

# The Diminutive Tone Change in Siyi Dialects

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## Abstract

Diminutives are words formed by a morphological device that adds a semantic element of *smallness* to the meaning of the stem. This thesis seeks to present a systematic investigation of diminutives in Siyi, a subgroup of Yue spoken in the southwest of the Pearl River Delta.

The Siyi dialect generally employs *bianyīn* (diminutive tone change) as the basic device for diminutives. Three types of *bianyīn* forms are found in Siyi: the high level, the high rising and the Yangshang Pattern *Bianyīn* (YPB). Among them the most prevalent type is the YPB, which is unexceptionally aligned with the lexical tone category of Yangshang, though its actual value varies from the low [21]/[11] to the high rising [35] or high falling [53] across divergent Siyi varieties. The TPB is attributable to an underlying pan-Siyi stratum at an earlier historical stage. The high level *bianyīn* is the least productive type, attributable to a superficial stratum nonnative to Siyi, and most of the words in this type of *bianyīn* are borrowed from Cantonese. The high rising *bianyīn* has an inconsistent distribution across various Siyi dialects, suggesting that it belongs to an intermediate stratum. Its origin could be traced to a diminutive suffix, possibly the most prevailing diminutive suffix *er* 兒 found in the majority of Chinese dialects.