SOAS
University of London

ARTICLE

Diminutive names in Peninsular Arabic

Mark D. Shockley 🆔

Centre for Linguistics, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
Email: m.d.shockley@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract

In the Arabian Peninsula, lexically diminutive personal names, family names and place names are ubiquitous. In a dataset of 9,060 Arabian names, 1,717 (19 per cent) are diminutive. This article finds that the diminutive pattern *CiCēC* (cf. Classical *CuCayC*) has meanings and functions in Arabic names that are distinct from its meanings and functions in common nouns. In addition to expected meanings related to size, the diminutive carries partitive and attributive meanings. It may simply mark a name (as an onymic) or derive a name (as a transonymic). The diminutive may disambiguate two similar names found in close proximity (e.g. Diba ≠ Dubai). The form and function of the diminutive differ categorically according to what kind of name is diminutivized, supporting the semantic-pragmatic theory of names. A quantitative analysis of toponyms indicates that diminutive names are associated with Bedouin dialects and practices, as suggested by previous research.

Keywords: Arabic; diminutives; onomastics; names; semantics; pragmatics; Bedouin; morphology

Introduction

Diminutive personal names, tribal names, place names and plant terms are ubiquitous in most areas of the Arabian Peninsula. This study seeks first to elucidate some of the semantic and pragmatic peculiarities of morphologically diminutive names and, secondly, to investigate their geographical distribution and relative frequency across dialects. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of an extensive onomastic and lexical database indicates that the diminutive pattern *CiCēC* (cf. Classical *CuCayC*) has meanings and functions in Arabic onomastics that are distinct from its meanings and functions in common nouns. This extension of use also pertains to terms for flora and certain kinds of fauna. The use of diminutive patterns in Peninsular Arabic names sometimes has a meaning related to size, but is often more readily interpretable as an onymic or transonymic pattern. The diminutive may also serve to disambiguate two similar names. Within onomastics, derivational morphology often serves the pragmatic purpose of lexical expansion, over semantic considerations. The diminutive is, therefore, polyfunctional in Arabian names. Although diminutivization of names is generally motivated from the pragmatic domain, its form and meaning are also constrained by the semantic category of the name being used. In addition, a quantitative analysis of toponyms indicates that diminutivization is more common in areas where Bedouin-type dialects are spoken.

Most of the names examined here are taken from the following sources:

- Lorimer (1908): Place names and tribal names, *Khuzestan, Iraqi, Gulf, Baḥārna, Najdi, Omani and other varieties of Arabic*
- Littmann (1920): Personal names, *Najdi Arabic and Druze Arabic*
- Mandaville (2011): Plant names, *Najdi Arabic*
- Qafisheh (1996, 1997): Miscellaneous, *Gulf Arabic*
- Holes (2001): Miscellaneous, *Gulf Arabic and Baḥārna Arabic.*

The data sources are mainly reference works such as dictionaries and glossaries. In all these works, apart from hypocoristic personal names, lexically diminutive names are frequently given as the sole citation form, in which the diminutive pattern is obligatory (see below). Diminutive frequency estimates were also obtained for Yemeni names (al-Maqḥafī 2002). Hejaz and Dhofar are underrepresented in this data, but estimates covering the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula allow us to assert that the diminutive *CiCēC* is the most common vocalic pattern for Arabian names.

Defining "proper names"

Though proper names have special morphosyntactic properties in many languages, defining the set "proper names" is not an easy task. For Coates (2006: 356, 371), proper names "refer nonintensionally" and are "senseless". Proper names may not be defined by their distinctive features – they refer, but do not denote. This article adopts the semantic-pragmatic framework given by van Langendonck (2020), which is a refinement from the "pragmatic theory of properhood" promoted by Coates (2006). Van Langendonck (2020) characterizes Coates' approach as "reductionist". Van Langendonck and van de Velde (2016) offer morphosyntactic evidence that proper names may have both denotation (semantic meaning) and reference (pragmatic meaning). Indeed, the empirical data presented here do not justify a discrete boundary between semantic and pragmatic meaning. Semantics and pragmatics both play a part in the evolution of Arabian names.

Regardless of how we approach "proper names" as a linguistic category, diminutive names are very frequent in Arabic. Van Langendonck (2020) writes that proper names cannot be treated as a determinate set. Some names are prototypically proper names and others are not; there are also language-specific differences in how names are construed. The larger part of this study, including the quantitative portion, deals with family names and place names, which are prototypically proper names (van Langendonck 2020: 117). Examples of diminutive toponyms and anthroponyms range from the earliest eras of Arabian epigraphy, through to pre-Islamic poetry and up to the present day. Names of plants (phytonyms) and wildlife (zoonyms) are also included in this study, following the typology of proper names given by van Langendonck and van de Velde (2016: 29–39); this should not be regarded as a claim that all such terms function as proper names. Rather, terms for species, much like brand names and names of diseases, are less prototypically proper names, but many of these may function as proper names. Consider the examples:

1) *ṭmām* is an important grazing plant.
2) The camels discovered some *ṭmām.*

In example (1), *ṭmām* (i.e. *Panicum turgidum*) is a proper noun, which cannot be restricted by a relative clause; in (2) the same word is a common noun (cf. van Langendonck 2020: 118). Indeed, in their morphosemantic properties, Arabic terms for plants and wildlife are

unique, sharing characteristics with both common nouns and proper nouns. They are a marginal category, but nevertheless constitute a useful and underexplored point of comparison in the study of Arabic nouns.

Many other semantic fields may include proper names, some of them diminutive, but data were too scanty to allow for a thorough analysis. For example, names of diseases may be diminutivized, e.g. *šnēṭir* "chicken pox" (Kuwaiti). Names of traditional games and dances may be diminutive – and not only when pertaining to children, e.g. *mğēlsi* "men's folk singing". Names of stars may be diminutive in Arabic, such as *shēl* "Canopus" and *ḥaymir* (< *ʾuḥaymir*) "Arcturus". Names for points in time may also be diminutivized in Arabian dialects, e.g. *ġbēša* "early morning".[1]

Defining "diminutive" morphology in Peninsular Arabic

In my dataset for Peninsular Arabic, the most common diminutive forms fall into four groups of patterns (following Hoffiz 1995: 166; Holes 2016: 127–8; cf. Socin 1898).

CiCēC[2]

This includes the quadriliteral forms $C_1iC_2\bar{e}C_3iC_4$ and $C_1C_2\bar{e}C_3\bar{\imath}C_4$. These are frequently plain, e.g. *qurayn* "a place name" (attested 7x) < *qarn* "hill", but may be inflected with the feminine suffix *-a*, e.g. *burayda* "a city" (Najd), or the *nisbah* suffix *-ī*.

Gemination of the second or third consonant occurs in plant terms and rarely elsewhere. The variant $C_1iC_2C_2\bar{e}C_3$ is attested in 27 names, e.g. *fuṭṭaym* "a family name" (Gulf); 25 such forms are plant names.[3] Mandaville (2011) also includes two plant names of the pattern $C_1(i)C_2\bar{e}C_3C_3$: *ḥwērra* "*Leptaleum filifolium*" (Kuwait) < *ḥārr* "hot" and *ḥuwēḏḏān* "*Cornulaca monacantha*" (Āl Murra) < *ḥāḏ* "two species of *Cornulaca*".

CaCCūC

This includes $C_1aC_2C_2\bar{u}C_3$ (mainly in hypocoristics of given names; see Davis and Zawaydeh 2001), $C_1aC_2C_3\bar{u}C_3$, quadriliteral $C_1aC_2C_3\bar{u}C_4$ and occasionally variants in which *ū* > *ī*, e.g. *siḥtīt* "extremely small pearls" (Holes 2001) < *suḥtūt*.

The pattern $ʾaC_1C_2\bar{u}C_3$ is a form found exclusively in Yemen. Littmann (1920) also reports the form $C_1ayC_2\bar{u}C_3$. In a few items, two or more diminutive forms alternate, as in *banu al-ḥuḏayfī ~ ʾaḥḏūf* "a tribe" (Yemen), *šuwwēḫ ~ šēyyūḫ* (< *šayyūḫ*) "globe thistle" (Najd).

Suffix -ō

The suffix *-ō* is much more limited in usage than the first two patterns. It is primarily attested in hypocoristics of given names (cf. Procházka 2020: 95).[4] It also appears in

---

[1] See Holes (2016: 127) for more examples.

[2] Short, high vowels are often elided in unstressed, open syllables. In many North Arabian dialects, **ay* > *ē, ay*; **u*, **i* > *i* [i, ɨ, u]. (On the phonology of Gulf Arabic vowels, see Shockley 2020.) Here *CiCēC* is merely taken as the more common vocalization. In data from Lorimer, *qrayn, baraymi, dibay* and *kuwayt* are all coded as *CiCēC* here. In addition, spellings such as *baraymi* (today *li-brēmi*; Qafisheh 1997: 620) are peculiar to Lorimer; the first *a* in *CaCayC* forms may possibly represent a mid central vowel [ə], with some vowel lowering, but it does not reflect a distinct pattern.

[3] Mandaville (2011: 208) writes, "CuCCayC is so frequent among the names used in the study area that I have been tempted to dub it, in Latin fashion, a *nomen plantarum*."

[4] Gulf Arabic has several systems for avoiding the plain use of given names. Among family, hypocoristics may be used, e.g. *zaydō* < *zayd*, *yazzūy* < *il-yāziyeh*, but *CiCēC* patterns are usually not hypocoristics. Teknonyms – names derived from children's names – may also be given (*ʾimm* – or *bū* – = mother or father of so-and-so), but these are

nouns of "local reference", but is no longer productive in Gulf Arabic (Holes 2007: 616). It is attested in four ichthonyms (see Table 3). In northern Oman, this affix is attached to common nouns to indicate "immediacy in space" (Morano 2019: 47), which is one of the accepted meanings of the diminutive. The suffix -ō is also a definite noun marker in Southwest Iranian languages, such as Kumzari, but none of the Arabic names ending in -ō appears to be of Iranian origin.

Suffix -ūn

Another diminutive suffix -ūn is occasionally attested in the study area. Holes (2005: 250) lists five examples of diminutive -ūn in common nouns and two in names, opining that it is "probably of Aramaic origin"; in data gathered for this study, diminutive -ūn was attested in one toponym, *abu al-ḥanaynūn* "a pearlbank" (Lorimer 1908: 366).

While other patterns are sometimes considered diminutive in Arabic, e.g. CiCCaC, none of them figured prominently in the data considered here and thus they are not included.[5]

"Diminutive" is taken as the typical, not exhaustive, meaning of the above patterns. I argue that in Peninsular Arabic names, diminutives have three functions in addition to existing categories of meaning: 1) marking names (onymic), 2) deriving new names (transonymic), and 3) differentiating existing names (disambiguator).

Summary of frequency data

Lorimer's Gazetteer

For the purposes of analysing the morphosemantics of Arabic proper nouns, 9,207 proper names were gathered from J.G. Lorimer's *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf* (1908). Of these, 1,320 names from non-Arabic-speaking provinces of Persia were excluded. This leaves a sample of 7,887 proper names: 5,451 toponyms and 2,436 anthroponyms.

These data represent a vast area where a number of Arabic varieties are spoken, in addition to Modern South Arabian languages and Indo-Iranian languages, which are not examined here. Arabic dialects represented in the study area are primarily those categorized as North Arabian by Johnstone (1967), comprising a total of 4,847 names. Omani Arabic, Baḥārna Arabic and, to a lesser extent, Dhofari Arabic and Šiḥḥi Arabic are also represented.

Overall frequency of diminutive morphology among these names is given in Table 1. The pattern *CiCēC* is quite frequent in Arabian toponyms and family names, and *CaCCūC* occurs occasionally; other types of diminutives are rare or unattested in data from Lorimer.[6]

As shown in Table 2, diminutive toponyms often receive two or more suffixes (cf. Mandaville 2011: 237).

---

often assigned lexically, e.g. *bū šhāb* < *ʾaḥmad* (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; hereafter UAE), meaning everyone named *ʾaḥmad* may also receive the less formal teknonym *bū šhāb*. Thus, a man may have three or more familiar appellations apart from his given name: a hypocoristic, a name derived from his eldest son's name and the lexically assigned teknonym.

[5] Brockelmann (1928) and Zewi (2006) give more extensive summaries of diminutive morphology in Arabic.

[6] In names gathered from Lorimer, the suffix -ō is unattested; as noted above, -ūn appears only in a single toponym, *abu al-ḥanaynūn*, which is a double diminutive (both *CiCēC* and -ūn) and therefore does not affect the overall count.

Table 1. Frequency of diminutive morphology in proper names

	Sample	CiCēC	CaCCūC	Diminutive
Toponyms	5,451	1,059 (19.4%)	22 (0.4%)	1,081 (19.8%)
Family names	2,436	393 (16.1%)	16 (0.7%)	409 (16.8%)
Total	7,887	1,452 (18.4%)	38 (0.5%)	1,490 (18.9%)

Table 2. Frequency of suffixes in Arabic toponyms in Lorimer (1908)

Morphological element	CiCēC toponyms (1,059 total)	All other stem patterns (4,392 total)
Feminine singular -*a*	488 (46.1%)	1,140 (26.0%)
Nisbah suffix -*ī*	134 (12.7%)	410 (9.3%)
Sound plural -*āt* or -*īn*	53 (5.0%)	68 (1.5%)
-*ān* suffix	45 (4.2%)	117 (2.7%)

Modern sources

In addition, zoonyms and phytonyms were gathered for comparison. Plant names were gathered from Mandaville (2011). Most names for marine fauna came from Eagderi et al. (2019). Other wildlife names were collated into a lexical database on Gulf Arabic gathered by the author.[7] Diminutive frequencies are given from this database in Table 3.

The pattern *CiCēC* prevails in most onomastic categories. One exception is notable: names of land animals are generally *not* lexically diminutive; rather, the diminutive of size is reserved for young animals, e.g. *rwēl* "young ostrich" (Al-Rawi 1990: 223).

Table 3. Frequency of diminutive morphology in Gulf Arabic names

	Sample	CiCēC	CaCCūC	Diminutive
Plant generics	431	91 (21.1%)	8 (1.9%)	99 (23.0%)
Marine fauna[8]	141	19 (13.5%)	7 (5.0%)	29 (20.6%)
Land animals	70	2 (2.9%)	2 (2.9%)	4 (5.7%)
Birds	20	7 (35%)	1 (5%)	8 (40%)
Total	556	105 (18.9%)	17 (3.1%)	122 (21.9%)

---

[7] For more extensive detail on this data, see Shockley (2020: 16–17). Sources for wildlife names include Johnstone (1967); Qafisheh (1996, 1997); Holes (2001). The author has also conducted fieldwork in Qatar and the UAE.

[8] The cumulative count includes one double diminutive, *šnēnō* "yellowfin hind", and three other fish names ending in -*ō*: *bū šalanbō* "mudskipper" (Kuwaiti), *balandō* "giant guitarfish" (Kuwaiti) and *ḥalwāyō* "pomfret" (Bahrain).

Table 4. Frequency of diminutive morphology in other sources

Author	Area	Name type	Sample	Diminutive
Provençal (2010), data from Forskål (1775)	Yemen	Plants	454	63 (13.9%)
Littmann (1920)	Northern Najd	Given names	762	178 (23.4%)
Lake (1941)	SW Yemen	Toponyms	411	49 (11.9%)
al-Maqḥafī (2002)	Yemen	Toponyms & anthroponyms	9,000*	1620* (18%)

Supplemental sources

To test the above observations concerning North Arabian dialects, frequency counts were obtained from other sources (shown in Table 4). There is subregional variation, but the frequency of diminutive names is relatively consistent in the Arabian Peninsula.[9]

Meanings of diminutive common nouns

The semantics of diminutive common nouns in Arabic varieties is relatively well-investigated. Typically, the diminutive in common nouns carries meanings listed by Jurafsky (1996: 536): small, child/offspring, female gender, small-type, imitation, intensity/exactness, approximation and individuation/partitive. Diminutivization is frequently an *optional inflection*, used for politeness and endearment:

ḥilw ~ ḥlēw "nice"
ṭayrī ~ ṭwayrī "my falcon"

The pragmatic meanings of the diminutive in Arabic common nouns fall within the range of cross-linguistically well-attested expressive functions of diminutive nouns, which include endearment, contempt, "non-seriousness", approximation and intensification.[10] In these functions, the diminutive is almost always optional.

Diminutivization may also be used in the derivation of new (common or proper) nouns. In such cases, it is not optional, e.g. *ligēmāt* "a type of sweet" < *ligma* "morsel" (Bahrain; Holes 2001: 482).

Superficially, the optional usage of the affective diminutive in common nouns bears some resemblance to the optional usage of the hypocoristic diminutive in given names, but this relation is misleading with regard to all other types of Arabic onomastics. In a few cases, diminutivization was optional in a tribal name found in Lorimer (1908), e.g. *ruwāḥī ~ ruwayḥī* "a tribe".[11] Thirteen such cases were documented among 1,490 diminutive names. The diminutive is typically optional in common nouns, but it is typically obligatory in names (Borg and Kressel 2001: 49; Ritt-Benmimoun 2018). Borg and Kressel (2001: 49) further point out that lexically diminutive names differ morphologically

---

[9] The count for al-Maqḥafī (2002) is an estimate extrapolated from the first 25 per cent of the data. Analysis of Forskål's plant names follows Provençal (2010).
[10] Some studies that address semantic and pragmatic issues in Arabic varieties are Masliyah (1997), Badarneh (2009), Eshreteh (2017), Taine-Cheikh (2018) and Ritt-Benmimoun (2018).
[11] Perhaps this is mere phonetic similarity. Lorimer (1908) compared data from previously existing sources.

from hypocoristics which are formed by the pattern *CaCCūC* and suffixes *-ō* and *-ūn*, but lexically diminutive names are more commonly formed with *CiCēC*.

Previous accounts of diminutive names

The semantics of diminutive names is a poorly explored topic. The morphology of names is rarely treated in grammatical descriptions, and semantic studies are almost totally confined to common nouns and adjectives. Some linguists have noted the high frequency of diminutive names in Arabic, but few provide any rationale for its productivity.

Socin (1898: 483) dedicates about half of his study on Algerian names to the discussion of various diminutive forms, but he demurs on the question of how they came to be so productive. Palacios (1942: 25) notes that the diminutive is the predominant form for Arabic place names in Spain. Johnstone (1967: 82) notes that in Gulf Arabic, the pattern *fˁēlīl* is found "mainly [in] proper names". Taine-Cheikh (2018: 22–23), while noting the relative rarity of *CiCēC* nouns in the Middle East, notes that certain diminutives are mainly found among proper nouns. None of these studies seeks to explore diminutive names as distinct from diminutive common nouns.

In a study of Iraqi diminutives, Masliyah (1997: 77, 78) advances the conversation by trying to supply an expressive meaning in diminutive names. He points out the diminutive in terms for "wild animals...harmful plants" and "courageous tribes". He makes a case that here the diminutive serves "to soothe the fear they may cause to people". This is a helpful suggestion, but one that alone is not sufficient to explain the sheer abundance of diminutive tribe names and place names, as well as terms for birds, fish and plants.[12] A broader explanation is needed.

Mandaville (2011: 207) perceived that diminutives occur in plant names, place names and personal names at a "much higher frequency than in common speech over all". Through his thorough study of plant names, he judged that the meaning of the pattern *CiCēC* in these names was attributive or onymic. "Diminutive forms in the plant names … appear to have the primary function not of indicating small physical size but rather of attributing the characteristics of a root noun to its referent and probably, to some extent, of marking it as a plant name." Attribution was once a meaning of the English diminutive suffix *-ling*, e.g. *earthling* "ploughman", *darkling* "dark-dwelling". Masliyah (1997) and Mandaville (2011) are both right in suggesting that *CiCēC* has various senses and functions driven by both semantics and pragmatics.

Semantic meanings of diminutive names

Size-related meanings

If we organize types of toponyms according to size, as in Table 5, we see that the diminutive is more frequent in microtoponyms, but it is still relatively frequent in names referring to places of all sizes. The conventional size-related meaning of *CiCēC* may account for many diminutive geonyms, for instance, but it does not explain the diminutive as a preferred form in every semantic category.

Expressive meanings: affection and contempt

Affective meaning has explanatory power in its optional, expressive use of the diminutive in given names, which follow the pattern *CaCCūC* (e.g. *il-yāziyeh ~ yazzūy* "female given

---

[12] See below on the possible use of a diminutive of contempt in given names to avert the evil eye.

Table 5. Frequency of diminutive morphology in toponyms, by size

City	Village
13.2%	17.8%
Mountain	Hill
6.7%	21.6%
Island	Islet
12.6%	22.2%
River	Creek
10.3%	24.1%

name", UAE), and in common nouns, which follow *CiCēC* (e.g. *ṣḥēn ~ ṣaḥan* "plate"), but this expressive use of the diminutive is rarely attested in any other type of name in Peninsular varieties of Arabic. Affective interpretations are particularly unsatisfying with regard to lexically diminutive names of tribes, clans, families, settlements, flora and fauna.

In a study of personal names, Borg and Kressel (2001: 49) reject the contention that lexically diminutive personal names are used for endearment. Rather, diminutive names are used among Bedouin tribes to avert the attention of the evil eye and prevent death by making the child appear lowly. Borg and Kressel support this with an anecdote of a Bedouin man who gave his children contemptuous names after his first children died young. Death prevention names are a well-known practice in West Africa but have not been studied in Arabic.

The following names are listed in Littmann (1920), which mainly treats northern Najdi Arabic:

il-ʿaryān "Naked"
miġḍib "Annoyance"
ḥimār "Donkey"
duwēč "Rooster (dim.)"
sakrān "Drunk"
skēkīr "Drunk (dim.)"

This apotropaic function of (lexically) diminutive names is quite distinct from the diminutive's (usually optional) hypocoristic usage and should be explored in more detail in anthropological investigations of Arabic personal names. If it is correct, the diminutive in this context signifies contempt, not affection. The pattern *CiCēC* may denote endearment in common nouns, but contempt in given names; the pattern *CaCCūC* denotes endearment in given names, but has no clear function in common nouns.

It is unclear what influence, if any, apotropaic naming practices have in Arabic proper names other than personal names. It is conceivable that the diminutive could serve an apotropaic function in Peninsular Arabic place names. Thus far, evidence only points to this usage for death prevention after the birth of a child.

Partitive and individuative meanings

In data from Lorimer (1908), diminutive names are common for tribes (14.3 per cent), although they are more common in names of sub-tribal groups (17.1 per cent; see
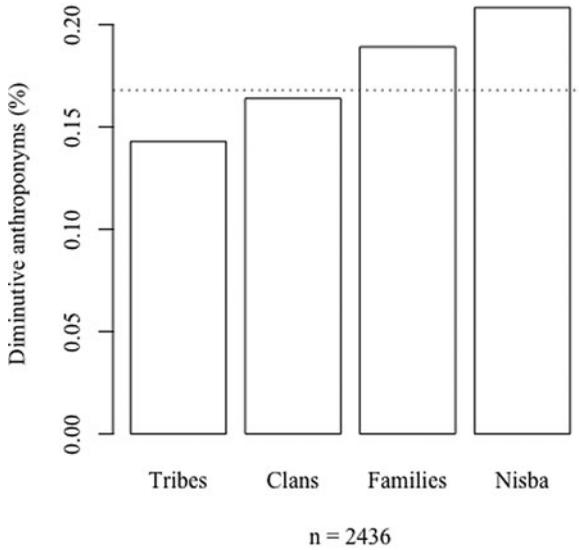
Figure 1. Frequency of diminutive morphology in anthroponyms, by relative size

Figure 1). In a few names, the diminutive may have a partitive meaning, e.g. ʾāl ʿaǧayma "section of Ajmān tribe" < ʿaǧmān "a tribe".

Diminutives are even more frequent in singular (nisbah) forms (20.8 per cent), indicating a possible individuative or attributive meaning. A diminutive nisbah is often derived from a group name that is not diminutive, e.g. salaiṭī "member of the Sulaiti tribe" (< suluṭa), suwaydī "a member of the Suwaidi tribe" (< sūdān), muḥayribī "member of the Maḥāriba clan" (< maḥāriba).

Here we are only noting tendencies, though, and we have not arrived at a comprehensive account of diminutive names. Moreover, in two cases, the plural or collective form is diminutive and the nisbah form is not, e.g. ġāfilī "member of the Ghafailāt" < ġafaylāt "tribe name".[13]

Attributive meanings

Sībawayh (1988) wrote that use of the diminutive form can denote something "similar to the thing you are uttering while you mean something else" (Fayez 1990: 201). In Mandaville's (2011) account of Najdi plant names, diminutivization frequently denotes some similarity, whether visual or sensory, e.g. gnēfiḏa "Anastatica hierochuntica" < ginfiḏ "hedgehog", khiyyēs "stinkweed" < khāyis, "stinking", ʿuwēḏirān "little ʿāḏir-like bush" (Artemisia scoparia) < ʿāḏir "Artemisia monosperma". Attributive meanings are also possible in other types of names, e.g. hadhūd "a tribal name" (attested twice) < hudhud "hoopoe", fahayd "a tribal name" (attested 4x) < fahad "lynx". In spite of these semantic interpretations of the diminutive, pragmatic meanings are able to account for a wider array of data.

Pragmatic meanings of diminutive names

Diminutive as onymic

Aside from Arabic, several languages abound in diminutive names in which the diminutive affix may be semantically vacuous. Morris (2002: 49) indicates the diminutive in Soqoṭri

---

[13] Compare the tribe name ġafala, which has the nisbah form ġafaylī.

plant names may have semantic meaning, denoting smallness, or pragmatic meaning, merely deriving a new form. Alexandre (2015: 51) writes that in Kimbundu, diminutive and augmentative suffixes are common in toponyms, but lack their conventional meanings. Similar examples may be adduced in Persian (Imani and Kassaei 2016). Nash (2014: 45) writes that, in Yuwaalayaay and Yuwaalaraay toponyms, the diminutive suffix *-dool* acts as a "definitiser or individuator, related to its hypocoristic function and the formation of proper names". In existing onomastic terminology, the diminutive in these languages acts as an *onymic*, a name marker.

A point of evidence for *CiCēC* as an Arabic onymic pattern is the adaptation of borrowed names: the Persian toponym *ḫargū* "an island" is Arabized as a diminutive, *ḫwēriǧ*. From pre-Islamic times, there is a tendency to diminutivize names during borrowing, including prophets' names, e.g. *ᶜuzayr* "Ezra" and *sulaymān* "Solomon". Even the title *firᶜawn* "pharaoh" is attested as a diminutive, *furayᶜ*.

Diminutive as transonymic

Mandaville (2011: 237) writes that diminutivization often occurs in deriving toponyms from plant names. In onomastics, the derivation of one name from a name of another type is known as transonymization. In eastern Arabia, the four major categories form a cline of derivation, *zoonym > phytonym > toponym > anthroponym*, with transonymization frequently inducing diminutivization.

Zoonym > phytonym
ḫanzīr "pig" > *ḫinēzīr* "*Peganum harmala*"
Phytonym > toponym
ḥanẓal "the colocynth gourd" (*Citrullus colocynthis*) > *ḥanayẓil* "a village"
Zoonym > toponym
ẓabb "spiny-tailed lizard" > *ẓabayba* "a well"
Phytonym > anthroponym
rimṯ "a saltbush" (*Haloxylon salicornicum*) > *rumaiṯī* "a tribe"
Zoonym > anthroponym
ḥanaš "poisonous snake" > *ʾāl ḥanayš* "a tribal section"

In many such examples, it is unclear whether the diminutive is primarily attributive (semantic) or transonymic (pragmatic). It is also possible that the diminutive derives new (secondary) names within the same semantic field, as suggested in Galician toponyms by Pérez Capelo (2017). However, this is not clear from the data.

Diminutive as disambiguator

Early theorists referred to proper names as having unique reference; problematically, though, multiple referents may share the same name. Moldovanu (1972: 82) noted a tendency to *reuse* toponyms across different semantic fields, but to *differentiate* toponyms when repeated within the same semantic field. Differentiation is usually accomplished by compounding in English, e.g. *Upper Wraxall* ≠ *Wraxall*, *Little Sodbury* ≠ *Old Sodbury*, *Bradford-on-Avon* ≠ *Bradford*. In other languages, the same aim is accomplished by a derivational affix, frequently with a diminutive or attributive meaning, e.g. among Roman cognomina, *Crispinillus* ≠ *Crispinus* ≠ *Crispus*. Efficiently differentiating or disambiguating names appears to be a key function of diminutivization in Arabic names.

In wildlife terms, the diminutive may differentiate two nouns, without a clear small-type/normal-type correspondence, e.g. *gabgūb* "lobster" ≠ *gubgub* "small crab", *ḫwēt* "oyster" ≠ *ḥūt* "whale; fish" (generic). Among toponyms, numerous pairings may be found,

Table 6. Meanings of the Arabic diminutive, by semantic category

	CiCēC	CaCCūC	Productive?
Common nouns	Expressive (inflectional) or small (derivational or inflectional), sometimes pejorative	Small, sometimes augmentative or pejorative	Yes
Tribal names	Partitive, individuative (in nisbahs), attributive, disambiguator	–	Variants
Given names	Disambiguator, death-prevention	Hypocoristic	Yes
Toponyms	Small, onymic, attributive, disambiguator	–	Rarely
Phytonyms	Small-type, onymic, attributive, disambiguator	Onymic	Regional variants
Zoonyms	Small/young	–	Yes
Marine life	Onymic	Onymic	No
Bird names	Onymic, small/young	–	No

e.g. *dbayy* "a city" ≠ *diba* "a village" (UAE); *kuwait* "a city" (Kuwait) ≠ *kūt* "a town" (Iraq). Lorimer's (1908) data included at least 63 such pairs (out of 1,081 diminutive toponyms). Other diminutive names have a corresponding non-diminutive name that is not listed by Lorimer, e.g. *simaysima* "a village" ≠ *simsima* "well" (Qatar).

In a study of Canarian diminutive toponyms, Trapero (2000) writes that the purpose of derivational (i.e. diminutive) morphology in these toponyms is lexical expansion; semantics are not even in consideration.[14] In Arabian names, I contend that the diminutive frequently serves the same purpose.

Caskel's study of Ibn al-Kalbī's *Ǧamharat al-Nasab* (1966, vol. 1: fig. 19) includes a single family with three sets of brothers differentiated by diminutivization: *ḫālid* ≠ *ḫuwaylid*, *ṭālib* ≠ *ṭulayb* and *al-ḥāriṯ* ≠ *al-ḥuwayriṯ* (cf. Borg and Kressel 2001).

The same process occurs among tribal names. Tribal sections with adjacent lineages are differentiated using the diminutive. In the three examples below, the sections with diminutive names are larger in number than those with non-diminutive names.

ʾāl bū ḥamādi ≠ ʾāl bū ḥumaydi ≠ ʾāl bū ḥamūd
ʾāl bū ḫāṭar ≠ bayt ḫuwayṭar
ṭarārifa ≠ ʾāl ṭarayf

This is similar to Jurafsky's (1996) category "approximation" and Mandaville's (2011) function of attribution. However, it is (pragmatic) disambiguation, not (semantic) approximation, that is motivating the use of the diminutive in these names.

Synthesizing the data, it becomes apparent that the range of meaning of diminutive morphology in Arabic nouns is circumscribed according to the semantic field of the noun (Table 6). If the meaning of a morpheme is limited by semantic domain, even among proper nouns, then proper nouns are able to both refer and denote.

---

[14] Out of 12,777 Canarian toponyms, 2,256 (17.7 per cent) include a diminutive suffix (Trapero 2000).

Diachronic evidence

Diachronic evidence further bears out the semantic-pragmatic account of diminutivization. According to Johnstone and Wilkinson (1960: 442), the name "Core Hessan" (*ḫōr ḥassān*, a bay and settlement) was recorded in 1827 in Qatar. In 1908, Lorimer listed *ḫōr ḥassān* on the west coast, and *ḫōr šaqīq* on the east coast. Lorimer (1908: 681) wrote that one name became diminutivized to disambiguate the two: "[Khor Hassān] is frequently spoken of simply as 'Khuwair' in contradistinction to 'Khor' [= Khor Shaqīq]." He uses the names *ḫōr ḥassān*, *ḫwayr ḥassān* and *ḫuwayr* interchangeably, but by 1960, the names of *both* bays were shortened, and today the standard names are *al-ḫuwayr* and *al-ḫawr.* It is likely that in such pragmatic re-namings, it would be inadmissible to diminutivize the *larger* place name; thus, semantics and pragmatics both determine the acceptability of the name.

Several other name variants have been lost to standardization. For example, Lorimer (1908: 281) lists a valley known as both *bāṭin* and *baṭayn*; today, it is known as *bāṭin* (NE Saudi), perhaps because *buṭayn* designates another (smaller) valley in Najd. One diminutive toponym, *rās al-ǧunayz* "a cape" (Oman), is today falling out of use, in favour of *rās al-ǧinz*. These show the ongoing influence of pragmatic concerns in name evolution.

Scope

In compound names, the diminutive may apply to either element or both, suggesting that the name is the scope of the diminutive. Lorimer includes two cases of diminutive agreement between a generic element and a proper noun: *falayǧ bin qafayyir* "a hamlet" (Hatta), and *ʿawaynat bin ḥasayn* "a group of wells" (Qatar).[15] Cross-linguistically, diminutive agreement is unusual, but it is obligatory in Maale and Walman (Steriopolo 2013: 42).

In several cases, only the generic element of a place name is diminutive, e.g. *qarayn aḏ-ḏabbān* "well" (Bahrain), *ʿawaynat aš-šuyūḫ* "camping ground" (Qatar), *muwayh ḥakrān* "group of wells" (Hejaz). Kharusi and Salman (2015) note diminutive terms used in Omani hydronyms, including some with no clear relation to size, e.g. *kudayr* "turbid (water)", *mudayfiʿ* "lower part of a valley". Similarly, Qafisheh (1997) lists *šʿēb* "small valley", but *šiʿb* has the same meaning. These diminutive generics and attending diminutive agreement may have arisen through variation in the scope of the diminutive.

Quantitative analysis

Physiography

CiCēC applies frequently in names of sources of fresh water (Figure 2). Many of the most frequently used roots among toponyms were related to water sources: *m-l-ḥ* "salt" (18x), *š-ʿ-b* "rivulet" (15x), *b-d-ʿ* "spring" (17x), *ṣ-f-w* "pure" (13x), *m-r-r* "bitter" (13x), *f-l-ǧ* "irrigation channel" (10x).

A chi-squared test was performed to test the relation between diminutivization and fresh water sources (Table 7).[16] The relation is statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 5450) = 76.124, p < .001.

---

[15] Holes (2016: 352, 463) includes two examples among common nouns, *ḫfērāt ṣġērāt* "tiny holes" and *dukēkīn ṣġayyir* "a little shop". The adjective *ṣġayyir* is in frequent use, so it is unclear whether agreement is really at work.
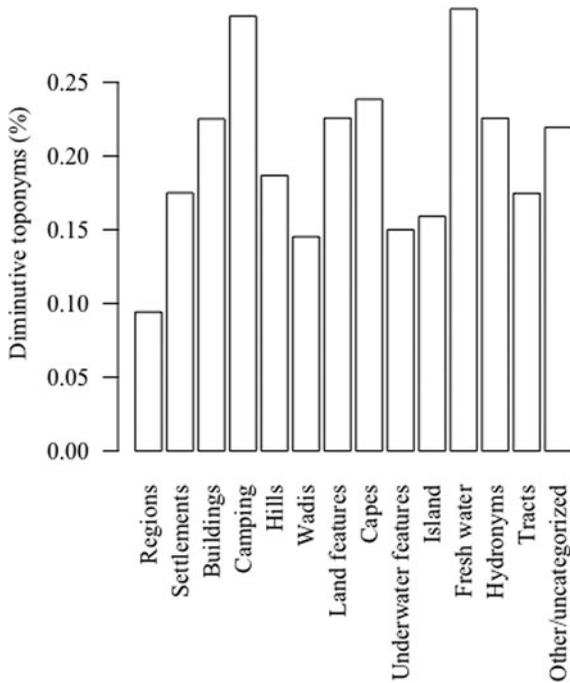[16] All chi-squared tests were performed using R statistical software.

Figure 2. Frequency of diminutive morphology in toponyms, by type

Table 7. Frequency of diminutive names, by presence or absence of water

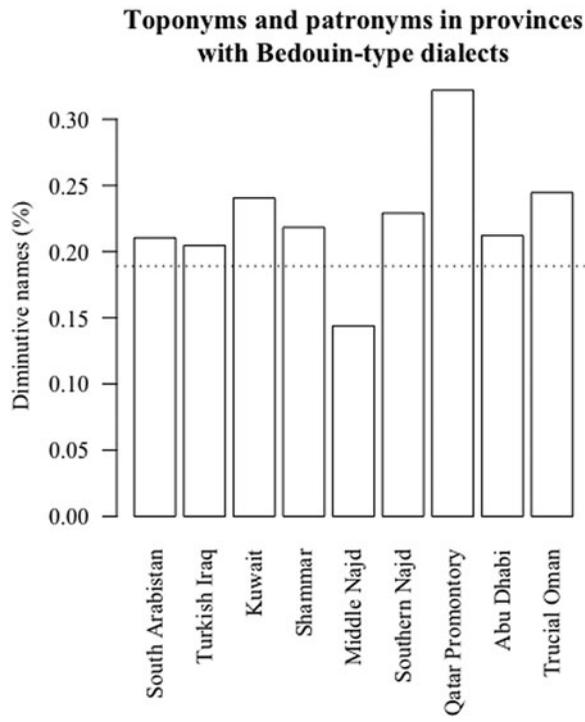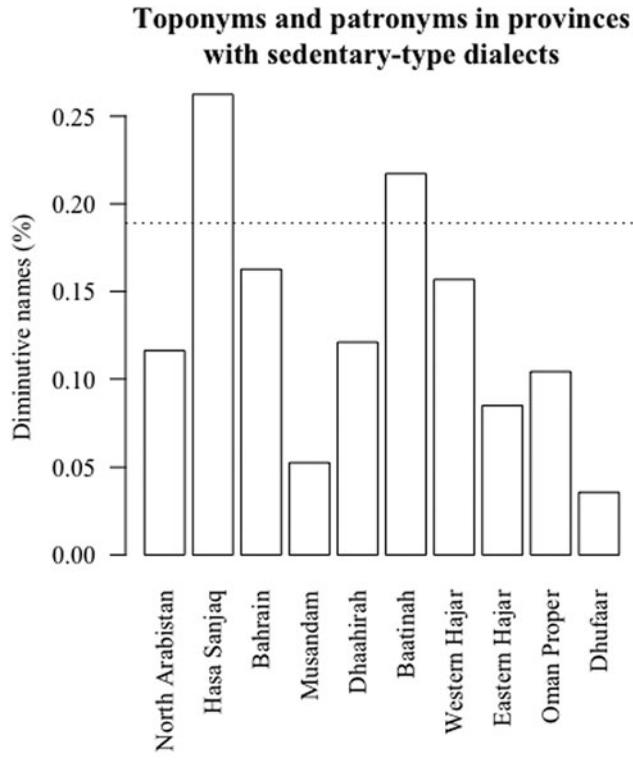|	Non-diminutive	Diminutive	Row total
No fresh water present	3,406	706 (17.2%)	4,112
Fresh water present	961	377 (28.2%)	1,338
Column total	4,367	1,083 (19.9%)	5,450

Bedouin and sedentary dialects

Kaye and Rosenhouse (1997: 284) have claimed that "diminutives are used mainly in Maghrebine and bedouin (and bedouinized) dialects in both nouns and adjectives". Borg and Kressel (2001) likewise note a special use of the diminutive in Bedouin societies. In data from Lorimer (1908), the diminutive form bears a geographic relation to Bedouin-type dialect areas.[17]

To test the strength of this relation, regions were coded according to whether the historically prevailing Arabic dialect of the region is a Bedouin-type dialect or a sedentary-type dialect (see Figures 3 and 4). The imprecise coding of whole regions as "Bedouin-type" or "sedentary-type" requires some explanation. I follow Lorimer's geopolitical terminology.[18] The geopolitical categorization of toponyms here acts only as a proxy

---

[17] In Arabic dialectology, the terms "Bedouin" and "sedentary" refer to a broad classification of two major dialect types, corresponding in a diminished sense to the sociological categories with the same names (Watson 2011: 859). Under this scheme, the dialects of the Persian Gulf are Bedouin-type dialects, except for Baḥārna Arabic (spoken in Bahrain and Hasa) and the sedentary dialects of Oman (Holes 2016: 31).

[18] "Arabistan" is the term used in Lorimer's time for an area corresponding to Khuzestan, now a province of Iran. Lorimer (1908: 657) used the name "Hasa Sanjāq" for an Ottoman province along the east Arabian coast; it

Toponyms and patronyms in provinces with sedentary-type dialects

Diminutive names (%)

0.25
0.20
0.15
0.10
0.05
0.00

North Arabistan · Hasa Sanjaq · Bahrain · Musandam · Dhaahirah · Baatinah · Western Hajar · Eastern Hajar · Oman Proper · Dhufaar

Toponyms and patronyms in provinces with Bedouin-type dialects

Diminutive names (%)

0.30
0.25
0.20
0.15
0.10
0.05
0.00

South Arabistan · Turkish Iraq · Kuwait · Shammar · Middle Najd · Southern Najd · Qatar Promontory · Abu Dhabi · Trucial Oman

Figures 3 and 4. Frequency of diminutive toponyms in Bedouin and non-Bedouin areas

Table 8. Frequency of diminutive names, by historically prevailing dialect type (Bedouin or sedentary)

	Non-diminutive	Diminutive	Row total
Non-Bedouin area	944	116 (10.9%)	1,060
Bedouin area	3,423	967 (22.0%)	4,390
Column total	4,367	1,083 (19.9%)	5,450

Table 9. Frequency of diminutive names, by presence or absence of permanent habitation

	Non-diminutive	Diminutive	Row total
No permanent habitation	1,909	519 (21.4%)	2,428
Permanent habitation	2,458	564 (18.7%)	3,022
Column total	4,367	1,083 (19.9%)	5,450

for which type of dialect is taken to be the prevailing source language for toponymy in that area based on present and historical realities. With regard to Arabistan (Khuzestan), I consulted Lorimer's notes about population groups, wherein he notes the prevalence of Bedouins in South Arabistan, but not in North Arabistan (Lorimer 1908: 124). He also notes an abundance of Bedouins in Oman Proper (Lorimer 1908: 1376). Even though Gulf Arabic (a Bedouin dialect) predominates in Bahrain, it is coded as a sedentary-type area because of the strong historical presence of the Baḥārna. Lorimer (1908: 238) writes that the historically agriculturalist Baḥārna are the "largest community" in Bahrain, and Baḥārna Arabic is considered the variety more pertinent for understanding the nation's toponyms relative to other areas of the Gulf (cf. Holes 2001: xxv; Holes 2002).

A chi-squared test was performed to test the relation between diminutivization and areas where Bedouin-type dialects are dominant (Table 8). The relation is statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 5450) = 65.184, p < .001.

A chi-squared test was performed to test the relation between diminutivization and permanent habitation (Table 9). Permanent habitation was coded based on whether Lorimer (1908) notes permanent dwellings in a place; his notes usually include detailed information about the types of dwellings in each locale, whether temporary, seasonal or permanent. The relation is statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 5450) = 6.052, p = .014.

Permanently inhabited locations have a somewhat lower prevalence of diminutive names. Microtoponyms associated with Bedouin practices and roles in Arabian society also have very high frequency of diminutives; this includes wells (31.7 per cent), camping grounds (29.6 per cent) and forts (29.6 per cent). This study provides strong evidence showing that places historically associated with Bedouins have a significantly higher prevalence of diminutive toponyms. The use of the diminutive in onomastics is found throughout the Arabian Peninsula and in many other Arabic-speaking regions, but the extended use of the diminutive in the pragmatic domain of onomastics may be a characteristically Bedouin practice.

was known in Turkish as the Najd Sanjāq, but it was not in Najd. Oman Proper corresponds roughly to the modern Dakhiliyah Governorate of Oman. Finally, Trucial Oman is the predecessor to the UAE, though Abu Dhabi is coded separately here.

Conclusion

A review of a considerable database of secondary data has suggested that the Arabic diminutive, when applied to names, has several possible meanings seldom mentioned in previously published literature, including attribution, partition and individuation. The evidence presented here also demonstrates that, in many cases, the diminutive form functions as an onymic, transonymic or disambiguator, and that these functions are attested most extensively in Bedouin-type varieties of Arabic. The relevant categories of meaning are delineated according to the semantic field at hand, indicating that names indeed have denotation as well as reference (van Langendonck and van de Velde 2016). The evolution of Arabic names, in which the diminutive may be either applied or removed, shows that both semantic and pragmatic considerations remain relevant even after name bestowal.

The use of the diminutive in marking, deriving and differentiating names should be incorporated in refining theoretical explanations of the diminutive. The link between evaluative morphology and onomastics, observed in many languages, merits more investigation on a broader linguistic basis.

Bibliography

Alexandre, H.P. 2015. "Proposta de harmonização gráfica da toponímia de Angola", PhD thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

Al-Rawi, Rosina-Fawzia B. 1990. *Studien zum Arabischen Dialekt von Abū Ḏaby: Nominalbildung und -lexik, Texte.* Heidelberg: Groos.

Badarneh, M.A. 2009. "The pragmatics of diminutives in colloquial Jordanian Arabic", *Journal of Pragmatics* 42/1, 153–67.

Borg, A. and G.M. Kressel. 2001. "Bedouin personal names in the Negev and Sinai", *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 40, 32–70.

Brockelmann, C. 1928. "Deminutiv und Augmentativ im Semitischen", *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und Verwandte Gebiete* 6, 109–34.

Caskel, W. 1966. *Ǧamharat an-nasab: das genealogische Werk des Hišʿam Ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī.* Leiden: Brill.

Coates, R.A. 2006. "Properhood", *Language* 82/2, 356–82.

Davis, S. and B.A. Zawaydeh. 2001. "Arabic hypocoristics and the status of the consonantal root", *Linguistic Inquiry* 32/3, 512–20.

Eagderi, S., R. Fricke, H.R. Esmaeili and P. Jalili. 2019. "Annotated checklist of the fishes of the Persian Gulf: diversity and conservation status", *Iranian Journal of Ichthyology* 6, 1–171.

Eshreteh, M.K.M. 2017. "A pragmatic analysis of diminutives in Palestinian society", *International Journal of Language Studies* 11/1, 45–62.

Fayez, E.A.A. 1990. "Siibawaih's linguistic analysis of the diminutive in classical Arabic and its subsequent developments", PhD thesis, Georgetown University.

Forskål, P. 1775. *Flora Ægyptiaco-Arabica sive descriptiones plantarum quas per Ægyptum Inferiorem et Arabiam felicem detexit, illustravit Petrus Forskål. Post mortem auctoris edidit Carsten Niebuhr*, ed. C. Niebuhr. Copenhagen: Möller.

Hoffiz, B. 1995. "Morphology of United Arab Emirates Arabic, Dubai dialect", PhD thesis, University of Arizona.

Holes, C. 2001. *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabia. Volume 1: Glossary.* Leiden: Brill.

Holes, C. 2002. "Non-Arabic Semitic elements in the Arabic dialects of eastern Arabia", in W. Arnold and H. Bobzin (eds), *Sprich doch mit deinen Knechten aramäisch, wir verstehen es: 60 Beiträge zur Semitistik Festschrift für Otto Jastrow zum 60. Geburtstag*, 269–80. Wiesbaden: Harassowitz Verlag.

Holes, C. 2005. *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabia. Volume 2: Ethnographic Texts.* Leiden: Brill.

Holes, C. 2007. "Kuwaiti Arabic", in K. Versteegh (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, 2, 608–20. Leiden: Brill.

Holes, C. 2016. *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabia. Volume 3: Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Style.* Leiden: Brill.

Imani, A. and G. Kassaei. 2016. "A morpho-semantic study of the diminutive suffix–æk in Persian", *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences* 2/9, 85–93.

Johnstone, T.M. 1967. *Eastern Arabian Dialect Studies.* London: Oxford University Press.

Johnstone, T.M. and J.C. Wilkinson. 1960. "Some geographical aspects of Qatar", *The Geographical Journal* 126/4, 442–50.

Jurafsky, D. 1996. "Universal tendencies in the semantics of the diminutive", *Language* 72/3, 533–78.

Kaye, A.S. and J. Rosenhouse. 1997. "Arabic dialects and Maltese, in R. Hetzron (ed.), *The Semitic Languages*, 263–311. London: Routledge.

Kharusi, N.S. and A. Salman. 2015. "In search of water: hydrological terms in Oman's toponyms", *Names* 63/1, 16–29.

Lake, M. 1941. *South-west Arabia (The Yemen and the Aden Protectorate)*, 3rd ed. Aden: Colonial Office.

Littmann, E. 1920. "Beduinen- und Drusen-Namen aus dem Haurân-Gebiet", in *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse*, 1–20. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung.

Lorimer, J.G. 1908. *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Omān, and Central Arabia.* Superintendent Government Printing.

Mandaville, J.P. 2011. *Bedouin Ethnobotany: Plant Concepts and Uses in a Desert Pastoral World.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

al-Maqḥafī, I.A. 2002. Muʿǧam al-buldān wa al-qabāʾil al-yamaniyya, 2 vols. Dār al-Kalima: ṣanʿāʾ.

Masliyah, S. 1997. "The diminutive in spoken Iraqi Arabic", *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 33, 68–88.

Moldovanu, D. 1972. "Principii ale lexicografiei toponimice", *Anuar de Lingvistică şi Istorie Literară* 23, 73–99.

Morano, R. 2019. "The Arabic dialect spoken in the al-ʿAwābī district, northern Oman", PhD thesis, University of Leeds.

Morris, M. 2002. "Plant names in Dhofar and the Soqotra Archipelago", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 32, 47–61.

Nash, D. 2014. "The diminutive suffix -dool in placenames of central north NSW", in I.D. Clark, L. Hercus and L. Kostanski (eds), *Indigenous and Minority Placenames: Australian and International Perspectives*, 39–55. Canberra: ANU Press.

Palacios, M.A. 1942. *Contribución a la toponimia árabe de España.* Madrid: Imprenta de Estanslao Maestre.

Pérez Capelo, C. 2017. "O sufixo diminutivo -ŏla na toponimia galega", *Revista Guavira Letras* 13/25, 122–36.

Procházka, Stephan. 2020. "Arabic in Iraq, Syria, and southern Turkey", in C. Lucas and S. Manfredi (eds), *Arabic and Contact-induced Change*, 83–114. Berlin: Language Science Press.

Provençal, P. 2010. *The Arabic Plant Names of Peter Forsskål's Flora Aegyptiaco-Arabica.* Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy.

Qafisheh, H.A. 1996. *A Glossary of Gulf Arabic: Gulf Arabic-English, English-Gulf Arabic.* Beirut: Librarie du Liban.

Qafisheh, H.A. 1997. *NTC's Gulf Arabic–English Dictionary.* Chicago: NTC/Contemporary.

Ritt-Benmimoun, V. 2018. "Diminutives in South Tunisian Bedouin Arabic", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 108, 181–228.

Shockley, M. 2020. "The vowels of Urban Qatari Arabic", MA thesis, University of North Dakota.

Sībawayh. 1988. *Kitāb Sībawayh*, (ed.) Bišr ʿAmr ʿUthmān. Al-Qāhira: Maktabat al-Khanjī.

Socin, A. 1898. "Die arabischen Eigennamen in Algier", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 52/3, 471–500.

Steriopolo, O. 2013. "Diminutive affixes in the number domain: a syntactic variation", *Questions and Answers in Linguistics* 1/2, 33–56.

Taine-Cheikh, C. 2018. "Expressiveness and evaluation in Arabic: the singular development of the diminutive in Ḥassāniyya Arabic", *Studies in Language* 42/1, 81–113.

Trapero, M. 2000. "La morfología derivativa como procedimiento de creación léxica: su especial importancia en la toponimia de Canarias", in C. Corrales and D. Corbella (eds), *Estudios de dialectología dedicados a Manuel Alvar*, 207–36. La Laguna: Instituto de Estudios Canarios.

van Langendonck, W. 2020. "A semantic-pragmatic theory of proper names", *Acta Linguistica Lithuanica* 69, 99–129.

van Langendonck, W. and Mark van de Velde. 2016. "Names and grammar", in C. Hough and D. Izdebska (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, 17–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Watson, J.C.E. 2011. "Arabic dialects (general article)", in Stefan Weninger et al. (eds), *The Semitic Languages: An International Handbook*, 851–96. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

Zewi, T. 2006. "Diminutive", in M. Eid and K. Versteegh (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, 1, 637–40. Leiden: Brill.