

Diminutives

22.1 Forms of the diminutive

A diminutive is a noun derived from another word, usually also a noun, with a special ending that is used to indicate smallness, endearment and other meanings.

The Dutch diminutive ending is *-je*. The gender of diminutives is always neuter and their plural is formed by the addition of *-s*. Many words simply add this ending without further change:

het huis	the house	het huisje	little house
het boek	the book	het boekje	little book
de zak	the bag	het zakje	little bag

Note: When *s* and *j* are juxtaposed, they form a *sh*-like sound.

In most cases, when the diminutive ending is added, the form of the noun changes somewhat.

22.1.1 Words with a long vowel or diphthong or followed by final *l*, *n*, *r*, *w* → + *-tje*

ei	eitje	egg
mouw	mouwtje	sleeve
boel	boeltje	mess
schoen	schoentje	shoe
deur	deurtje	door

22.1.2 *Words ending in unstressed -el, -en, -er → + -tje*

tafel	tafeltje	table
keuken	keukentje	kitchen
kamer	kamertje	room
eikel	eikeltje	acorn

Note: An exception is the common word *jongen*—*jongetje*.

22.1.3 *Words containing a short vowel followed by final l, r, m, n, ng and occasionally other consonants → + -etje*

bel	belletje	bell
ster	sterretje	star, asterisk
kam	kammetje	comb
pan	pannetje	pan
ding	dingetje	thing
brug	bruggetje	bridge
kip	kippetje	chicken

22.1.4 *Words ending in -m preceded by a long vowel or ending in -lm, -rm or unstressed -em → + -pje*

boom	boompje	tree
duim	duimpje	thumb
bezem	bezempje	broom
arm	armpje	arm
film	filmpje	film (diminutive: roll of film)
museum	museumpje	museum

Note: The word *bloem* has the diminutive *bloempje*, although most Dutch speakers use *bloemetje* instead.

Words with a short vowel in the singular and a long vowel in the plural usually have the long vowel in the diminutive as well:

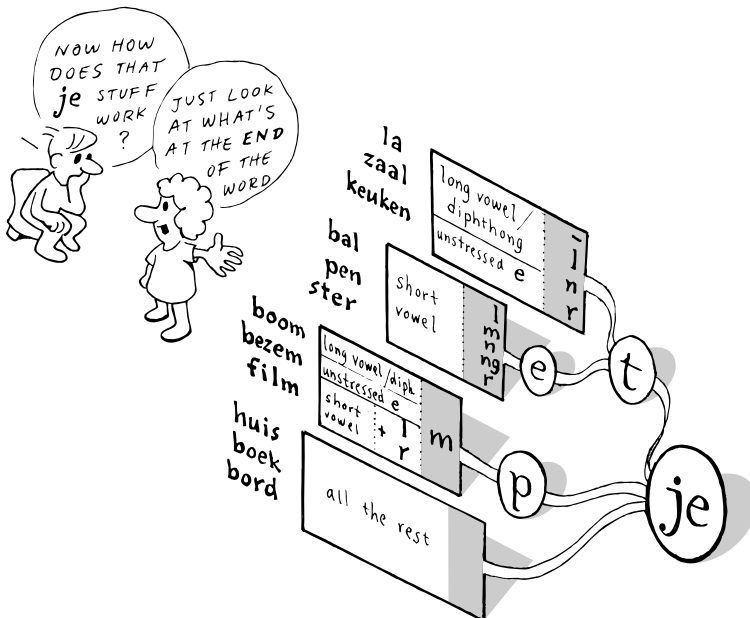
het glas	glazen	glaasje	glass
het schip	schepen	scheepje	ship
<i>But de weg</i>	wegen	wegje/weggetje	way

Words ending in -cht, -ft or -st + -je drop the t in their pronunciation:

lucht	air	→ luchtje	bad smell	(luchje)
zacht	soft	→ zachtjes	softly	(zachjes)
kaft	cover	→ kaftje	little cover	(kafje)
schrift	notebook	→ schriftje	little notebook	(schrifje)
kist	chest	→ kistje	little chest	(kisje)
lijst	list	→ lijstje	little list	(lijsje)

Words ending in -o, -a, -u double the vowel and add -tje:

auto	car	→	autootje
paraplu	umbrella	→	parapluutje
mama	mom	→	mamaatje



22.1.5 *Let's try it*

Give the diminutive of the following words:

de vrouw	de boezem	het mormel
het deken	de man	de tuin
het schip	het geheim	de kruimel
de darm	de zalm	de nicht
de regel	het boek	de zoen
het ding	het raam	de ster
de school	de kan	het museum

22.2 **Diminutives as adverbs**

Many adjectives derive an equivalent adverb by adding the diminutive suffix + -s, often with reference to human actions or emotions. There are a couple dozen in common colloquial use:

droog	dry	droogjes	drily
even	just	eventjes	for a moment
fijn	fine	fijntjes	slyly
kalm	calm	kalmpjes	calmly
mager	lean	magertjes	scantily
wel	well	welletjes	more than enough
zacht	soft	zachtjes	in a low voice
zoet	sweet, easy	zoetjes	gradually
			(usually zoetjesaan)
zuinig	thrifty	zuinigjes	frugally, hesitantly
zwak	weak	zwakjes	weakly

Hij merkte droogjes op dat de laatste trein inmiddels vertrokken was.

He remarked drily that the last train had already left.

Zij ziet wat bleekjes om de neus.

She looks rather pale.

Je moet het netjes op het bord opschrijven.

Write it neatly on the blackboard.

Het is al bijna middernacht. Wij moeten zoetjesaan eens naar huis.

It's nearly midnight already. We'd better think about going home.

Ik ben over de ergste griep heen, maar ik voel me nog wat slapjes.

I'm over the worst of the flu, but I still feel a little weak.

Moeder zei: "En nu is het welletjes. Houd op met dat gezeur!"

Mother said: "And now that's enough. Stop that whining!"

22.3 Using the diminutive

Diminutives are widely used by native Dutch speakers and are an important expressive feature of the language. To explain this by saying that the Dutch have some fondness for the smallness of things (which natives themselves will occasionally claim) would be to miss the main point. Smallness pure and simple is indicated by the adjective **klein**.

The diminutive might, therefore, best be called a "personalizing suffix" that says nothing more than that the user is adopting a certain attitude toward the thing. The range of possible attitudes is wide and can be learned only with some experience in listening and reading. Here are a few examples:

De zon zit vandaag achter de wolken. ↔ **Het zonnetje schijnt.**

The sun is hiding behind the clouds today.

The sun is (pleasantly) shining.

Wij leren de Nederlandse taal. ↔ **Wat voor taaltje is me dat!**

We learn the Dutch language.

What kind of odd lingo is that!

In Holland zie je veel koeien. ↔ **Zie je al die koetjes?**

In Holland you see a lot of cows.

Do you see all those cows?
(said to child)

De wijn is in de aanbieding. ↔ **Wat een lekker wijntje is dit!**

Wine is on sale.

What a nice little wine this is!

22.3.1 Sometimes the diminutive of a word changes its meaning

de lepel	spoon	het lepeltje	teaspoon
het scheermes	razor	het scheermesje	razor blade
dubbel	double	het dubbeltje	10-cent coin
brood	bread	het broodje	roll (bread roll)
lucht	air	het luchtje	scent, odor (often a bad one)
klein	small	het kleintje	little one
toe	in addition	het toetje	dessert
onder ons	between us	het onderonsje	tête-à-tête

Note: A few words today exist only as diminutives:

poffertjes	“poffertjes” (small fried pastries commonly sold at fairs)
toetje	dessert
beetje	little bit
winterkoninkje	wren