

A MORPHOMIC ANALYSIS OF MEHRI DIMINUTIVES

Morgan Rood

Carleton College | mrood@carleton.edu

0. INTRODUCTION

GOALS

1. Present novel data for diminutive nouns and adjectives in Mehri (Semitic, Modern South Arabian)
2. Sketch out two potential analyses to account for a puzzling syncretism known as a morphome (Aronoff 1994)
3. Propose that the morphomic analysis utilizing post-syntactic feature insertion within hierarchical structure is preferable to an analysis utilizing phonological rules operating over linear strings

ROADMAP

- §1 Mehri diminutive nouns
- §2 Mehri diminutive adjectives: a puzzle
- §3 Introducing morphomes
- §4 Morphomes within DM: two proposals
- §5 Returning to Mehri: the analysis
- §6 Conclusion and future research

1. DIMINUTIVE NOUNS

The Data

- Previous accounts of diminutive nouns describe their form in terms of CV templates (Rubin 2010; Johnstone 1973; Watson 2012); between 3-6 templates proposed
- Novel data shows that a single morphological operation, insertion of infix $-\bar{a}-$ coupled with predictable morphophonological processing can account for all forms

(1) a. ḵabšiš
 insect/cockroach.M.DIM

 b. ḵab<ā>šiš
 insect/cockroach.M<DIM>
 small insect/cockroach

(2) a. masxān
 fireplace.M

 b. ms<ā>xān
 fireplace.M<DIM>
 small fireplace

- In (1)-(2), the diminutive infix $-\bar{a}$ appears in the penultimate syllable in masculine nouns
- The same is true for feminine nouns that take the $-Vt$ suffix:

(3) a. θḥm-ōt
 cinder/ash-F

 b. θḥ<ā>m-ōt
 cinder/ash<DIM>-F
 small (piece of) ash

- (4) a. tamr-ūt
date-F
- b. tam<ā>r-ūt
date<DIM>-F
small date

- If the insertion of *-ā-* would result in a V.V sequence, an epenthetic *-n-* is inserted to avoid hiatus:

- (5) a. ðb-ūt
fly-F
- b. ðb<ān>-ūt
fly<DIM>-F
small fly

- (6) a. mġġ-ōt
bite/morsel-F
- b. mġġ<ān>-ōt
bite/morsel<DIM>-F
small bite

- Finally, *-ā-* is only licensed in the penultimate syllable of a minimally-trisyllabic word. If necessary, the suffix *-ān* is also added to ensure prosodic well-formedness¹:

- (7) a. ħmūh
water.M
- b. ħm<ā>h-ān
water.M<DIM>-DIM
small (bounded amount of) water

- (8) a. jūfn
eyelid.M
- b. jf<ā>n-ān
eyelid.M<DIM>-DIM
small eyelid (e.g., of a child)

- Having established the forms of the (singular) diminutive noun, I now turn to a syntactic analysis.

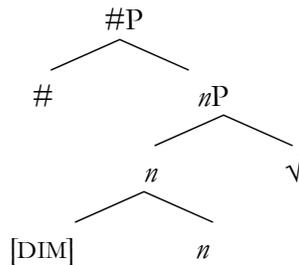
The Analysis

- The following list details the grammatical characteristics of Mehri nominals:
 - The diminutive morpheme is only interpretable on nouns, and the meaning tends to be compositional
 - There is only one morphological strategy (infixation of *-ā-*) to create diminutives
 - The diminutive morpheme does not change the gender or number features on the noun
 - The diminutive morpheme can co-occur with gender and number morphemes
 - The diminutive morpheme triggers the sound plural suffix²
- Based on the above characteristics and diagnostics for diminutives from Wiltschko and Steriopolo (2007) and Steriopolo (2013), I propose that the feature [DIM] is adjoined to *n*

¹ Such a “stem extender” has been proposed in other languages. See Acquaviva (2009) for a discussion of stem extension in Italian motivated by stress-related prosodic well-formedness conditions.

² In contrast with the Semitic “broken” plural suffix

(9) Mehri diminutive is an adjunct to *n*



- Given these background assumptions, let us turn to the central puzzle

2. DIMINUTIVE ADJECTIVES: A PUZZLE

- In terms of form, diminutive adjectives are identical to diminutive nouns
- ā-* is infix in the penultimate syllable (as in (10)), and if necessary, *-n-* is epenthesized to avoid hiatus ((11)) or the stem extender *-ān* is utilized to ensure prosodic well-formedness ((12)-(13)):

(10) a. ḥayḍinat
new.F

b. ḥayd<ā>n-ōt
new<DIM>-F

(11) a. ḥūlīt
crazy.F

b. ḥul<ān>-ūt³
crazy<DIM>-F

(12) a. ḥīwal
crazy.M

b. ḥw<ā>l-ān
crazy.M<DIM>-DIM

(13) a. ṭhāk
smooth.M

b. ṭh<ā>ḵ-ān
smooth.M<DIM>-DIM

- In contrast with diminutive nominals, however, the “diminutive” adjectives do not have a diminutive meaning.
- Furthermore, they are not a type of diminutive agreement.
- According to my consultants, (14) & (15) have the same meaning:

(14) bīt<ān>-ūt alb<ā>n-ān
house<DIM>-F white.<DIM>-DIM
small white house

³ Note here that the feminine suffix becomes *-ūt*, despite the generalization I have proposed that the diminutive infix changes the vowel in the feminine suffix from a front vowel to *ō*. The Mehri vowel space (and its transcription) has not been fully standardized, and it is possible that *ō* and *ū* are allophones of the same phoneme (and similarly, *ī* and *ê*) (Watson 2012). I assume no unusual processing in (11)b.

(15) bīt<ān>-ūt labn-īt
 house<DIM>-F white-F
 small white house

- Thus a diminutive adjective may optionally modify a diminutive noun
- This may indicate diminutive agreement, however, a diminutive adjective can also be used with a non-diminutive noun:

(16) bayt alb<ā>n-ān
 house.F white.<DIM>-DIM
 white house
 *small white house

- In the case of (16), the diminutive form of the adjective cannot designate a small house
- This fact is further supported in (17), in which the house is explicitly specified as big

(17) bayt lax-t alb<ā>n-ān
 house.F big-F white.<DIM>-DIM
 big white house

- Furthermore, the diminutive adjective does not suggest a degree of color (e.g., whitish), in contrast with Arabic and Hebrew color diminutives (Kagan 2016)
- The above facts are confirmed with different types of adjectives, as in (18) & (19):

(18) tayθ ḥūl-īt
 woman crazy-F
 crazy woman

(19) tayθ ḥul<ān>-ūt
 woman crazy<DIM>-F
 crazy woman

- The use of the diminutive form in (19) is grammatical, and the phrases in (18) & (19) can refer to the same woman.
- Again, the diminutive morphology on the adjective can not denote a degree (e.g., a little bit crazy)
- This is further supported with the fact that diminutive adjectives can also be modified by degree adverbs:

(20) tayθ ḥul<ān>-ūt wīyan
 woman crazy<DIM>-F very
 very crazy woman

- In (20), the intensifier “very” can modify the diminutive form of “crazy”, yielding the result of a “very crazy woman.”
- Based on the data from (14)-(20), I conclude that the diminutive forms of adjectives are neither forms of agreement nor interpretable as diminutive

The Puzzle:

“Diminutive” nouns and adjectives have the same form but different meanings in Mehri. How is this disconnect between form and meaning accounted for in the grammar?

3. INTRODUCING MORPHOMES

- Shared morphological forms representing different meanings (or feature values) are typically referred to as syncretic.
- Most examples of syncretism cross-linguistically are either derived from shared features or the default morphological form. These cases are easily handled in DM via underspecification (see, e.g., Bobaljik 2001; Embick 1997; Embick and Noyer 2007; Harley 2008; Kramer 2016; Müller 2004, among others)
- Underspecification states that Vocabulary Items do not need to be fully specified for every feature in the terminal node (Halle and Marantz 1993)
- For example, in Mehri, the masculine and feminine forms of some adjectives are syncretic in the plural:

(21) Shared-feature syncretism in the Mehri adjective “white”

	Singular	Plural
Masculine	lbōn	lēban
Feminine	labnīt	lēban

- Such a syncretism is accounted for in DM utilizing the following VIs, in which only one phonological expression is mapped to the plural feature:

(22) Selected Vocabulary Items for Mehri AGR⁴

- AGR [M][SG] ↔ -ō- / √lbn
- AGR [F][SG] ↔ a,ī / √lbn
- AGR [PL] ↔ ē,a / √lbn

- Underspecification allows the VI in (22) to be inserted in any terminal node with a plural feature, regardless of the gender feature within the feature bundle
- Default-form syncretism works in a similar way, in which an “elsewhere” case is defined in the list of VIs that acts as a final catch-all for feature bundles that have not already been expounded

Morphomes

- Rarely, syncretic forms are attested that are not derived from shared features or a default morphological form
- Aronoff (1994) called these *morphomes*
- A classic example is found in English passive and past participles:

⁴ As will be discussed below, I assume AGR nodes are inserted post-syntactically on terminal nodes that show agreement (Embick 1997; Embick and Noyer 2001, 2007; Kramer 2010; Norris 2014).

(23) Syncretism in English passive and past participles

The puppy was **trained**.

She has **trained** the puppy.

The window was **broken**.

She has **broken** the window.

The bourbon was **drunk**.

She has **drunk** the bourbon.

The butter was **spread** on the bread.

She has **spread** the butter on the bread.

- These forms are syncretic in English across a wide breadth of data, despite not being the default form or sharing any syntactic or semantic features uniquely.
- Because morphemes cannot be explained phonologically, syntactically or semantically, Aronoff (1994) used them to argue for an autonomous morphological level
- Such a proposal is problematic for syntactico-centric models (e.g., DM) that assume syntactic structure “all the way down”
- This leads to the central theoretical question: how does DM account for morphemes?
- Before tackling this question, however, we must first 1) establish how to diagnosis morphomicity and 2) establish that the Mehri data in question is indeed morphomic

Diagnosing Morphomes

- The diagnosis of morphemes is a complicated task, as there is no precise definition, and their existence is based on negative evidence rather than positive evidence (Koontz-Garboden 2016)
- Using data from Ulwa (Misumalpan language spoken in Nicaragua), Koontz-Garboden (2016) proposes two criteria:
 1. First, if any extramorphological motivation can be determined, then the phenomenon is not morphomic (by definition)
 2. Secondly, if other languages exhibit similar systematic patterns, then it is far more likely that there is an extramorphological motivated has simply not been determined
- Maiden (2016) approaches the problem from a diachronic perspective: utilizing evidence from Romance verb morphology, he proposes that synchronic morphemes are a product of the retention of morphological forms coupled with the loss of extramorphological motivations

Diagnosing Mehri

- The Mehri diminutive data tentatively passes all three tests from Koontz-Garboden (2016) and Maiden (2016)
- To my knowledge, no other language has developed a similar pattern, thus passing the typological test
- Very little is known about Mehri historically, making the diachronic test difficult. However, given the tendency of diminutives to undergo semantic bleaching (Jurafsky 1996), a loss of the diminutive interpretation in adjectives seems plausible

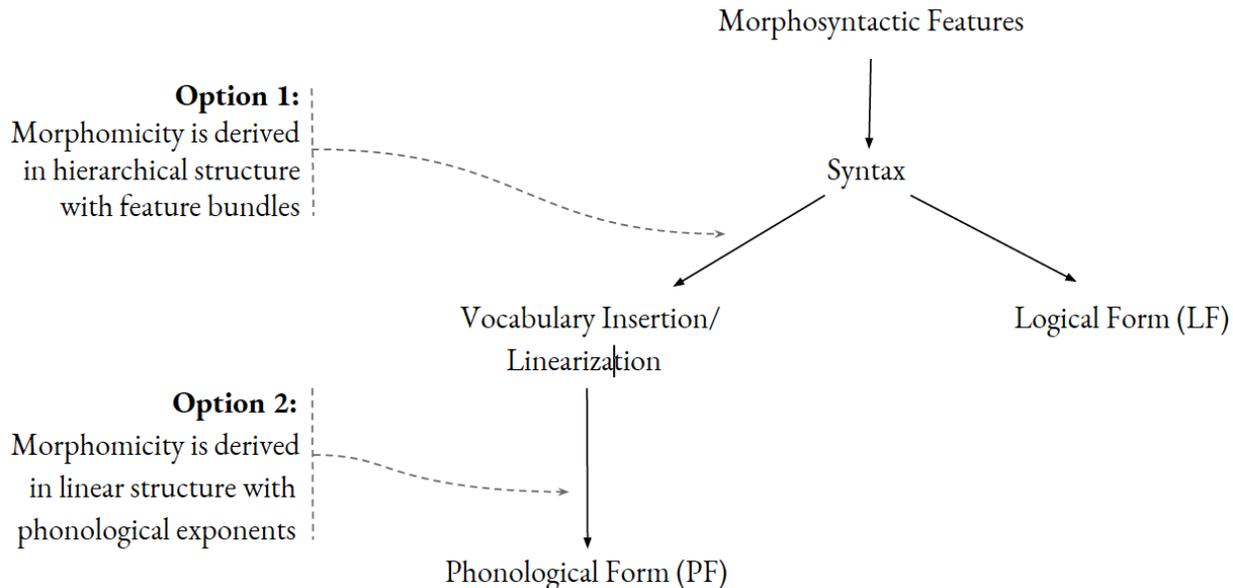
The Puzzle (Update):

The disconnect between form and meaning in the Mehri data is an example of a morphome!

Still Puzzling: How are morphemes handled in the grammar?

4. MORPHOMES WITHIN DM: TWO PROPOSALS

- Remember: morphemes are problematic for syntactico-centric models of grammar
- In order to achieve syncretism independent from synsem features, I assume morphomicity is derived post-syntactically at PF
- Two distinct stages at PF offer two options for deriviving morphomicity:



- I now present two competing proposals from Trommer (2016) and Embick (2016) that explore these two options

Option 1: Trommer (2016):

- Trommer proposes to account for morphemes with the insertion of features post-syntactically (at PF), an operation that has been proposed independently for a variety of morphological reasons⁵
- Any features inserted post-syntactically must not be interpretable (because the derivation has already been sent to LF)
- Using the example of English passive/past participles, Trommer proposes a feature [+P] to be inserted in the context of the two syntactic feature bundles that make up the participles:

(24) Insertion Rule for English Past/Passive Participles in DM (Trommer 2016)

- a. [] → [+P] / [___ -FIN +PASS]
- b. [] → [+P] / [___ -FIN +PERF]

⁵ For example, Halle and Marantz (1993) insert features utilizing “redundancy rules” to account for Theme Class features in Spanish. Embick and Noyer (2007) insert features on nodes (“dissociated nodes”) to account for morphological case in Latin. Norris (2014) inserts AGR nodes to account for Estonian nominal concord.

- Following the insertion of [+P], Trommer proposes a deletion of all other syntactic features on the node (represented below by [F])⁶:

(25) Feature Deletion Rule for English Past/Passive Participles in DM (Trommer 2016)
 $[F] \rightarrow \emptyset / [_ _ +P]$

- Once the insertion and deletion rules have been applied, [+P] is the (only) shared feature on each syntactic node representing the passive/past participles, and Vocabulary Insertion applies as follows:

(26) $[+P] \leftrightarrow -ed$

- Where *-ed* is shorthand for all syncretic forms seen in the regular and irregular past and passive participles
- Thus Trommer (2016) is able to account for morphomicity within the DM framework

Embick (2016):

- Despite expressing strong skepticism as to the existence of morphemes, Embick (2016) nevertheless proposes a DM solution to account for them.⁷
- Focusing on stem alternants, Embick sketches out a solution using diacritics that are only visible to the phonology, formalized as follows:

(27) Activate $[\alpha]$ in context $[Roots _ _] \frown \{F_1 \dots F_n\}$

- (27) specifies the activation of diacritic $[\alpha]$ over an arbitrary set of Roots and activates a rule within a specified context
- Once $[\alpha]$ has been activated, it enacts a phonological rule (utilizing the symbol \rightsquigarrow , where R_1 and R_2 represent different phonological rules)

(28) a. $[\alpha] \rightsquigarrow R_1 / List1 \frown _ _$
 b. $[\alpha] \rightsquigarrow R_2 / List2 \frown _ _$

- To make this solution work, Embick specifies that the diacritic $[\alpha]$ must only be legible in the phonology (if the diacritic were visible before Vocabulary Insertion, its presence on various roots would create a natural class, which goes against the definition of a morpheme)
- While this analysis is not fully fleshed out (esp. the status and location of the diacritics in the grammar), it appears to be a working solution
- Embick's solution is critically different from Trommer (2016) in both mechanism and timing:
 - 1) Trommer assumes the insertion of a feature (that is spelled-out via Vocabulary Insertion), while Embick proposes the activation of a phonological rule (that applies independently of Vocabulary Insertion)

⁶ Feature deletion in specified contexts is referred to as impoverishment (Halle 1997) and is used widely in DM.

⁷ Embick's proposal is primarily arguing against a separate level between phonology and syntax because it precludes contextual locality effects that have been widely documented (see, e.g., (Embick 2010))

- 2) Trommer’s feature solution occurs in hierarchical structure prior to Linearization and Vocabulary Insertion; Embick’s solution applies to linear structure because the diacritics are activated (and only visible) after Linearization and Vocabulary Insertion

- New question: Can the Mehri data distinguish between these two proposals?

5. RETURNING TO MEHRI: THE ANALYSIS

- Goal: A successful analysis must account for the shared *-ā-* in Mehri diminutive nouns and adjectives, with only an interpretable [DIM] feature on the noun

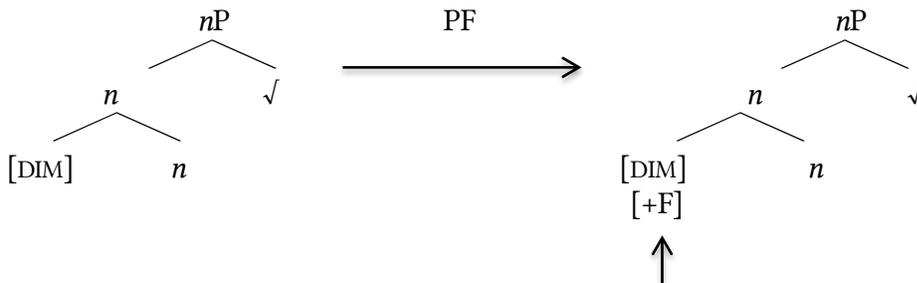
Option 1: Post-Syntactic Feature Insertion (in the spirit of Trommer 2016)

- Under an analysis inspired by Trommer (2016), a feature [+F] is inserted post-syntactically, with *-ā-* being the exponent of this meaningless feature [+F]:

(29) $[+F] \leftrightarrow -\bar{a}-$

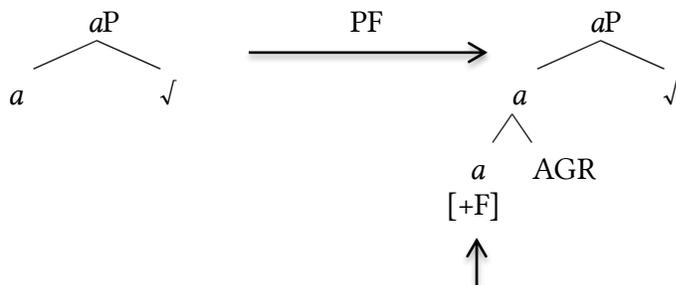
- Where does [+F] get inserted? Two contexts are necessary: one for nouns and one for adjectives
- **Nouns:** Insert [+F] at any terminal node [DIM]:

(30) Insertion of [+F] at [DIM]



- **Adjectives:** Insert [+F] at terminal node *a*:

(31) Insertion of [+F] at *a*



- This insertion context must be optional (not all adjectives have diminutive morphology)⁸

⁸ Such optional insertion is not unprecedented in the literature (see, e.g., Kramer (2010) for optional insertion of AGR for Amharic adjectival definiteness agreement).

- The insertion of [+F] is formalized as follows:

- (32) Insert [+F] into contexts X and optional Y, where
- a. X is terminal node *n* with feature [DIM]
 - b. Y is terminal node *a*

- This analysis accounts for morphomicity utilizing independently-motivated DM operations
- Furthermore, this solution doesn't require deletion (cf. the English passive/past participle analysis in Trommer (2016)), yielding a more elegant version of a post-syntactic feature insertion to account for morphomicity

Restriction of the Insertion of [+F]

- [+F] cannot be adjoined to all types of *a*
- Some adjectives in Mehri never inflect with the diminutive pattern
- This subset of Mehri adjectives is identical to a subset of Mehri adjectives that do not inflect for gender or number

- (33) Mehri *ṭayf* (“bitter”) does not inflect

	Singular	Plural
Masculine	ṭayf	ṭayf
Feminine	ṭayf	ṭayf

- I argue that neither AGR nodes nor [+F] are available to be inserted in the context of these adjectives.⁹
- Dissociated notes are only inserted at PF under specified conditions (Embick and Noyer 2007), and thus I assume that the “specified conditions” are simply not met
- In order for [+F] to not be inserted in the context of indeclinable adjectives, I add a clause to the formalism initially presented above:

- (34) Insert [+F] into contexts X and optional Y, where
- c. X is terminal node *n* with feature [DIM]
 - d. Y is terminal node *a* sister to AGR

- Such reference to sisterhood is licit, because at the time of insertion, the derivation is still in hierarchical structure

Option 2: Activation of diacritics (in the spirit of Embick 2016)

- Despite not being traditionally considered “stem alternants”, the alternations seen in Mehri diminutives could be re-analyzed as stem alternation:

⁹ Classes of indeclinable adjectives are found cross-linguistically, including Nez Perce (Deal 2016), Icelandic (Norris, Mikkelsen, and Hankemer 2014) and Russian (Corbett 2004). Leu (2008) asserts that, because some adjectives in Swiss German (and other Germanic languages) do not inflect, AgrAP is not universally available on all adjectives.

(35) Mehri Diminutives as Stem Alternants

noun \rightarrow diminutive nounḵabšiš \rightarrow ḵabāšišḥūlīt \rightarrow ḥulānūtḥmūh \rightarrow ḥmāhān

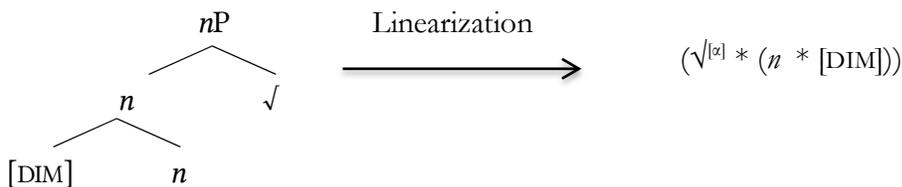
- Under an analysis inspired by Embick (2016), a diacritic $[\alpha]$ will be activated that calls the phonological rule R deriving the alternants from the stem in (35)
- The next task, then, is to define the contexts in which $[\alpha]$ is activated
- The activation of $[\alpha]$ on Roots in Mehri is formalized as follows:

(36) Activate $[\alpha]$ in context [Roots__] $\widehat{\sim}\{\beta, \gamma\}$, wherea. β represents linear adjacency with [DIM]b. γ represents linear adjacency with a (optional)

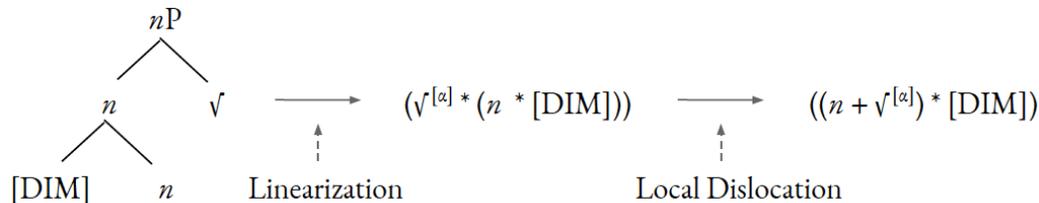
- Linear adjacency is specified with $\widehat{\sim}$ because this activation occurs after Linearization
- A nice result: the formalism in (36)b does not require reference to an AGR feature, because Roots that do not inflect can simply not be afforded a diacritic $[\alpha]$

Post-Syntactic Feature Insertion is Preferable to the Insertion of Diacritics

- Firstly, the post-syntactic feature insertion analysis utilizes independently-motivated DM operations and thus does not add superfluous grammatical machinery
- In contrast, the diacritic analysis requires an addition of diacritics to our conceptualization of Roots
 - Though future research may find these diacritics applicable to other phenomena, presently such an assumption undesirably expands our grammatical framework
- Secondly, the proposed diacritic solution in (36) does not yield the desired results with respect to the nominal context, because of the operation of Linearization:

(37) Linearization of nP 

- Post Linearization, the Root is not linearly adjacent to [DIM], and thus the diacritic cannot be activated to call phonological Rule R
- To solve this problem, Local Dislocation (Embick and Noyer 2001) could be utilized to right-adjoin the $\checkmark^{[\alpha]}$ to n :



- While possible, this operation adds another step in the derivation
- Alternatively, (36)a could be modified to specify linear adjacency to $n \sim [DIM]$, which is more precise, but restates the generalization that [DIM] is only licensed adjoined to n (an unwanted redundancy)
- Finally, the optional nature of the diminutive morphology in the adjectival context has been previously proposed in the literature (see, e.g., Kramer (2010)), while optional activation of diacritics has not been previously reported

The Solution to the Puzzle:

The morphomic patterns found in Mehri diminutives are best analyzed utilizing post-syntactic feature insertion (in the spirit of Trommer (2016))

6. CONCLUSION

- Novel data from Mehri diminutives introduces a puzzling syncretism known as a morphome
- While morphomes have been considered problematic for DM, Trommer (2016) and Embick (2016) have proposed two solutions to this problem
- The solution proposed in Trommer (2016) is better suited for the data in Mehri; furthermore, the Mehri analysis presented here is preferable (in its simplicity) to the original solution in Trommer
- I conclude that morphomicity is best derived with post-syntactic feature insertion in hierarchical structure pre-Linearization

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