

## Evaluative morphology in Luxembourgish

*Peter Gilles, University of Luxembourg*

### **1. Introduction**

Luxembourgish (local language name: Lëtzebuergesch ['lɛtsəbuəjəʃ]; ISO 639-3 code ltz) is a small West-Germanic language mainly spoken in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (500.000 inhabitants). Within a situation of societal multilingualism, Luxembourgish is sharing domains with German and French (official trilingualism; see Newton 1996, Horner & Weber 2008). While the former serves as the important language of everyday-life and for informal literacy (especially in digital media), the latter are used as written languages in more formal domains (administration, workplaces etc.). Luxembourgish is acquired as a first language by approximately 60 % of the population and spoken as an additional language by a certain amount of the non-Luxembourg residential population (Fehlen, Heinz, Peltier, & Thill 2013). Historically, Luxembourgish originates from a Central Franconian dialect (i.e. Moselle Franconian) and is today considered from a sociolinguistic point of view as an 'Ausbau language'. Due to extensive language contact with French and German (and, to a lesser extent, with English), lexical borrowing accompanied with phonological and morphological integration is rather high.

The closest genealogical related language to Luxembourgish is German (and also Dutch). Like in German, its morphology distinguishes three genders, but has less inflectional features preserved (loss of certain case distinctions, partial loss of the preterit and the present participle etc.). Umlaut and Ablaut, though hardly productive anymore, can indicate several morphological features (e.g. plural in nouns, tenses etc.) creating a complex system with numerous sub-classes. Various word formation options involving prefixes, suffixes and compounding allow for the creation of new lexical items. All examples in this chapter stem from actual usage or dictionaries (LWB, LOD) and are written in the official orthography.

### **2. Evaluative morphology in Luxembourgish**

Luxembourgish has no fully-fledged system of evaluative morphology, but certain aspects of word formation can be attributed to evaluative morphology. The most important feature among them is diminution.

#### **2.1 Diminution**

Within the historical West-Germanic continuum, several suffixes emerged indicating diminution and they led to a complex system in the concerned languages (see, e.g. Tiefenbach 1987; Fleischer 2012: 231–235 for German varieties). As a Central Franconian variety, Luxembourgish historically lay in a contact zone between Low German and High German diminutive suffixes, that is a <-k> suffix and an <-l> suffix, respectively. Reflexes of both suffixes can be found in the present-day diminutive system (see Bertrang 1921; Bruch 1949; Bruch 1953).

### 2.1.1 Diminutive with <chen> and its allomorphs

The most productive suffix in the present-day language is <chen> (including its allomorphs) and it is thus identical to the genetically closest language, i.e. Standard German. The suffix originates from the extension of the Old High German suffix <īn> with a prepended <ch> (< Germanic <k>). In contrast to Dutch or German, where these suffixes can create diminutives from nouns, adjectives and verbs, the is restricted suffix in Luxembourgish to nouns only.<sup>1</sup> In the following, I will discuss the allomorphy, the gender assignment and semantic aspects of this diminutive.

#### Allomorphy

The form of the diminutive morpheme shows rich allomorphy, which is dependent on the final consonant of the base noun, and which leads to the three allomorphs /çən/, /jən/ (both written as <chen>) and /əlçən/ (written as <elchen>). In the most common case, that is when the base noun does not end with a (historical) velar, palato-velar, alveolo-palatal consonant or the alveolar fricatives [z, s] (including the affricate [tʃ]), <chen> (pronounced [çən]) is attached to the base noun in the singular and <ercher> in the plural (1).

(1)	<i>Base noun</i>		<i>Diminutive</i>		
	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	
a.	Päert	Päert	Päerdchen	Päerdercher	'horse'
	Been	Been	Beenchen	Beenercher	'leg'
	Bam	Beem	Beemchen	Beemercher	'tree'
b.	Kuerf	Kierf	Kierfchen	Kierwercher	'basket'
	Bouf	Bouwen	Béifchen	Béiwercher	'boy'
	Kand	Kanner	Këndchen	Kënnercher	'child'
	Pult	Pulten	Piltchen	Piltercher	'lectern'
c.	Dëppen	Dëppen	Dëppchen	Dëppercher	'pot'
	Decken	Decken	Deckchen	Deckercher	'blanket'
	Millen	Millen	Millchen	Millercher	'mill'
	Uewen	Iewen	Iefchen	Iewercher	'oven'

In addition to the suffixation of <chen>, Umlaut, that is the fronting of a back vowel to the corresponding front vowel, takes place in the diminutive whenever possible. Considering the rather high number of monophthongs and especially diphthongs, Luxembourgish is rich of Umlaut possibilities (see Nübling 2006; Gilles and Trouvain 2013). The words in (1b) exemplify only a few possibilities of these vowel mutations. Often the plural of the base noun shows already Umlaut as in *Bam* [ba:m] to *Beem* [be:m] 'tree(s)', which could lead to the assumption that the plural of the base noun serves as the input to diminution. That this is not entirely the case is reflected by the further examples (1): Diminutives are even then affected by Umlaut when the plural of the base noun is not (compare *Pulten*-PL with *Piltchen*-DIM-SG). Umlaut, then, has to be regarded, next to suffixation, as a core feature of diminution in Luxembourgish.<sup>2</sup>

Section (1c) further demonstrates how diminutives are formed when the base noun ends with the (unstressed) suffix <en>. Under this circumstance the final syllable is, probably for prosodic reasons, removed before the diminutive suffix is attached. Thus, the diminution of *Dëpp-en* ‘pot’ does not lead to *\*Depp-en-chen* but rather to *Dëpp-chen* ‘pot-DIM-SG’.

The so far presented morphological aspects are identical to Standard German (compare e.g. German *Bäum-chen* ‘tree-DIM-SG’, *Töpf-chen* ‘pot-DIM-SG’ with the corresponding Luxembourgish forms *Beem-chen*, *Dëpp-chen*). Clear differences arise, however, regarding the plural of the diminutives. While in Standard German diminutives are not marked for plural and <chen> is used throughout, Luxembourgish has its own plural suffix with the remarkable aspect of being a combination of both infixation and suffixation. As can be seen in (1), the plural of these diminutive is formed with <ercher> as in e.g. *Been-ercher* ‘leg-DIM-PL’. This suffix makes use of the <er> suffix present in the language as a plural marker, e.g. in *Bréiw-er* ‘letter-DIM-PL’ and modifies the singular suffix <chen> accordingly. The modification from the singular <chen> to <cher> in the plural seems straightforward, as an inflectional marker is attached after a derivational marker. This, in turn, complies fully with the typological universal that inflectional applies after derivational morphology (Greenberg 1963). But the Luxembourgish plural is marked twice and a second <er> is infixed between base noun and diminutive suffix leading to the following structure: ‘base noun’ + <er>-PL + <ch>-DIM + <er>-PL. It is obvious that this double marking of the plural in forms like *Béiw-er-ch-er* ‘boy-DIM-PL’ violates the above universal, because inflection of the first <er> takes place before the derivational affix is attached. The reason for this unusual double marking is discussed by Chapman (1996) by assuming that the input to the plural formation of the diminutive was in fact the plural of the base noun. This means that the plural formation of the diminutive started out with base noun plurals on <er> (*Mann* ‘man-SG’ / *Männ-er* ‘man-PL’) and this development then spread out via analogy on further word classes.

However, the plural infix <er> is lost when the base noun has a trochaic prosodic structure with a final unstressed syllable like <ef>, <el> or <em>. As shown in (2), trochaic base nouns like *Kallef* ‘calf’ attach only <cher> as their diminutive plural form: *Källef-cher* ‘calf-DIM-PL’. Here, a general prosodic constraint may be active, aiming at a preferred dactylic prosody for diminutives both in singular and plural.

(2) <i>Base noun</i>		<i>Diminutive</i>		
<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	
Kallef	Kaalwer	Källefchen	Källefcher	‘calf’
Wollef	Wëllef	Wëllefchen	Wëllefcher	‘wolf’
Apel	Äppel	Äppelchen	Äppelcher	‘apple’
Wuerzel	Wuerzelen	Wierzelchen	Wierzelcher	‘root’
Artikel	Artikelen	Artikelchen	Artikelcher	‘article’
Fuedem	Fiedem	Fiedemchen	Fiedemcher	‘fiber’

However, variants to these plurals exist which exceed the three-syllable pattern of the dactyl. (3) illustrates that next to the regular plural like in *Frä-ercher*

[frɛ:əçɐʳ] ‘wife-DIM-PL’ a more complex variant *Frä-cher-cher* [frɛ:çəçɐʳ] can be constructed through reduplication of the <cher> suffix. This pattern probably is arisen through hypercorrection. It is not productive anymore and restricted to a few words only.

(3)	<i>Base noun</i>		<i>Diminutive (+ Variant)</i>		
	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	
	Fra	Fraen	Frächen	Fräercher / Frächercher	‘woman’
	Mann	Männer	Männchen	Männercher / Männchercher	‘man’
	Spill	Spiller	Spillchen	Spillercher / Spillchercher	‘game’
	So	Soen	Seechen	Seeërcher / Seechercher	‘legend’

When the base noun ends in an alveolar fricative, regardless whether voiced or voiceless, [çən] changes its pronunciation to the allomorph [jən] (glide-formation); see examples in (4). The plural of these diminutives receive the regular <ercher> suffix and retains thus the fricative pronunciation. Despite its phonetic consistency, this allomorphy is not reflected in the official spelling and <chen> is used throughout.

(4)	<i>Base noun</i>		<i>Diminutive</i>			
	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	<i>Singular</i>		<i>Plural</i>	
	Haus	Haiser	Haischen	[ˈhaisjən]	Haisercher	[ˈhaisəçɐʳ] ‘house’
	Glas	Glieser	Glieschen	[ˈgliəsjən]	Gliesercher	[ˈgliəsəçɐʳ] ‘glass’
	Noss	Nëss	Nësschen	[ˈnəsjən]	Nëssercher	[ˈnəsəçɐʳ] ‘nut’

The third and last allomorph turns up, when the base noun ends either with historical velar consonants [k, ŋ, χ, ɕ] (5a) or with [ʃ, ʦ] (5b). These consonants trigger the appearance of the infix <el> between base noun and the suffix <chen>: <elchen>.

(5)	<i>Base noun</i>		<i>Diminutive</i>		
	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>	
a.	Sak	Säck	Säckelchen	Säckelcher	‘bag’
	Zong	Zongen	Zéngelchen	Zéngelcher	‘tongue’
	Duch	Dicher	Dichelchen	Dichelcher	‘cloth’
	Bauch	Bäich	Bäichelchen	Bäichelcher	‘stomach’
b.	Fësch	Fësch	Fëschelchen	Fëschelcher	‘fish’
	Putsch	Pitsch	Pitschelchen	Pitschelcher	‘tuft’
	Mutz	Mutzen	Mitzelchen	Mitzelcher	‘cap’
	Fatz	Fatzen	Fätzelchen	Fätzelcher	‘rag’

The infix <el> originates from a High German diminutive suffix, which used to spread also into Central German during the Early Modern German period, whereas <chen> belongs to the Low German area (Tiefenbach 1987). From a language historical point, a word like *Zéng-el-chen* ‘tongue-DIM-SG’ is thus diminutivised twice.<sup>3</sup> Note that Standard German under these circumstances also selects an allomorph different from <chen>. Here, <lein> is employed instead (*Stück-lein* ‘piece-DIM-SG/PL’, *Fisch-lein* ‘Fisch-DIM-SG/PL’). This general avoidance of <chen> is probably due to phonological reasons.

Comparable to the cases of final schwa syllables discussed above, these final syllables remain present in the plural, giving rise to a further plural allomorph <elcher> like in *Säck-el-cher* 'bag-DIM-PL'.

### Gender assignment

The most striking and yet to be explained feature concerns gender: Luxembourgish diminutives keep the gender of the base noun consistently.<sup>4</sup> This stands in great contrast Standard German or Dutch where all diminutives receive neuter gender by default (6).

<i>Luxembourgish</i>			<i>Standard German</i>		
	<i>Base noun</i>	<i>Diminutive</i>		<i>Base noun</i>	<i>Diminutive</i>
<i>m</i>	Mann	<i>m</i> de/e Männchen	Mann	<i>n</i> das/ein Männchen	'the/a man'
<i>m</i>	Wan	<i>m</i> de/e Weenchen	Wagen	<i>n</i> das/ein Wägelchen	'the/a car'
<i>f</i>	Fra	<i>f</i> d'/eng Frächen	Frau	<i>n</i> das/ein Frauchen	'the/a woman'
<i>f</i>	Boun	<i>f</i> d'/eng Béinchen	Bohne	<i>n</i> das/ein Böhnchen	'the/a bean'
<i>n</i>	Kand	<i>n</i> de/e Këndchen	Kind	<i>n</i> das/ein Kindchen	'the/a child'

This gender preservation questions, of course, the category determining ability of the diminutive suffix in Luxembourgish. While other word formation suffixes affect gender (and word-class), the only aspect determined by the diminutive morpheme is the selection of the plural suffix. This leads to the conclusion that the Luxembourgish diminutive morpheme cannot act as the head of the construction; see Booij (2007:14) for a similar discussion of the Italian diminutive suffix <ino>.

### Semantic aspects

On the most general level, diminutives can be used to indicate referential smallness, that is *Äermchen* 'arm-DIM-SG' actually means 'small arm' and it is this semantic domain where diminution is rather productive. Furthermore, diminutives often can convey endearment and/or irony, as in *Lännchen* 'country-DIM-SG' in the sense of 'our cosy country (i.e. Luxembourg)' or *Këndchen* 'child-DIM-SG' in the sense of 'sweetheart'. Also, several diminutives underwent lexicalisation by loosening the semantic relationship with their base nouns (7). The meaning of the diminutive is then either focusing on another semantic concept (7a) or the base noun is not in use anymore and the diminutive takes over its meaning (7b).

<i>Base noun</i>		<i>Diminutive</i>	
a.	aacht	'8'	Aachtchen 'pastry (in the form of an 8)'
	Klees	<i>proper name</i>	Kleeschen 'Santa Claus'
	Hiem	'shirt'	Hiemchen 'undershirt/chemise'
	Schaf	'closet'	Schäffchen 'cooker'
	Knupp	'bump'	Knippchen 'praline'
b.	*Lappen		Läppchen 'facecloth'
	*Chrëschtbam		Chrëschtbeemchen 'christmas tree'
	*Schnéimann		Schnéimännchen 'snow man'

Interestingly, the relationship to ‘size’ is lost completely in the examples in (8), where reference is made to rather big items through adjectives (*grouss/gréisst* ‘big(gest)’) and quantification (*4 Meter* ‘4 metres’). Consequently, diminutive and base noun become more or less synonym.

- (8) *De gréisste Schnéimännchen ass 4 Meter héich.*  
 ‘the biggest snow man-DIM is 4 metres heigh’

*aus enger grousser eise Biddchen*  
 ‘out of a big iron tub-DIM’

### 2.1.2 Diminutive with <i>

Restricted regarding the selection of the base noun, but nevertheless rather productive is the diminutive suffix <i>. These diminutives form hypocoristics (endearment forms). Base nouns often are kinship terms (9a), names of intimacy (9b) or hyponymic first names (9c).

	Base noun		Diminutive		
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	
a.	f Boma	Bomaen	Bomi	Bomien	‘grand-mother’
	m Bopa	Bopaen	Bopi	Bopien	‘grand-father’
	n Kand	Kanner	Kënni	Kënnien	‘child’
	m Fils	Filsen	Fissi	Fissien	‘son’
	m Jong	Jongen	Jéngi	Jéngien	‘son’
b.	n Häerz	Häerzer	Häerzi	Häerzien	‘sweetheart’
	f Popp	Poppen	Pëppi	Pëppien	‘doll’
c.	m Dominique	-	Dëmmi	-	
	m Änder	-	Ändri	-	
	f Stéfanie	-	Fanni	-	
	m Caspar	-	Kaschi	-	

Similar to <chen>, Umlaut is applied consistently and the choice of the plural suffix <en> is determined through the diminutive and not by the word class of the base noun (compare *Kann-er* ‘child-PL’ vs. *Kënn-i-en* ‘child-DIM-PL’). Note that the gender of the base noun remains the same in the diminutives.

### 2.2 Augmentation

On the morphological level, augmentatives do not exist and analytical phrases are preferred instead. Sometimes, however, nouns or adjectives can be modified with prefixes like *mega-*, *super-*, *risen-*. While used rather frequently, these words are stylistically marked, e.g. *megagrouss* ‘big-AUG’, *superschéin* ‘beautiful-AUG’, *Risebuttek* ‘trouble-AUG’.

### 2.3 Adjective approximation with <elzeg>

The next suffix also does not change the word class of the base word, making it a potential candidate for evaluative morphology. With the help of the suffix

<elzeg> the semantics of certain adjectives can be rendered as approximate, in the sense of ‘somewhat, rather, quite’. Thus, *gréng-elzeg* means ‘not quite green, greenish’. As (10a) shows, this approximation affects primarily the colour adjectives.

	<i>Base adjective</i>		<i>Derived adjective</i>	
a.	blo	‘blue’	bloelzeg	‘bluish’
	gro	‘grey’	groelzeg	‘greyish’
	gréng	‘green’	gréngelzeg	‘greenish’
	brong	‘brown’	brongelzeg	‘brownish’
	roud	‘red’	roudelzeg	‘reddish’
	wäiss	‘white’	wäisselzeg	‘whitish’
	giel	‘yellow’	gielzeg	‘yellowish’
b.	laang	‘long’	längelzeg	‘longish’
	ronn	‘round’	ronnelzeg	‘roundish’

This type of word formation rarely spreads over to other adjectives. Apart from the adjectives denoting spatial relations in (10b) and a few others, it seems that this adjective approximation is restricted to colour adjectives primarily. It is thus not productive anymore. Note that Standard German employs in this case the suffix <lich> (*grün-lich* ‘greenish’), which, however, is not confined to the described semantics only, but is rather polysemous and is able to create various kinds of adjectives. In contrast, by having this evaluative suffix <elzeg>, the word formation of Luxembourgish is more nuanced.

### **3 Conclusion**

It was the aim of this chapter to deliver a descriptive account on the evaluative morphology of Luxembourgish, which focused largely on diminution. In a next analytical step, it seems necessary, however, to amend the description with explanative functional analyses in order to detect productive and less productive semantic patterns. This could only be done by adopting a corpus linguistic approach.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Besides the regular lexicon, the <chen> suffix played an important role in the formation of family names in Luxembourg and the larger Rhineland area (e.g. *Bemtgen* ['be:mtçən] literally 'small tree', *Wildgen* ['viltçən] literally 'small Will(iam)'), originally meaning 'small one' or 'son of'. This word formation pattern was later stabilised as a family name and the meaning of the original diminutive was being lost subsequently.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, syllable final devoicing of underlying voiced obstruents is taking place whenever possible: compare the plural form *Kierwercher* ['kiəvəçɐ<sup>R</sup>] 'basket-DIM-PL' containing the underlying voiced obstruent [v] with the singular form *Kierfchen* ['kiəfçən] 'basket-DIM-SG' exhibiting the devoiced obstruent [f]. Note that final devoicing is reflected in the official orthography of Luxembourgish.

<sup>3</sup> Several relics of the former diminution with the <el> suffix exist today as lexicalisations: *Fänd-el* 'flag', *Fierk-el* 'farrow' and others have to be regarded as fossilised diminutions.

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of *Meedchen* 'girl-DIM-SG', which is – probably due to language contact with German (*Mädchen*) – neuter instead of feminine.