates that the physical dimension of the subject referent—*mango*—is large. In contrast, the inclusion of the diminutive form *dǎn-X* in (13b) introduces a significant semantic shift, adding an additional layer of meaning. This added interpretation arises because the degree of intensity ordinarily contributed by the scalar adjective *bàbbá* is attenuated. Consequently, the diminutive here does not denote literal smallness but instead expresses the notion of 'a little bit/not too much.'

Furthermore, another noteworthy observation emerges when this type of diminutive construction is applied in different linguistic contexts: the conceptual meaning conveyed may diverge substantially from the sense illustrated above. This contrast is exemplified in the subsequent examples in (14a–b).

- a. Mángwàrón qàràmmi nè 'It is a small mango'
- b. Mángwàrón *xán* qàràmmi nè 'It is a somewhat small mango'

The principal distinction between the examples in (13) and (14) lies in the type of adjectives employed; beyond this, the differences are minimal. In (13), the adjective encodes the notion of *greater* size, whereas in (14) the adjective expresses the notion of *lesser* size. This contrast leads to different types of conceptual specification in each set. As previously noted, the diminutive in (13) attenuates the intensity of the scalar adjective, yielding the meaning 'a little bit/not too much.' In (14), however, the specification pattern shifts rather than reducing intensity, the diminutive construction *increases* it.

Thus, while (14a) indicates that the referent possesses a relatively small physical dimension, (14b) conveys that the referent is *even smaller* than what is expressed in (14a). In simple terms, the diminutive construction in (14b) encodes a stronger degree of scalar intensity than its counterpart in (14a).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Hausa diminutives, far from being mere morphological devices denoting 'smallness', constitute a richly organised system of conceptual operations that reveal how the speakers construe, categorise, and make sense of their social and experiential world. While traditional analyses—represented in the works of Galadanci (1976, 1999), Yusuf (2011), Charles and Kirk-Greene (2013), Korecky-Kröll et al. (2023), Abdullahi, at. el, (2024), Aboh (2025) and so on—have successfully illuminated the morphosyntactic architecture of diminutive constructions, the cognitive linguistic perspective adopted in this study uncovers the deeper conceptual motivations that structure their form and function. The analysis has shown that diminutives in Hausa systematically instantiate fundamental cognitive processes including metaphor, categorisation, polysemy, metonymy, and the link schema.

Through metaphor, diminutives map child–parent relations onto domains such as profession, geography, and action quality; through categorisation, they form family-resemblance networks of related senses grounded in graded semantic distinctions; through polysemy, they develop radial structures extending from a prototype of physical smallness to social, qualitative, and scalar interpretations; through metonymy, they evoke salient subcategories via whole–for–part relations; and through the link schema, they encode socially and conceptually meaningful connections.

Taken together, these findings affirm the central claims of cognitive linguistics—namely, that linguistic structure is a reflection of embodied conceptual structure and that grammar functions as a symbolic resource for organising human experience. By reconceptualising Hausa diminutives as cognitive-grammatical categories, this study offers a deeper, more explanatory account of their semantic range and communicative potential, thereby providing a theoretically grounded contribution that complements and extends the existing formal descriptions.

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