

A New Perspective on Mehri Diminutives

Utilizing data from fieldwork, this project proposes a new analysis of Mehri diminutives that relies primarily on phoneme insertion and phonological processing rather than the CV templates of more traditional Semitic research. Diminutives in Mehri (Modern South Arabian) were first thoroughly documented by Johnstone (1973). Utilizing the Semitic notation of root-and-pattern morphology, Johnstone (1973) develops three categories for diminutive formation: *CewēCēC*, *CeCēCēn*, *CeCēCēC*. In her grammar, Watson (2012) describes a much more robust system (11 patterns overall). These forms are more inclusive of feminine and plural morphology that that had been simplified in the Johnstone typology.

My analysis of nominal diminutives builds upon the generalizations from previous research and develops a more unified account. Minimally, a diminutive singular noun is formed with the infixation of *-ā-* at the penultimate syllable. For example:

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|-----|----|-------------------------|----|--|
| (1) | a. | hūlaʃ
shadow.M | b. | hw < ā > laʃ
shadow.M < DIM > |
| (2) | a. | θḥm-ōt
cinder/ash-F | b. | θḥ < ā > m-ōt
cinder/ash < DIM > -F |
| (3) | a. | mḷḡ-ōt
bite/morsel-F | b. | mḷḡ < ān > -ōt
bite/morsel < DIM > -F |

These diminutive forms can be formed from either a feminine or masculine noun. Note that in (3), which ends in the feminine suffix *-Vt*, an epenthetic *-n-* is inserted following the *-ā-* to avoid hiatus.¹

In some nouns, the diminutive infix appears in conjunction with a suffixed *-ān*:

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|-----------------|----|--|
| (4) | a. | ḥmūh
water.M | b. | ḥm < ā > h-ān ²
water.M < DIM > -DIM |
|-----|----|-----------------|----|--|

The diminutives seen in (4), which Johnstone (1973) characterized as “Type 2”, all end in *-ā < last radical > ān*. I argue against the analysis that these diminutives are of a different type. Instead, the suffix *-ān* is a result of a phonological process to ensure a well-formed word. Infixes *-ā-* is not licensed in either the first syllable or the final syllable (inclusive of suffixes). In other words, *-ā-* is only licensed within a minimally trisyllabic word. When these restrictions preclude the insertion of *-ā-* in any position, *-ān* is suffixed to the word to “save” the derivation.

The diminutive plural noun consists of the infixes *-ā-* and the suffix *-ūtan*. Unlike the diminutive singular, where the *-ā-* is found on the penultimate syllable, the infixes *-ā-* for the plural diminutive is found on the antepenultimate syllable:

¹ Consistent with Mehri phonology. Mehri employs several strategies to avoid hiatus (Watson 2012).

