

Small and many: German diminutive verbs

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In a nutshell. Recent work suggests that the nominal and verbal domains exhibit unexpected parallels, with morphological material encoding strikingly similar structuring operations across entities and events (cf. Wągiel 2025). This paper contributes to our understanding of these cross-categorical symmetries by examining a domain that has not been systematically unified to date: the German *-er* [ɐ] and *-el* [l] suffixes (including the latter's Austro-Bavarian allomorph *-erl* [ɐl], which combines both elements). I argue that their behavior in both the nominal and verbal domains follows from the semantic contributions of their two formative components. Specifically, I show that the [l] component consistently contributes diminutive or attenuative meaning, while the component [ɐ] encodes multiplicativity, yielding iterativity when applied to events and countability when applied to entities; and when both components co-occur, as in [ɐl], the suffix introduces both attenuation and unit-formation simultaneously. Framed within a nanosyntactic approach (Starke 2009; Caha et al. 2024), this analysis captures both the internal feature complexity of these suffixes as well as the way their components give rise to parallel effects across nouns and verbs.

Data. Standard German *-el(n)* verbs show several robust properties: the suffix attaches to bases of different categories and derives atelic, unergative verbs with diminutive/attenuative meaning (Grestenberger & Kallulli 2019). The contrast with unsuffixed bases is clear in (1a-b): *frosten* 'freeze' denotes a punctual event, while *frösteln* 'shiver' is weaker and temporally extended; *schwächen* 'weaken' is a result-state verb, whereas *schwächeln* 'be weak' denotes a mild ongoing state. The *-l-* element also triggers umlaut where possible. Austro-Bavarian *-erl(n)* shows the same semantic pattern – atelic, weaker, often iterative readings – but unlike *-el(n)*, *-erl(n)* does not trigger umlaut, (1c).

- (1) a. *fröst-el-n* 'to shiver' – *frost-en* 'freeze'
- b. *schwäch-el-n* 'to be somewhat weak' – *schwäch-en* 'weaken'
- c. *tratsch-erl-n* 'to chit-chat' – *tratsch-en* 'chat'

A related pattern involves the *-er-* suffix, (2), which contributes iterativity without a diminutive component (Fleischer & Barz 2012).

- (2) a. *blink-er-n* 'flicker' – *blink-en* 'blink, flash'
- b. *schleck-er-n* 'lick repeatedly' – *schleck-en* 'lick'

The same suffixes also appear in the nominal domain, (3). Here, *-el* and *-erl* often yield diminutives that individuate or partition a referent, consistent with cross-linguistic observations that diminutive morphology can function as a nominal classifier (Wiltschko 2005; Wiltschko & Steriopolo 2007; De Belder 2011; Ott 2011; De Belder et al. 2014; Manova et al. 2023). For instance, *Bündel* denotes a discrete bundle, and *Schnaps-erl* identifies one (shot)glass of schnaps.

- (3) a. *Bund* 'bunch' → *Bünd-el* 'bundle'

b. *Schnaps* 'schnaps' → *Schnaps-erl* 'a (shot)glass of schnaps'

The *-er-* suffix behaves slightly differently. As (2) illustrates, it contributes iterativity in verbs. In the nominal domain, it often appears as a plural marker or in comparatives, expressing 'more of X'. Crucially, these uses reflect the same underlying multiplicative function: the suffix replicates or scales up the relevant unit, that is, events in verbs, entities in nouns.

- (4) a. *Buch* 'book' → *Büch-er* 'books'
 b. *schön* 'beautiful' → *schön-er* 'more beautiful'

The suffixes *-el*, *-erl*, and *-er* all modify the internal granularity of the base. In nouns, *-el/-erl* create finer segmentation and smaller individuated units, while *-er* adds plurality or a higher degree; in verbs, *-el/-erl* break events into small substages and *-er* multiplies event tokens. The suffix *-erl* contains both components, with the dominant meaning determined by the base, i.e., diminutive/individuating in nouns and iterative/pluractional in verbs.

Proposal. I adopt Waęiel's (2025) view that entities and events are built from structured bases that can be individuated. In his system, these bases consist of an XP with lexical content plus a categorizing head. I depart from this in two respects. First, I assume that the base itself does not inherently encode a part-whole structure or event segmentation. Second, I eliminate the separate categorizing head: since the base is already internally decomposed into grammatical features, category distinctions arise from the specific feature sequences within the base (e.g., NP > REF > GENDER > NUMBER > CASE for nouns; DIM > DIR > POINT for adjectives; cf. Caha et al. 2024). Interpretive properties such as individuation, diminutivization, or multiplicativity are introduced only by functional heads above the base. In particular, UNIT imposes discrete segmentation, DMV contributes attenuation or diminutive meaning, and MULT yields iterative or 'more-of-X' readings. The base thus serves as a neutral scaffold whose eventual interpretation depends on which higher functional heads attach to it.

Within a nanosyntactic framework, morphemes may lexicalize multiple adjacent features. This explains why the same suffix can express more than one semantic contribution: *-el* spells out UNIT and DMV alongside Ramchandian verbal features (producing individuation or attenuation), *-er* spells out MULT (iterativity or pluralization), and *-erl* combines both components. Consequently, *-el* and *-erl* induce individuation in nouns and attenuative/iterative meanings in verbs, while the *-er* element produces iterativity in verbs but plurality or scalar 'more-of-X' readings in nouns and adjectives. These patterns are visualized in the lexicalization tables in (5) and (6).

	NP	REF	GEN	NUM	CASE	MULT	UNIT	DMV	PROC	INIT	...	GLOSS
(5)	Stück		stück									'piece'
	Stück-[e]-[l]		stück			[e]			[l]			'small piece (N)'
	stück-[l]-[n]		stück					[l]				'to break into pieces (V)'
	DIM	DIR	POINT	MULT	UNIT	DMV	PROC	INIT	...	GLOSS		
(6)	schwach		schwach									'weak' (A)
	schwäch-[n]				schwäch							'to weaken' (V)
	schwäch-[l]-[n]		schwäch					[l]				'to break into pieces (V)'

Conclusions. This paper has shown that the German suffixes *-el*, *-erl*, and *-er* form a coherent system whose cross-categorial behavior follows from the semantic contributions of their two components: [l] (diminutive/attenuative) and [ɐ] (multiplicative).

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