

An Analysis of the Suffixes
-Er and *-Zi*
in Mandarin

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An Analysis of the Suffixes –*Er* and –*Zi* in Mandarin

Abstract: The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the suffixes –*er* and –*zi* as encountered in modern Mandarin. What it aims to explore are the semantic and grammatical aspects of these two suffixes. The analyses touch upon questions such as: (1) What kind of word classes can –*er* and –*zi* be suffixed to? (2) Do –*er* and –*zi* imply diminutive meaning? (3) Is there a difference in meaning when a word allows for both –*er* and –*zi* suffixation? These and other questions are investigated with the help of two dictionaries, namely Wei (2005) and Jia (1990), on the basis of which a database of words suffixed with –*er* and –*zi* will be created.

Keywords: Mandarin, Beijing dialect, suffixation, semantics, grammar

1. Introduction to the suffixes –*er* and –*zi* and the research

This thesis investigates the suffixes –*er* and –*zi* in Mandarin. One of the interesting features of these suffixes is that in some varieties of Mandarin, such as that of Beijing, they often are interchangeable in the words in which they appear. See, for example, the following words: *hái-zi* 孩子 / *hái-er* 孩儿¹ ‘child’, and, *zhuō-zi* 桌子 / *zhuō-er* 桌儿 ‘table’; both variants for each have the same meaning. At the same time, some words are often encountered with only either one of the two suffixes, while other words do not allow for the suffixation of either, i.e., word *huā* 花 ‘flower’ can only be suffixed with –*er* and not –*zi* and retain its original meaning of ‘flower’, while the opposite is true for a word such as *é-zi* 蛾子 ‘moth’ in which the morpheme *é* 蛾 does not allow for the suffixation of –*er*; *shū* 书 ‘book’, among many other words, does not allow for either suffix.

This research aims to better understand the behavior of the suffixes –*er* and –*zi* and attempts to categorize the words they appear in. This research necessitates the study of the semantic properties of the suffixes as well since in the literature there are contradictory semantic functions ascribed to the two: most linguists discard the diminutive association of –*zi* (Henne, et al. 1978: 208; Norman 1988: 155; Li 1964: 303) and/or the idea of it embodying lightness of tone (Chao 1968: 237) while, conversely, others embrace the thought that it does denote a sense of smallness (Hsu 1972: 210; Yang 2004: 66). The descriptions of the suffix –*er* are more harmonious with each other as, in general, linguists share an acknowledgement of its functions as an indicator of both smallness and endearment (Tian 2007: 210; Lu 1995: 103, 110). Besides looking at the semantic effect the suffixation of –*zi* and –*er* has, what will be analyzed is the meaning category the root word belongs to; do the suffixes refer to concrete objects or abstract notions? Do these words tend to be human or non-human?

Above is described how in modern Mandarin words can be either –*zi* suffixed or –*er* suffixed or not suffixed at all. In the dialects of Chinese, the suffixes –*er* and –*zi* are both treated differently: in some dialects, one of the two suffixes is preferred over the other or not used at all; for example,

¹ In this thesis I present –*er* as a suffix (N-er) to underline the parallelism with –*zi*, despite the fact that it is never pronounced as a separate syllable (unlike –*zi*). More information regarding the phonetics of the suffix –*er* can be found a bit further in this chapter.

the dialect of Shanghai does not know the suffix *-er* at all (Tian 2009: 217), while in the Cantonese dialect, both *-er* and *-zi* are rare (Sybesma 2007: 2). In this thesis, what will be analyzed are the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* in Standard Mandarin, the official language of China. Its phonology is based on the Mandarin variety spoken in Beijing while the vocabulary is based on the words from a significant group of Mandarin varieties. The Beijing dialect is known for its frequent use of the suffix *-er* (Zhang 2008). For this reason, it will act as the main source language from which *-er* suffixed words will be drawn.

Phonologically speaking, the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* are not treated in the same way. While the suffix *-zi* appears as a separate syllable when it is combined with a preceding syllable, i.e. in *tán-zi* 毯子 ‘blanket’, the suffix *-er* should be seen and pronounced as a word final sound (Wiedenhof 2012:42). This process is also known as rhotacization or *ér-huà* 儿化 in Mandarin. In this process, *-er* is a subsyllable, Wiedenhof adds. Lu (1995) mentions the same about the suffix, as he states that the suffix *-er* is pronounced as a terminal *-r* in the root syllable, and thus not as a separate syllable. In other words, rhotacization involves the “addition of the subsyllabic *-r* to the final” (p.441).

Wiedenhof (2012) first makes clear that many final sounds when followed by the suffix *-er* experience no phonetic alterations, for example (p.43):

<i>-e</i> > <i>-er</i>	<i>gē</i> 歌 > <i>gē-r</i> 歌儿	‘song’
<i>-iu</i> > <i>-iur</i>	<i>qiú</i> 球 > <i>qiú-r</i> 球儿	‘ball’

The final sounds *-i* and *-n* disappear when followed by the suffix *-er* and are replaced by it. Two illustrations of this process are (p. 44):

<i>-ai</i> > <i>-ar</i>	<i>dài</i> 带 > <i>dài-r</i> 带儿	‘leash’
<i>-en</i> > <i>-er</i>	<i>mén</i> 门 > <i>mén-r</i> 门儿	‘door’

Finally, Wiedenhof shows that the same happens for the final sound *-ng*, but also how the nasal sound is kept in the pronunciation of the syllable (p.45):

<i>-uang</i> > <i>uangr</i> (with nasal sound)	<i>huáng</i> 黄 > <i>huáng-r</i> 黄儿	‘yellow’
(no nasal sound)	<i>huá</i> 滑 > <i>huá-r</i> 滑儿	‘smooth’ ²

As mentioned in footnote 1, in this thesis, the suffix *-er* will be represented as a separate syllable (even though it is not) just to underline its suffixal status.

The layout of this thesis is the following: first, an overview will be given of the historical developments the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* have gone through in thousands of years. The reason for giving a historical overview is that it gives an overall impression of how the two suffixes have manifested themselves semantically and grammatically and as the analysis of the suffixes slowly reaches modern times, this impression will undergo new influences from modern Mandarin. In chapter 3, the standpoints that linguistic scholars have on some of functions of the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* are presented. Chapter 4 lists the research questions that will play a central role in the paper and contains the planned methodology for answering these questions. This methodology relies on a database that will be created from words from two dictionaries: *HànYǐng cídiǎn* 汉语词典 (A Chinese-English Dictionary (Revised Edition)) (Wei 2005) and *Běijīnghuà érhuà cídiǎn* 北京话儿化词典 (Dictionary of Rhoticization in Beijing Speech) (Jia 1990). More on the methodology and the content of the research questions will be explained in said chapter. Explanations and findings concerning the research questions can also be found in this chapter. Finally, chapter 5 summarizes the content of this thesis and the answers to the research questions.

² For more example words for these categories and more, cf. Wiedenhof 2012: 42-48.

2. Development of the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* through history

As time goes on many things change, including languages through the components that shape their identities, such as words, sounds, morphemes, etc. In this process suffixes are not left behind and are in the same way prone to undergoing alterations in some way or another. This chapter will, in brief, illustrate the journeys of the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* through time, while indicating similarities and differences between the two at the same time. Much of the historical information presented derives from Hsu's work *Er and Zi Suffixation in Chinese* (1972), as, I believe, it contains the most detailed chronological overview of the developments of the suffixes, starting from the Pre-Han period (before 220 A.D.) until modern times.

2.1. (Pre-)Han (before 220 A.D.)

The first appearances of *-er* and *-zi* can be traced back more than 2000 years ago, when both suffixes were independent words meaning "infant, offspring". After the Song period (960-1279) *-zi* reached the level of versatility as it is known now in contemporary Mandarin, while it took the suffix *-er* hundreds of years more, namely until the Late Qing, to do the same (Hsu 1972).³

In the pre-Han and Han period (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), the resemblance between the two suffixes *-zi* and *-er* was already noticeable. For example, both added a diminutive meaning to nouns. The morpheme *-er*, more than *-zi*, had a clear reference to "offspring", either male or female. Also, it only referred to (minor and young) humans as Hsu mentions (p.32); "only", as the morpheme *-zi* was used in a broader range. Although analogous to *-er* in that it never appeared as the first syllable in a bisyllabic word, and that it, on many occasions, was an interchangeable morpheme with *-er*, there were some characteristics that set *-zi* apart from *-er*, namely: (1) *-zi*, exclusively, could indicate the notion of "master"; (2) *-zi*, exclusively could indicate the notion of "seeds and eggs". Finally, another difference between the two suffixes, one which illustrates *-zi*'s versatility in usage as well, was that unlike *-er*, *-zi* actually could be used for non-human, non-animate nouns.

2.2. Six-Dynasties (220-589)

During the Six-Dynasties period (220-589) there were few changes in the behavior of the suffix *-er*. It still, above all else, remained a suffix that was used to refer to human words, but besides this, not much was added to nor taken from its identity.

While during the Six-Dynasties period, the development of *-er* was practically at a standstill, the suffix *-zi*, however, experienced more additions to its usages. For example, it increasingly became an indicative suffix for animate nouns with the tendency of displaying a diminutive association with the word concerned. However, such semantics were not always expressed through this suffix; instead, *-zi* began to develop a different and yet unseen function for itself, namely that of a nominal marker; that is to say, it now indicated words as being nouns. Now, with the suffix *-zi* being both a diminutive and a nominal marker, it was not uncommon for certain words to cause some confusion for how they should be perceived, i.e., was a *dāo-zi* 刀子 just a 'knife', or, considering the associated diminutive semantics which was (and still is) frequently portrayed by *-zi*, a 'small knife', Hsu notes (p.39).

³ Please note that the term and idea "Mandarin Chinese" originates from the 20th century. During the Song period and the majority of the dynasties to follow, with the lack of a standardized national language, it did not exist under that name. For convenience purposes, this paper will refer to the language used at the time as "Chinese".

2.3. Tang (618-907)

It was mentioned how during the (Pre-)Han and Six-Dynasties periods the suffix *-er* had less usages than the suffix *-zi*. In the Tang period (618-907), however, this slowly started to change as *-er*'s functions extended in some ways. To begin with, it were not just human nouns anymore which were seen with the suffix *-er*; reflexive pronouns appeared in combination with the morpheme, e.g. *zì-shēn-er* 自身儿 'oneself' as well. The same applied for more and more non-human animate nouns.⁴

In the same period, the suffix *-zi* did not undergo many new changes. The lexicon at the time did show an increased usage of *-zi* suffixation, however, this was not due to any additions to the functions of the suffix, as there were none. Not different from prior history, *-zi* suffixation was still associated with non-animate concrete and abstract nouns as well.

2.4. Song-Jin (1115-1279)

The following Song-Jin period (1115-1234) meant more extensions in the usages of the suffix *-er*, which now started to resemble the usages of the suffix in modern Mandarin. Non-animate concrete nouns, some abstract nouns and now even measure words underwent *-er* suffixation. See for example, respectively, the words *mén-er* 门儿 'door', *yàng-er* 样儿 'style' and *kǒu-er* 口儿 'measure words for persons'. With this said, most *-er* suffixed words were still nouns.

The suffix *-zi* experienced an increased usage in abstract nouns, and similar to *-er*, measure words became increasingly suffixed with it, e.g. *xiē-zi* 些子 'some'. These two were the most significant developments the suffix experienced during this period.

2.5. Yuan (1271-1368)

During the Yuan period (1271-1368), the usages of the suffix *-er* approached its modern manifestations. This means that during the Yuan period, *-er* became identified with several new kinds of word classes, one of which were temporal adverbs, e.g. *qǐ-chū-er* 起初儿 'at first'. A second kind consisted of reduplicated stative verbs, such as *guāng-guāng-er* 光光儿 'completely'. Both word types were used adverbially; this, in combination with earlier adverbial examples of the Song-Jin period, leads to the conclusion that adverbs derived from words of other classes appear to be *-er* suffixed, Hsu mentions (p.62).

In the same period, the suffix *-zi* was used less in the literature of the time than *-er* was, and the range of its usages only reached as far as the realms of nouns and measure words. Additionally, some of the attention it received even had to be shared with the suffix *-er*, an phenomenon already described for the Tang period earlier. This process resulted into the creation of words such as *xìng-zi-er* 性子儿 'temperament' and *shēn-zi-er* 'figure.

⁴ For more *-er* suffixed non-animate nouns, cf. Hsu 1972: 41,42.

2.6. Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911)

During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) periods there were a few additional separate developments noticeable for the suffixes *-er* and *-zi*. The *-er* suffix was still predominantly used in nouns, however, it was also used in many adverbs as well, e.g. *yí-kuai-er* 一块儿 ‘together’. This word, in which the suffix *-er* follows a numeral and measure word, is an example of a construction which, in modern Mandarin as well, is very common. Concerning *-er*, new findings were rare, with perhaps an exception being its somewhat odd relationship with the morpheme *liǎo* 了 and active verbs (among which: *xiē-er* 歇儿 ‘to rest’).⁵ Later on, during the Qing period, the range of versatility of the suffix did not stop there as adverbial place and time words now started to appear in combination with the suffix, resulting into words such as *zhè-er* 这儿 ‘here’ and *jīn-er* 今儿 ‘today’. Also, examples of *er*-suffixed active and stative verbs from that period are respectively *xiē-xi-er* 歇息儿 ‘to rest’ and *yuǎn-er* 远儿 ‘far’.

In the same period, the suffix *-zi* underwent an extension in usage from the nominal to the verbal domain; the verb *shuǎ-zi* 耍子 ‘to play’ is such an example.

2.7. Summary

In sum, through time, the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* have undergone a considerable expansion of functions: at first, in the (pre)-Han period, they embodied a diminutive sense of “infant and offspring”. The following development of the two suffixes did not go at a similar pace, nor along the same path. While *-zi* already had many usages as early as the Song dynasty, the suffix *-er* reached a high level of versatility later in the Yuan period. Both suffixes started out as noun markers, but received additional functions along the way; these extensions were in quantity more impressive for *-er* than for *-zi*, as for the latter, only real changes were witnessed through suffixation of abstract nouns and measure words during the Song period, and its first appearance in rare verbal cases in the Yuan period. The suffix *-er*, as well, was used as a suffix in measure words starting in the Song period, but unlike *-zi*, it got further usages in (ad)verbs. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the extensions of its functions were most significant: now, the suffix *-er* appeared in many adverbial and verbal words and later on place and time words began to undergo *-er* suffixation as well.

3. Current linguistic views on the suffixes *-er* and *-zi*

Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words. It deals with word formation processes such as affixation.⁶ Analogous to Western languages, in modern Mandarin there are many affixed words (Chao 1968: 228-244). Although the general consensus is that the language has no infixes, some linguists argue the opposite (Zhang 2001: 55). This thesis, however, will not deal with any form of affixation in modern Mandarin other than the suffixation of the morphemes *-er* and *-zi*. Below are some of the ideas linguists have concerning several aspects of these two suffixes. These ideas will also act as introductions to the research questions this thesis revolves around.

Many linguists discard the diminutive association of the suffix *-zi* (Henne 1978: 208; Norman 1988: 155; Kennedy 1964: 303) while others embrace the thought that it does indicate a sense of smallness (Hsu 1972: 210; Yang 2004: 66). In his book, Chao (1968: 237) mentions the following about the suffix *-zi*: “[...]it has *no* diminutive effect or lightness of tone, its chief functions being to nominalize.” Apparently, the suffix has no diminutive function. Yang (2004: 66), however, believes

⁵ Due to their appearance of irregular use, this paper pays no further attention to them; if interested, please see Hsu 1972 (p.74) for further information regarding the two cases.

⁶ In Mandarin, morphology also consists of the processes of reduplication and compounding.

the opposite to be true and he instead acknowledges this function as he believes the origin of *-zi* to be a reference to “children, offspring”. He touches upon the semantic idea of smallness, in a sense, as children are born from their parents, and the small out of the big. He explains how children and (small) animals possess characteristics of “low and little” (a direct translation of *bēi-xiǎo* 卑小), in the same way that the fruits and seeds of plants and trees possess characteristics of a “granular and/or compound structure” (a direct translation of *tuán-lì-xíng* 团粒形) (p.66). So, in his view, things that have these characteristics will, more often than not, have this reflected in the words that represent them through the suffix *-zi*. As such, the suffix has diminutive meaning. Examples Yang mentions are words such as *wán-zi* 丸子 ‘pills, balls’ and *zhū-zi* 珠子 ‘pearl, bead’.

Kennedy’s (1964) analysis of *-zi* touches upon the denial of the existence of “small specimen” and can be seen as a counter-argument against Yang’s belief in the embodiment of “smallness” that *-zi* supposedly portrays. To quote Kennedy: “In this world of relative values almost everything can be considered smaller than something else. So [...] for *zhuō-zi* [桌子], one can argue that a table is smaller than a tennis-court”, [.....] descriptively, [...] the suffix *-zi* has no recognizable connection with a word ‘son’ nor does it have any essential connotation of smallness (p.303-304)”. Kennedy proceeds his interpretation of the denial of any diminutive functions associated with *-zi* by mentioning how *-zi* suffixation of Mandarin words such as ‘mosquito’ and ‘donkey’ should not be contributed to the idea that both are respectively the young of parents, because then “the attempt to read the meaning ‘child’ into *-zi* plunges us in a prolonged biological series of retrogressions (p.304).” Instead, he advocates the idea that the suffix acts only as a noun marker, one that can cause shifts among word classes, i.e., the verb for ‘to brush’ *shuā* 刷 when *-zi* suffixed becomes the noun for ‘a brush’ *shuā-zi* 刷子. In short, Kennedy believes that the suffix *-zi* indicates only substantial existence, nothing else (p.305).

Apparently, ambiguity exists concerning the diminutive status the suffix *-zi* may or may not have. While some believe the function of the suffix to be that of an indicator of smallness, there is also the belief that it is purely a nominal marker. This discrepancy in opinions has led to one of the research questions this thesis will aim to find an answer for.

Concerning the suffix *-er*, there seems to be the general idea among linguists that the semantics of the suffix embody smallness and endearment alike.⁷ Lu (1995) elaborates on this and provides examples in the process. He uses the Mandarin words *xì-xiǎo* 细小, and *qīn-nì* 亲昵 to describe respectively the added semantics of “smallness” and “endearment” that *-er* portrays. Example words he gives include: *xīn-gān-er* 心肝儿 ‘darling’, *zhū-zǎi-er* 猪崽儿 ‘baby pig’, and many more (p.103-104). A quick look at these words brings forth the understanding that for ‘darling’ the suffix *-er* brings with it a sense of closeness and intimacy while for ‘baby pig’ it embodies the idea of smallness and endearment perhaps. In short, not only in the case of the suffix *-zi* the semantic idea of smallness plays an important aspect to investigate, it appears that *-er* has a positive affiliation with the semantic notion of endearment as well. So, for both, the semantics are worthwhile exploring.

Questions concerning the semantic manifestations of *-er* and *-zi* do not only arise when the words they appear in are analyzed individually. What is equally interesting to analyze is, when one word allows for both *-er* and *-zi* suffixation, if there is any difference in meaning between the two forms. Examples that make this more clear are the Mandarin words *lǐng-er* 领儿 ‘starched collar of a Western-style shirt’ and *lǐng-zi* 领子 ‘collar’. Both words refer to a collar, however, *lǐng-er* 领儿 represent a certain type of collar while *lǐng-zi* 领子 can be perceived as the basic noun with no added semantic meaning (Hsu 1972: 9). This specific example gives rise to the question if more words behave in this way.

⁷Although Kennedy sees the suffix *-er* as disposable and something “that had better be amputated”, because in every word it is encountered, there is a primary form without the suffix (1964: 304-305).

This chapter has shown that the semantics that the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* supposedly portray are well worth researching. What this thesis aims to investigate as well is what kinds of words are suffixed, either with *-er* or *-zi*. This involves the grammatical categorization of those words into word classes, but also the analysis of their behavior in combination with concrete/abstract, human and non-human words. As such, this investigation of grammar is a continuation of chapter 2. Additionally, this thesis aims to further categorize the suffixed words by dividing them into groups that contain similar words based on their meaning (think of: animals, flora & fauna, etc.). The following chapter explains how the research questions are set up.

4. Research

4.1 Objectives and questions

The goal of this thesis is to examine the semantic and grammatical properties of the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* in modern Mandarin. Motivations for doing so have been explained previously in chapter 3. This research deals with the interchangeability of the suffixes, e.g., when *hái-zi* 孩子 ‘child’ becomes *hái-er* 孩儿, or *zhuō-zi* 桌子 ‘table’ becomes *zhuō-er* 桌儿, and looks for reasons that can help explain why some words can be suffixed with either suffix while others occur with just one suffix or even neither. The words for ‘child’ and ‘table’ allow for both *-er* suffixation and *-zi* suffixation. The word *shū* 书 ‘book’, on the other hand, does not allow for either. In the same sense, *huā-er* 花儿 ‘flower’ is widely used, while 花子 is not.⁸ Similarly, *-zi* is suffixed in the word for ‘moth’ *é-zi* 蛾子, but this word does not appear with *-er* suffixation.

In consideration of all of the above, the research question which will guide the exploration of the manifestations of the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* is as follows:

To what kinds of words can the suffixes -er and -zi in modern Mandarin be attached and what are the semantic effects of their suffixation?

This question will be reinterpreted and understood as indicated below:

Properties of the root word:

- (1) What words can be *-zi* suffixed and *-er* suffixed in terms of word classes and is the word class affected by the suffixation?
- (2) Do these words belong to a certain semantic class?

Semantics effects of the suffixation:

- (3) Do the suffixed words portray a diminutive meaning and/or a sense of endearment?
- (4) Are there differences in meaning between a set of the same words with different suffixes?

4.2 Methodology

The research relies on two dictionaries: Wei (2005)⁹ and Jia (1990). The first will serve as the basis from which *-zi* suffixed words are extracted; the second dictionary contains only *-er* suffixed words

⁸ It is an old term for a ‘beggar’, not the modern term for ‘flower’.

⁹ This dictionary is an initiative of Chinese students of the Chinese and English language and originates from the year 1983. The efforts made by the students were not unnoticed as their work quickly received positive

and will in the same way act as a source that provides *-er* suffixed words. The source language in both is Mandarin. In Wei (2005), it is stated that the earliest source used is the *Hóng Lóu Mèng* 红楼梦 (*The Red Chamber*) which originates from the 18th century. This means that it is likely that the dictionary contains words that no longer exist in Mandarin. Although both dictionaries clearly indicate each occurrence of such an old word, it remains uncertain which words are actually used, or at least known, in contemporary Mandarin. To overcome this, these words will be reviewed by a speaker from Beijing who will be asked to confirm that a word exists and that the meaning as indicated in the dictionary is correct.

A final note on Jia (1990): in this dictionary there was no mentioning of how the words listed in it came about. In other words, for data gathering, it is unclear whether or not oral inquiry had taken place. This observation does not necessarily nullify the importance nor diminish the quality of the work; it is, however, important to keep in mind, because it could help explain the adoption of some *-er* suffixed words and the absence of others.

A database of approximately 400 suffixed words (approx. 200 words for both *-er* and *-zi*) will act as the foundation of this research. It will aid in the attempt to answer the research questions. Admittedly, having a higher number of words in the database would probably be more desirable, however, due to time constraints this is not feasible. Even so, I feel that a database consisting of 400 words is enough for the purposes of this thesis. In short, this research will not attempt to analyze *all* words as found in the dictionaries.

For the database, only words in which a suffix follows one syllable will be considered, e.g. *fáng-zi* 房子 'house' and not *dà fáng-zi* 大房子 'big house'; *fáng-er* 房儿 'house' and not *dà fáng-er* 大房儿 'big house'. The reasoning behind this is that the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* may display different behavior when suffixed to bisyllabic words than when they are suffixed to monosyllabic words. In addition, words that are treated in the dictionary as *old.* or *dial.* (dialect) will not be adopted into the database as it is unclear which dialects *dial.* refers to.¹⁰

Words that will be documented in the database are chosen at random. This means that every other page a word will be chosen from the dictionaries and added to the database.

The documentation of the suffixed words in the database will commence with Wei (2005) and afterwards they will be structured in a table that lists the English meaning of each word and with it notes that comment on any peculiar or uncommon behavior of the suffix or the suffixed word in relation to word class, semantics (e.g. diminutive meaning), etc. For reference purposes pinyin is added likewise.

The process for creating a database will be the same for the dictionary of Jia (1990) as for Wei (2005). This means that in the same manner, words that refer to old/ancient and possible no longer existing objects/people, etc. are dismissed.¹¹ Similarly, a table will be made that includes and deals with the same aspects Wei (2005) does. Concerning the representation of the definition of a word in this table, for each, not only the meaning of the word but also its direct translation will be shown. Doing so stems from the intention to give the reader full access to the whole process.

4.3 Analysis of database

The database that was created as described earlier can be found in table 1 of the appendix. It contains the complete list of the *-er* and *-zi* suffixed words that were taken from the dictionaries. Explanations and examples given in the analyses of the research questions will be done exclusively with the help of the words in table 1. The quantity of words that was aimed for to gather

attention from the People's Republic of China State Education Commission which expanded the range of the project so that Master students from high level universities were able to participate as well.

¹⁰ *Dial.* may refer to the Beijing dialect. However, with no clear indication of this being the case, all words with the reference of *dial.* are ignored.

¹¹ Indicated in the definition of a word with the Chinese characters 旧时(in old times).

approximates the total amount shown in the table. As indicated earlier, the table shows the meaning of the word along with notes that point out special or uncommon behavior of a word or suffix, with additionally, the representation of the word in pinyin.

Before the analyses of the results are given, however, here a short note on the review of the list done by the specified speaker of Beijing speech. In general, the speaker mostly agreed with the representation of the content of the dictionary. Most of the discrepancies between her judgment and how the words were represented in the dictionary involve semantics and in particular the concerning diminutive function. One example that illustrates this is the word *xuè-er* 血儿 ‘small amount of blood’ as defined in Jia (1990).¹² Admittedly, the word exists as an idea of ‘blood’, however, the speaker did not believe that the word can only refer to small amounts of blood; in other words, at least for this word, the suffix *-er* does not imply the addition of the semantic meaning of smallness or limitation in amount.

4.3.1. Question 1

This question deals with the matter of word classes, namely, what (semantic) word classes can be *-er* and *-zi* suffixed?

To start with *-zi*, table 1 shows that the suffix is mostly seen in combination with a noun stem, e.g. 案子 *àn-zi* ‘law case; case’; 歌子 *gē-zi* ‘song’, etc. In less instances is it paired with a verb stem, e.g. 滚子 *gǔn-zi* ‘(stone) roller’; 结子 *jié-zi* ‘knot’. In these cases the suffix *-zi* acts as a nominal marker when the original meanings of the syllables 滚 *gǔn* ‘to roll’ and 结 *jié* ‘to tie’ are considered.

Table 1 lists only one example in which the suffix pairs up with a measure word, namely *gè-zi* 个子 ‘height; stature; build’. Notice how, analogous to the examples of noun stem words and verb stem words, the word turns into a noun. Also, while it originally is used to classify people or objects in general, e.g. *sān ge rén* 三个人 ‘three people’, after suffixation, however, it obtains a totally different meaning of ‘height; stature; build’.

In addition, adjectives are often *-zi* suffixed as well. See, for example, the words 胖子 *pàng-zi* ‘fat person; fatty’ and 瞎子 *xiā-zi* ‘blind person’. Again, the nominalizing function of the suffix becomes clear in all of these cases.

Table 1 shows that, the suffix *-er*, similar to *-zi*, can be suffixed to noun stems, e.g. *huà-er* 话儿 ‘words; speech; discourse’, and verb stems *wán-er* 玩儿 ‘to play’; *diān-er* 颠儿 ‘to leave’. A notable addition to the list word classes that can be *-er* suffixed is that of the adverbs. Example adverbial words that are suffixed are: *jīn-er* 今儿 ‘today’ and *hòu-er* 后天儿 ‘day after tomorrow’. These adverbs of time are special for another reason which is that *-er* replaces the last syllable in the non-suffixed forms of the words. In this way, *jīn- tiān* 今天 ‘today’ and *hòu- tiān* 后天 ‘day after tomorrow’ lose the syllable *tiān* 天 and shift into the *-er* suffixed forms. In addition to adverbs of time, other adverbs can be *-er* suffixed as well; the adverb of place, *zhè-kuài-er* 这块儿 ‘position: here; this place’ makes this clear. An equally interesting finding is that several adjectives can be *-er* suffixed as well. This process differs with that of *-zi* suffixation in that the word is still an adjective and it does not undergo a process of nominalization. Examples of such adjectives are: *sǎn-er* 散儿 ‘sloppy’ (clothing); *zǎo-er* 糙儿 ‘ugly (of appearance)’.

The table shows a handful of *-er* suffixed verb stems. It was mentioned earlier how the verb *wán-er* 玩儿 ‘to play’ is the only acknowledged *-er* suffixed verb in common use (Norman 1988: 155). Apparently, in Beijing speech there are a few other verbs that act similarly which are: *diān-er* 颠儿 ‘to leave’; *bàn-er* 绊儿 ‘to trip’; *qīn-er* 亲儿 ‘to kiss’. It was noted that the suffix *-zi* can be paired up with a verb as well, however, in all the words in which this happened, the nominalizing function of this suffix was the main driving force behind this process. In these cases, verbs became nouns (recall:

¹² Definition in Mandarin: 少量的血 ‘small amount of blood’ (p.286).

gǔn-zi 滚子 ‘(stone) roller’; *jié-zi* 结子 ‘knot’). In the case of *-er*, the nominalizing function still seems to be there, although visible in less words; table 1 shows that 71% (12 out of 17 words) of the words with verb stems become a noun when *-er* suffixed. Examples of such words are: *chuān-er* 穿儿 ‘clothing’, *gài-er* 盖儿 ‘lid’ and *chàng-er* 唱儿 ‘song’. In the verbs mentioned earlier, *-er* lacks this function, and these words keep their identity of a verb instead.

Finally, another difference between the two suffixes is the ways in which the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* behave in combination with measure words. The suffix *-er* seems to be more easily allocated to measure words than *-zi* is, as table 1 shows. Admittedly, the amount of measure words that are *-er* suffixed is not substantial. Suffixation is still there and the identity of the measure word as being one is unaffected; for reference, see the following words: *kǒu-er* 口儿 ‘measure word for people’; *cáo-er* 槽儿 ‘measure word for doors and windows’; *yá-er* 牙儿 ‘measure word for objects shaped like the crescent moon (food, etc.)’.

This question set out to investigate with what kinds of word classes the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* can be combined. The findings show that *-zi* suffixation leads to nominalization of the suffixed word; another observation is that *-er* suffixation appears to be done more generously, i.e., at least, this type of suffixation, in addition to nouns, verbs and adjectives, is also allowed for adverbs and a higher degree of measure words. What is more, unlike the suffix *-zi*, it is less likely to change the word class the word originally belongs to.

4.3.2. Question 2

Having determined a grammatical categorization in the previous section, what will now be analyzed is the question to what semantic category the words to which *-er* and *-zi* are suffixed belong. Considering the historical developments the two suffixes have gone through, it makes sense to further research some of the semantic categories as described in chapter 2. The first distinction made is the one between concrete and abstract words.

4.3.2.1. Concrete and abstract words

In linguistics, the terms ‘abstract’ refers to “things that are only in our minds and we cannot know through our senses” (Vande Kopple 1989). Concrete words, then, are the exact opposite. In this sense, among the list of *-zi* suffixed words, *chuāng-zi* 窗子 ‘window’; *chuí-zi* 锤子 ‘hammer’; *gǔ-zi* 骨子 ‘frame; rib’ are some of the many concrete words, while the word *xìng-zi* 性子 ‘temperament; strength, potency’ represents the abstract side of the spectrum. Notice the discrepancy in number of examples; concrete *-zi* suffixed words are ample, abstract variants are not, however. The database shows that 9% (22 out of 250 words) of the *-zi* suffixed words are abstract.¹³ Not deviating from the behavior of the suffix *-zi*, *-er* has the similar tendency of displaying suffixation in concrete words, see the following examples: *zhū-er* 珠儿 ‘pearl’; *sǎng-er* 嗓儿 ‘voice’; *chóng-er* 虫儿 ‘insect’. A notable difference with the suffix *-zi*, however, is that *-er* seems to appear in relatively more abstract words than *-zi* does. Coincidentally perhaps, two abstract words that illustrate this have the meaning of ‘hope’; these words are: *pàn-er* 盼儿 and *xiǎng-er* 想儿. The syllable *xìng* 性 makes a reappearance as well, e.g. *xìng-er* 性儿 ‘temper; potency, strength’. Also consider the word *lì-er* 力儿 ‘power, strength’. These words are examples that illustrate the possibility for *-er* suffixation of abstract words. They are a small portion of the 16% (27 out of 175 words) of *-er* suffixed abstract words.

¹³ In table 1 under “notes” it is indicated when a word is considered to be abstract. This is done for both suffixes *-er* and *-zi*.

4.3.2.2. (Non-)human words

Table 1 shows the attribution of the suffix *-zi* to 12% of human words (31 out of 250 words).¹⁴ See for example the following words: *biǎo-zi* 婊子 ‘prostitute’; *hái-zi* 孩子 ‘child’; *gū-zi* 孤子 ‘orphan’; *dāi-zi* ‘idiot; simpleton; blockhead’; *piàn-zi* 骗子 ‘swindler; cheat; trickster’. These examples lead to two interesting observations: first, the addition of the suffix does not change the semantics of the word, i.e. *biǎo* 婊 means ‘prostitute’ as well and is semantically the same to *biǎo-zi* 婊子. The same semantic indifference between the *-zi* suffixed form and the monosyllabic original is noticeable in the word *hái-zi* 孩子 in which *hái* 孩 means ‘baby; child; children’. The other three words are similar in that *-zi* does not change the meaning of the word. However, and this is the second observation, these words are part of the phenomenon in which the first syllable is either an adjective or a verb, as opposed to a noun, followed by the suffix *-zi*: *gū* 孤 means ‘alone’ and *dāi* 呆 means ‘dull; simple; stupid’; the verb *piàn* 骗 means ‘cheat; swindle’. Confirmed earlier was the notion of *-zi* being a nominal marker. Apparently, in human words this nominalizing function is maintained. In the case of human words, the suffix *-zi* should then be understood as ‘a person who is/does/etc’. In other words, a *biǎo-zi* 婊子 is a person who is *biǎo* 婊, thus ‘a prostitute’; in the same way, a *gū-zi* 孤子 is a person who is *gū* 孤, or ‘an orphan’. What is interesting about this word, however, is that the definition for the nominal form is not a direct and linguistic true representation of the adjectival form, but instead it reflects a very specific meaning. When it would be a such a direct representation, however, a more accurate translation of the noun would be something in the vicinity of ‘a loner’, or at least, ‘a lonely person’.

Just like *-zi* suffixed human words, non-human words that are combined with the suffix are plentiful. Examples of *-zi* suffixed non-human words are *bù-zi* 步子 ‘step; pace’; *jìng-zi* 镜子 ‘mirror; looking glass’; *pāi-zi* 拍子 ‘bat; racket’ and *xuàn-zi* 旋子 ‘copper plate; hot water container for warming up wine’. While in the case of human words, the suffix should be understood as ‘a person who...’, here, in non-human words, it seems more appropriate to consider it as the notion of ‘a thing which...’. Similarly for human words, the suffix implies no additional meaning for the word; it merely conveys the thought that what is described is a thing. The initial syllable makes clear the characteristics of the word and represents the variety of ways in which the word can be defined; an example to clarify: the syllable *bù* 步 in *bù-zi* 步子 brings about a small array of associations the reader of the words has with a ‘walk; step’ and, therefore, cannot be correctly understood as something different. Similar to *-zi* suffixation in human words, in non-human words this suffix can be attached to nouns and verbs. The former two words are examples of nominal suffixation; *pāi-zi* 拍子, then, is the result of a *-zi* suffixed verb with *pāi* 拍 meaning ‘hit; beat’; *xuàn* 旋 means ‘to revolve; move in orbit; return’ and through this verbal expression of characteristics it explains the origin of the word.

Examples of *-zi* suffixed adjectives as non-human words are not as plentiful as they were for human words; the limited amount of words that do appear in table 1 can be considered to be slightly ambiguous, because the classification of these words brings with it the question whether or not they should be identified as a noun instead. Words such as *quān-zi* 圈子 ‘circle; ring’ and *tuán-zi* 团子 ‘dumpling’ are illustrative of such words which are difficult to determine. As a monosyllabic noun, *quān* 圈 indeed means ‘circle; ring’; it can be used adjectivally, however, e.g. *quān-quān-de+N* 圈圈的+N ‘round; circular’; *tuán* 团 behaves in the same way and is adjectivally often represented as *tuán-tuán-de+N* 团团的+N ‘round’. No matter which point of view is taken in the analysis of the behavior of *-zi* in human- and non-human words with an adjectival initial syllable, the fact remains that the suffix *-zi* is found in both human and non-human words.

The suffix *-er* can appear in human words as well, although not as frequent *-zi* does, as a percentage of 3% makes clear (5 out of 175 words). Some of the examples encountered in table 1 are:

¹⁴ In table 1 under “notes” it is indicated when a word is considered to be human. This is done for both suffixes *-er* and *-zi*.

hái-er 孩儿 ‘child’; *jiě-er* 姐儿 ‘term for younger and older sisters’; *gē-er* 哥儿 ‘term for younger and older brothers’, etc. While the former has a *-zi* form as well, namely *hái-zi* 孩子, this is not the case for the other two; that is to say, *jiě-zi* 姐子 and 哥子 do not exist. An explanation that helps possibly understand the discrepancy between the level of usage of the two suffixes in combination with human words might be found in the semantic domain, namely that of endearment; paragraph 4.3.3. deals with this more.

The suffix *-er* is used more in non-human words than it is used in human words, table 1 shows. See, for example, words such as *yuán-er* 缘儿 ‘fate’; *liú-er* 瘤儿 ‘tumor’; *shì-er* 事儿 ‘thing; matter’. What makes these examples interesting, in particular the former two, is that in these words the suffix *-er* replaces syllables (more) often associated with the respective word. Without the addition of *-er* or the specific syllable the word would not exist; to clarify: *yuán* 缘 does not exist as ‘fate’, only *yuán-fèn* 缘分 does (and *yuán-er* 缘儿); *liú* 瘤 does not exist as ‘tumor’, only *zhǒng-liú* 肿瘤 does (and *liú-er* 瘤儿), and so forth. Noteworthy, the example words given for the suffix *-zi* can only exist when suffixed with it: e.g. *pāi-zi* 拍子 ‘bat; racket’ has no other form in which the first syllable can be accompanied by another syllable while keeping the original meaning; nor does *jìng-zi* 镜子 ‘mirror; looking glass’, *hái-zi* 孩子 ‘child’, etc.

4.3.2.3. Further categorization

The categorization of *-er* and *-zi* suffixed words as concrete and abstract, human and non-human has resulted in interesting findings. This paragraph will attempt to categorize the words even further by, first, dividing them based on other lexical meaning categories. This entails the categorization of these words into lexical word groups of animals, body parts and more. Analyzing *-er* and *-zi* suffixed words in this way may result in an indication of what kind of words (based on characteristics of the object) are likely to undergo this kind of suffixation. Second, a grammatical analysis will be made of the *-er* and *-zi* suffixed words of being either a mass noun or a count noun. Also, for *-er* suffixed verbs, what will be briefly looked at is whether they are dynamic verbs or static verbs. Doing both these types of in-depth categorization, again, may lead to a better understanding of under what kind of circumstances *-er* and *-zi* suffixation can grammatically occur and when it cannot.

It has been established that the suffix *-zi* appears in many human words. However, in addition, many animal and insect words are suffixed with *-zi*; see for example: *hóu-zi* 猴子 ‘monkey’; *é-zi* 蛾子 ‘moth’ and *háo-zi* 貉子 ‘raccoon dog’. The largest amount of *-zi* suffixed words, however, are those that represent objects such as tools or everyday common items: e.g. *chuí-zi* 锤子 ‘hammer’; *dīng-zi* 钉子 ‘nail’; *fǔ-zi* 斧子 ‘axe; hatchet’; *gùn-zi* 棍子 ‘stick; rod’; *shū-zi* 梳子 ‘comb’; *yǐ-zi* 椅子 ‘chair’, etc. Another substantial group of *-zi* suffixed words is the one that represent body parts, such as *bó-zi* 脖子 ‘neck’; *bí-zi* 鼻子 ‘nose’; *hú-zi* 胡子 ‘beard’, etc. At a first glance, these groups of words imply a structured behavior of the suffix *-zi*, as the suffix is found in many more words belonging to these groups. With this said, this does not mean that the suffix adheres to a hidden tendency to be associated with these groups of words only. Contrarily, its behavior can also be described as rather unsystematic: for example, why do not all animal words appear with the suffix and how can it be explained that the suffix also appears in words such as *yuán-zi* 园子 ‘garden’; *qí-zi* 旗子 ‘flag; banner’, etc.?

Many linguists believe that the suffix *-zi* is mostly used in count nouns as opposed to mass nouns (Sybesma 2007). Because Mandarin nouns do not allow for inflexion through suffixation as a means to pluralize, a count-mass distinction has to be used that looks at how individual and mass classifiers (measure words) manifest themselves in the language (Cheng & Sybesma 1998). Liu (2012), however, gives an example that shows some ambiguity concerning this idea as the distinction between a count and mass noun is not always clear (p.215). He opts for using number quantifiers (*hěnduō* 很多 ‘a lot, many’) and volume quantifiers (*yídiǎn* 一点 ‘a little, a few’) to respectively differentiate the two. In this way, he mentions *shā-zi* 沙子 ‘sand’ to be a mass noun (among others)

(p.216). With this approach in mind, table 1 shows how examples of suffixed mass nouns are scarce with a percentage of 2 % (6 words out of 250 words). One example word is *jīn-zi* 金子 ‘gold’.¹⁵ Table 1 has only *-er* suffixed mass noun listed in it which is *shuǐ-er* 水儿 ‘juice in fruit or other juices’.

The suffix *-er* is also found in many words for animals and insects; two of such examples are *tù-er* 兔儿 rabbit; hare’; *yā-er* 鸭儿 ‘kind of crow’. Not unlike *-zi*, the suffix appears in a substantial amount of words that embody everyday items such as: *chuí-er* 锤儿 ‘hammer’; *zhuō-er* 桌儿 ‘table’; *lǒu-er* 篓儿 ‘basket’; *ping-er* 瓶儿 ‘bottle’, etc. The suffix does not appear in many words that represent body parts. The remaining nouns listed in table 1 range from words such as *fāng-er* 方儿 ‘prescription’ to that of *shēng-er* 声儿 ‘sound’. This means that even though there is some structure visible in the allocation of the suffix *-er* to words, many words the suffix *-er* appears with seem to be rather random semantically; a phenomenon similar to that of *-zi*.

Finally, verbs that are *-er* suffixed exist; they are scarce however. Table 1 lists merely three of such words. The three verbs are *diān-er* 颠儿 ‘to leave’; *bàn-er* 绊儿 ‘to trip’; *qīn-er* 亲儿 ‘to kiss’ and *wán-er* 玩儿 ‘to play’. All of them are dynamic.

Summing up the analysis of this question, *-er* and *-zi* suffixation both occur with concrete and abstract words, while the former appears in approximately twice more abstract words than *-zi* does. In human words, the suffix *-zi* makes a constant reappearance be it either following a noun stem, verb stem or adjectival stem, while it does the same in non-human words following noun stems and verb stems. Furthermore, the suffix *-er* is more than *-zi* associated with words representing family members, however, it appears in far fewer human words than *-zi* does.

Further categorization according to lexical differences and grammatical analyses of a count-mass distinction in nouns and a dynamic-static distinction in verbs shows that the words in which the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* appear often belong to a certain group (e.g. animals or everyday items), however, they are also found in random and unrelated words. As the suffixes lack a clear systematic pattern as to what kind of words they are allocated lexically, at least on this front, the behavior of the two is considered to be somewhat by chance. Finally, *-er* and *-zi* appear in not many mass nouns and the suffix *-er* is exclusively encountered in dynamic verbs.

4.3.3. Question 3

The following question deals with the semantics behind the suffixed words as listed in table 1. As previously described, the assumption is that the added semantic function of the suffix *-er* is more variable than that of the suffix *-zi*; that is, semantics in the form of smallness and endearment. This question seeks the truth behind this assumption.

So far in this thesis, the suffix *-zi* has been predominantly identified as a nominal marker. This classification, however, does not automatically mean that no additional semantics are associated with it; recall Yang (2004), for example, who acknowledges a sense of “young” and “smallness” associated with the suffix (p.66). An analysis of the words as found in table 1 reveals that the suffix *-zi* does not add any semantics to the original syllable and its meaning. In other words, the semantics behind the original syllable stays the same and there is no additional meaning of “small” or “cute”; for example, *hóu-zi* 猴子 ‘monkey’ does not mean a “small” or “cute” monkey; nor does *kù-zi* 裤子 ‘trousers; pants’ mean a pair of “small” or “cute” pants. Admittedly, Yang is right in saying that the suffix *-zi* does frequently appear in words that indicate characteristics of smallness: e.g. *kǒu-zi* 口子 ‘knot; button’; *lán-zi* 篮子 ‘basket’; *lì-zi* 栗子 ‘chestnut’. Now, accepting or discarding the diminutive function of the suffix *-zi* relies on the perception one has regarding the meaning of “diminutive”. It is clear that the suffix is not a diminutive suffix when one, for example, considers its

¹⁵ In table 1 under “notes” it is indicated when a word is considered to be a mass noun.

properties identical to that of *-je* in Dutch: *huis-je* ‘little home’; *paard-je* ‘little horse, etc. (Sybesma 2007) which causes a direct shift from a noun into its “small” version. However, considering the amount of words that exhibit properties of being small or young in themselves it appears in table 1, namely 25% of the nouns, opting for the consideration of the suffix *-zi* to be diminutive indeed is possible. This research does, therefore, acknowledge its diminutive properties.

Similar to the suffix *-zi*, in many *-er* suffixed words the diminutive connotation is observable when, again, the object a word represents exhibits semantics of “smallness” (21% of the nouns). See, for example, the words *huā-er* 花儿 ‘flower’ and *lèi-er* 泪儿. Interestingly, in a few instances, the suffix seems to add a further or deeper notion of smallness, that is to say, as was explained earlier about the Dutch morpheme *-je*, when *-er* suffixed, the word now represents a “small” version of the object; some words in table 1 make this clear. See, for example, the following words: *dāo-er* 刀儿 ‘small knife’; *diàn-er* 店儿 ‘small store’ and *shān-er* 山儿 ‘small mountain’. These words can be considered to be the diminutive form of the monosyllabic nouns. Non-suffixed, the syllables respectively have the definition of ‘knife’, ‘store’ and ‘mountain’. So in conclusion, not only does the suffix *-er* appear in many words in which the word itself embodies “smallness”, in some words it is literally a diminutive suffix (4% of the nouns).

The sentiment of endearment *-er* adds to words is observable in the analysis of its behavior in human words. Especially words that represent members of the family often have this suffix; some examples are: *jiě-er* 姐儿 ‘term for younger and older sisters’ and *gē-er* 哥儿 ‘term for younger and older brothers’. Lu (1995) gives additional examples of the sentiment of endearment the suffix adds to a word by making a comparison with the same words that are the *-zi* suffixed forms (p.110). For example, he mentions: *yá-shuā-er* 牙刷儿 ‘toothbrush’ versus *yá-shuā-zi* 牙刷子 and *lǎo-tóu-er* 老头儿 ‘old man’ versus *lǎo-tóu-zi* 老头子, and many more words. Supposedly, the *-er* suffixed forms portray a more substantial sense of endearment than their counterparts do. He further makes clear that the same applies for words such as *xiān-sheng-er* 先生儿 ‘mister, husband’ and *xiōng-dì-er* ‘brother’, etc. These words do not allow for *-zi* suffixation. Similarly to the other words presented in this paragraph, the addition of the suffix *-er* to these words indicates a relatively close relationship the speaker has with the objects or people portrayed by them, or in other words, it at least indicates a more intimate state than the non-suffixed form does.

This question has shown how diminutive connotations are present with both suffixes *-er* and *-zi* in a twofold of ways: first, both of them often appear with words that denote small or young objects and as such Yang’s view on the matter is maintained. In the case of *-er*, in several instances, this connotation expanded even further as the suffix became literally an indicator of a smaller version of the object. Secondly, the suffix *-er* (more than the suffix *-zi* at least) tends to be used frequently as a marker of endearment, especially for words that represent family members or people in general.

4.3.4. Question 4

This question deals with words that allow for both *-er* suffixation as well as *-zi* suffixation and attempts to analyze any semantic differences between the two.

Diverting our attention back to chapter 3 for a moment, it was mentioned how Hsu made a distinction between, on the one hand, *lǐng-er* 领儿 ‘starched collar of a Western-style shirt’ and, on the other, *lǐng-zi* 领子 ‘collar’. Table 1 shows words that allow for both kinds of suffixation, for example see: *yè-er* 页儿 / *yè-zi* 叶子 ‘leaf’; *kēng-er* 坑儿 / *kēng-zi* 坑子 ‘hole’; *pū-er* 铺儿 / *pū-zi* 铺子 ‘shop’; *táo-er* 桃儿 / *táo-zi* 桃子 ‘peach’. These words and other similar example word sets show no semantic differences between the two forms for each set. However, one example stands out slightly, which is the word that stands for ‘vehicle’, namely *chē* 车. According to Jia (1990), when *-er* suffixed, the word means ‘vehicle with often one or two wheels’. Wei (2005) believes that the

syllable in combination with the *-zi* suffix means ‘small vehicle’. Although the translations show minor differences in meaning, at the same time, the definitions can be interpreted as practically the same; as such it is an ambiguous example. However, table 1 does not present other distinct examples of sets of two suffixed forms that have clear different meanings. The example Hsu gives of the two types of collars as represented by the two suffixes respectively cannot be traced back in the dictionaries. All of this leads to the result that practically no differences in meaning are present in the suffixed forms for each of them, aside from any semantics of endearment as proven in chapter 4.3.3.

Jia (1990) indicates when an *-er* suffixed word allows for *-zi* suffixation. About 40% of these words have a *-zi* suffixed form (66 out of 175 words). These variants are all nouns and show no semantic differences with their suffixed counterparts. Why some nouns (e.g. *ci-er* 刺儿 ‘small and pointy object’) do not have *-zi* suffixed variants is unclear. An analysis of table 1 shows that often interchangeability of the suffixes is possible while preserving the meaning.

5. Conclusions

In this thesis, many different aspects of the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* have been analyzed and compared with each other with the aim of creating a better understanding of the semantics and grammatical behavior of the two suffixes. The research has shown how the functions of the suffixes were few in the pre-Han period but in time extended to that of being a nominal marker. The suffix *-er* experienced further usages and was (and still is) encountered not only in nouns, but in verbs, adverbs and adjectives as well.

The main focus of the paper was to analyze the workings of the suffixes *-er* and *-zi* in contemporary Mandarin. An analysis of a substantial corpus of suffixed words resulted in the following findings for each of the four research questions: (1) the suffix *-zi* is exclusively encountered in nouns, while the suffix *-er* is also seen in verbs, adverbs, adjectives and measure words; (2) the suffix *-er* appears in about double the amount of abstract words that *-zi* does. Also, *-er* seems to be less associated with human words than *-zi* is, while it is more indicative of family members related words. Further categorization reveals that it is hard to determine what kind of words the two suffixes have lexical associations with; for example, they do appear in a substantial number of animal words but not all. The same applies for words that represent everyday items. Lastly, *-zi* appears in mostly count nouns and *-er* suffixed verbs are dynamic; (3) both suffixes display a diminutive sense in that the words containing them often denote small or young objects. The suffix *-er* even shows cases of being a “true” diminutive marker in the sense that suffixation of a word causes a shift of meaning into the smaller version of whatever the word represent. Additionally, the suffix *-er* more than *-zi* indicates a sense of endearment; finally, (4) when a word allows for both *-er* and *-zi* suffixation, the meaning definitions of the set of words are almost always identical.

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7. Appendix

Table 1:

List of *-zi* suffixed words from Wei 2005: *A Chinese-English Dictionary (HànYīng cídiǎn 汉英词典)* (total ~250 words):

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
案子	àn-zi	law case; case	abstract
把子	bà-zi	handle	
帮子	bāng-zi	outer leaf (cabbage, etc); upper (shoe)	
膀子	bǎng-zi	upper arm; arm	
包子	bāo-zi	steamed stuffed bun	
孢子	bāo-zǐ	spore	
雹子	báo-zi	hail; hailstone	
豹子	bào-zi	leopard	
杯子	bēi-zi	cup; glass	
鼻子	bí-zi	nose	
秕子	bǐ-zi	blighted grain	
篦子	bì-zi	a double-edge fine-toothed comb	
鞭子	biān-zi	whip	
辫子	biàn-zi	plait; braid; pigtail	
婊子	biǎo-zi	prostitute; whore	human
脖子	bó-zi	neck	
步子	bù-zi	step; pace	
簿子	bù-zi	notebook; book	
才子	cái-zi	a talented scholar	
草子	cǎo-zi	grass seed	
册子	cè-zi	book; volume	
层子	céng-zi	<i>phys.</i> Straton	
叉子	chā-zi	fork	
岔子	chà-zi	branch road accident; trouble	
铲子	chǎn-zi	shovel; spade	
肠子	cháng-zi	intestines	
厂子	chǎng-zi	factory; mill yard; depot	
场子	chǎng-zi	gathering place	abstract
超子	chāo-zi	<i>phys.</i> hyperon	
车子	chē-zi	a small vehicle	
臣子	chén-zi	an official in feudal times	
橙子	chéng-zi	orange (the fruit)	
池子	chí-zi	pond common bathing pool	
尺子	chǐ-zi	rule; ruler	
赤子	chì-zǐ	a newborn baby	human
绸子	chóu-zi	silk fabric	mass noun
处子	chǔ-zi	<i>lit.</i> virgin/maiden	human

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
搋子	chuāi-zi	suction pump	
椽子	chuan-zi	rafter	
窗子	chuāng-zi	window	
锤子	chuí-zi	hammer	
戳子	chuō-zi	<i>inf.</i> stamp; seal	
呆子	dāi-zi	idiot; simpleton; blockhead	human
袋子	dài-zi	sack; bag	
单子	dān-zi	list; bill; form	
胆子	dǎn-zi	courage; guts	
蛋子	dàn-zi	an egg-shaped thing	
蛋子	dàn-zi	a pellet shot from a slingshot	
		marble	
刀子	dāo-zi	<i>inf.</i> small knife; pocketknife	
稻子	dào-zi	<i>inf.</i> rice; paddy	
凳子	dēng-zi	stool; small seat	
底子	dǐ-zi	bottom; base	abstract
垫子	diàn-zi	mat; pad; cushion	
调子	diào-zi	tune; melody	abstract
钉子	dīng-zi	nail; saboteur	
豆子	dòu-zi	pod-bearing plant or its seeds	
		bean-shaped thing	
肚子	dù-zi	belly; abdomen	
对子	dùi-zi	a pair of antithetical phrases	abstract
驮子	duò-zi	a load carried by a pack animal; pack	
蛾子	é-zi	moth	
儿子	ér-zi	son	human
		formula	
房子	fang-zi	house; building	
		room, apartment, etc.	
妃子	fēi-zi	imperial concubine	human
分子	fèn-zi	<i>math.</i> numerator (in a fraction)	
		<i>chem.</i> molecule	
分子	fēn-zi	members of a class or group; part	human
缝子	fèng-zi	<i>inf.</i> chink; crack; crevice	
斧子	fǔ-zi	axe; hatchet	
盖子	gài-zi	lid; cover; top	
		shell (of a tortoise, etc)	
缸子	gāng-zi	mug; bowl	
歌子	gē-zi	song	abstract
格子	gé-zi	squares formed by crossed lines; check	
个子	gè-zi	height; stature; build	abstract
钩子	gōu-zi	hook	
		a hook-like thing	
孤子	gū-zi	orphan; a fatherless son	human
谷子	gǔ-zi	millet	
		<i>dial.</i> unhusked rice	
骨子	gǔ-zi	frame; ribs	
瓜子	guā-zi	melon seeds	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
拐子	guǎi-zi	<i>inf.</i> cripple crutch	human
关子	guān-zi	climax (in a story or drama)	abstract
冠子	guān-zi	crest; comb	
馆子	guǎn-zi	restaurant; eating house	
管子	guǎn-zi	tube; pipe	
罐子	guān-zi	pot; jar; pitcher	
鬼子	guǐ-zi	devil	
柜子	gù-zi	cupboard; cabinet	
滚子	gǔn-zi	(stone) roller	
棍子	gùn-zi	rod; stick	
果子	guǒ-zi	fruit	
孩子	hái-zi	child	human
蚶子	hān-zi	<i>zool.</i> blood clam	
毫子	háo-zi	a former silver coin	
貉子	hé-zi	raccoon dog	
号子	hào-zi	work chant	abstract
核子	hé-zi	<i>phys.</i> nucleon	
盒子	hé-zi	case	
黑子	hēi-zi	<i>form.</i> black mole (on the skin) <i>astron.</i> sun spot	
猴子	hóu-zi	monkey	
胡子	hú-zi	beard; moustache	
环子	huán-zi	ring; link	
幌子	huǎng-zi	shop sign; signboard pretence; cover	
混子	hùn-zi	charlatan; fake	human
机子	jī-zi	<i>inf.</i> lome; small machine trigger	
激子	jī-zi	<i>phys.</i> exciton	
夹子	jiā-zi	clip; tongs folder; wallet	
家子	jiā-zi	<i>inf.</i> household; family	abstract
架子	jià-zi	frame; stand; rack framework; skeleton airs; haughty manner	
茧子	jiǎn-zi	silkworm cocoon	
嚼子	jiáo-zi	bit; mouthpiece	
结子	jié-zi	knot	
金子	jīn-zi	gold	mass noun
妗子	jìn-zi	<i>inf.</i> aunt	human
精子	jīng-zi	<i>physiol.</i> sperm; spermatozoon	mass noun
颈子	jǐng-zi	neck	
镜子	jìng-zi	mirror; looking glass <i>inf.</i> glasses; spectacles	
驹子	jū-zi	foal; colt	
锯子	jù-zi	a clamp used in mending crockery	
橘子	jú-zi	tangerine	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
句子	jù-zi	sentence	abstract
卷子	juǎn-zi	steamed roll	
君子	jūn-zi	a man of noble character	human
坑子	kēng-zi	<i>inf.</i> hole; pit; hollow	
空子	kōng-zi	unoccupied place or time; gap chance or opportunity	abstract
口子	kǒu-zi	<i>inf.</i> measure word for persons my husband or my wife	
口子	kǒu-zi	opening; hole; cut; tear	
扣子	kòu-zi	knot button a point of high suspense	
裤子	kù-zi	trousers; pants	
款子	kuǎn-zi	<i>inf.</i> a sum of money	mass noun
筐子	kuāng-zi	a small basket	
框子	kuàng-zi	frame; rim	
辣子	là-zi	<i>inf.</i> hot pepper; chilli	
篮子	lán-zi	basket	
廊子	láng-zi	porch; corridor	
浪子	làng-zi	prodigal; loafer; wastrel	human
老子	lǎo-zi	<i>inf.</i> father	human
豹子	lí-zi	leopard cat	
李子	lǐ-zi	plum	
例子	lì-zi	example	abstract
帘子	lián-zi	<i>inf.</i> (hanging) screen; curtain	
莲子	lián-zi	lotus seed	
料子	liào-zi	material for making clothes	
林子	lín-zi	<i>inf.</i> woods; grove; forest	
瘤子	liú-zi	<i>inf.</i> tumor	
炉子	lú-zi	stove; oven; furnace	
路子	lù-zi	way; approach; means social connections	
乱子	luàn-zi	disturbance; trouble	
轮子	lùn-zi	wheel	
骡子	luó-zi	mule	
码子	mǎ-zi	numeral counter; chip	
麦子	mài-zi	wheat	mass noun
帽子	mào-zi	headgear; hat; cap label; tag; brand	
面子	miàn-zi	outer part; face reputation; prestige feelings; sensibilities	
末子	mò-zi	trowel	
奶子	nǎi-zi	<i>inf.</i> milk	mass noun
男子	nán-zi	man; male	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
脑子	nǎo-zi	<i>inf.</i> brain brains; mind; head	
内子	nèi-zi	<i>form.</i> my wife	human
碾子	niǎn-zi	roller and millstone	
镊子	niè-zi	tweezers	
孽子	niè-zi	an unfilial son	human
女子	nǚ-zi	woman; female	
耙子	pá-zi	rake	
拍子	pāi-zi	bat; racket <i>mus.</i> beat; time	
盘子	pán-zi	plate; tray; dish	
胖子	pang-zi	fat person; fatty	human
袍子	páo-zi	<i>zool.</i> roe deer	
袍子	páo-zi	robe; gown	
胚子	pēi-zi	silkworm embryo egg (fig.); person	
喷子	pēn-zi	sprayer; sprayer apparatus	
皮子	pí-zi	leather; hide fur	
痞子	pǐ-zi	ruffian; riffraff	human
片子	piān-zi	a flat, thin piece; slice visiting card	
骗子	piàn-zi	swindler; cheat; trickster	human
票子	piào-zi	bank note; paper money; bill	
瓶子	píng-zi	bottle; vase; flask	
铺子	pū-zi	shop; store	
妻子	qī-zi	wife	human
棋子	qí-zi	piece (in a board game); chessman	
旗子	qí-zi	flag; banner	
钳子	qián-zi	pliers; pincers; forceps	
曲子	qǔ-zi	song; tune; melody	
圈子	quān-zi	circle; ring	
瘸子	qué-zi	<i>inf.</i> a lame person; cripple	human
裙子	qún-zi	skirt	
日子	rì-zi	day; date time life	abstract
嗓子	sǎng-zi	throat; larynx	
嫂子	sǎo-zi	<i>inf.</i> elder brother's wife	human
沙子	shā-zi	sand; grit small grains; pellets	
傻子	shǎ-zi	blockhead; fool; simpleton	human
勺子	sháo-zi	ladle; scoop	
绳子	shéng-zi	cord; rope; string	
狮子	shī-zi	lion	
瘦子	shòu-zi	a lean (or thin) person	human
梳子	shū-zi	comb	
刷子	shuā-zi	brush	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
栓子	shuān-zi	<i>med.</i> embolus	
台子	tái-zi	<i>inf.</i> platform; stage	
太子	tài-zi	crown prince	human
瘫子	tān-zi	a person suffering from paralysis; paralytic	
毯子	tán-zi	blanket	
桃子	táo-zi	peach	
套子	tào-zi	sheath; case; cover conventionality	
梯子	tī-zi	ladder	
蹄子	tí-zi	<i>inf.</i> hoof	
条子	tiáo-zi	strip a brief informal note	
帖子	tiē-zi	invitation; note card	
秃子	tū-zi	baldhead; baldplate	
团子	tuán-zi	dumpling	
腿子	tuǐ-zi	<i>inf.</i> hired thug; lackey; henchman	human
驼子	tuó-zi	<i>inf.</i> hunchback; humpback	human
坨子	tuó-zi	lump heap	
丸子	wán-zi	a round mass of food; ball pill; bolus	
腕子	wàn-zi	wrist	
王子	wáng-zi	king's son; prince	human
网子	wǎng-zi	net; hairnet	
望子	wàng-zi	shop sign in the form of a streamer	
位子	wèi-zi	seat; place	
蚊子	wén-zi	mosquito	
瘡子	wù-zi	<i>med.</i> naevus; mole	
瞎子	xiā-zi	a blind person	human
销子	xiāo-zi	pin; peg; dowel; bolt	
孝子	xiào-zi	a filial son son in mourning	human
蝎子	xiè-zi	scorpion	
芯子	xìn-zi	fuse (as in a firecracker); wick (as in a candle) the forked tongue of a snake	
性子	xìng-zi	temper strength; potency	abstract
袖子	xiù-zi	sleeve	
旋子	xuàn-zi	copper plate hot water container for warming wine	
靴子	xuē-zi	boots	
鸭子	yā-zi	<i>inf.</i> duck	
秧子	yāng-zi	seedling; sprout vine young; fry	
样子	yàng-zi	appearance; shape manner; air	abstract
叶子	yè-zi	leaf	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
椅子	yǐ-zi	chair	
银子	yín-zi	silver; money	
引子	yǐn-zi	<i>theat.</i> an actor's opening words <i>mus.</i> introductory music introduction	abstract
饮子	yǐn-zi	<i>Chin. med.</i> a decoction of Chin. medicine to be taken cold	
印子	yìn-zi	mark; trace; print	abstract
影子	yǐng-zi	shadow reflection trace; vague impression	
游子	yóu-zi	<i>form.</i> a man travelling or residing in a place far away	human
柚子	yòu-zi	<i>bot.</i> shaddock; pomelo	
鱼子	yú-zi	(fish) roe	
园子	yuán-zi	orchard or garden	
院子	yuàn-zi	courtyard; yard	
簪子	zān-zi	hair clasp	
凿子	záo-zi	chisel	

List of –er suffixed words from Jia 1990: *Dictionary of Rhoticization in Beijing speech (Běijīnghuà érhuà cídiǎn 北京话儿化词典)* (total of ~175 words):

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
板儿(子)	bǎn-er	board (often wooden)	
绊儿	bàn-er	to trip someone	
本儿	běn-er	capital; asset	abstract
本儿(子)	běn-er	book; booklet	
边儿	biān-er	end edge	
表儿	biǎo-er	schedule	
脖儿(子)	bó-er	neck; things that resemble a neck	
布儿	bù-er	small piece of cloth	
步儿(子)	bù-er	step; pace	
步儿	bù-er	stage of a certain event or thing	abstract
菜儿	cài-er	vegetable and meat dishes	
槽儿(子)	cáo-er	manger; vat; tank	
槽儿	cáo-er	measure word doors and windows	
叉儿(子)	chā-er	fork	
唱儿	chàng-er	tune; music; melody	abstract
车儿	chē-er	vehicles with often one or two wheels	
虫儿(子)	chóng-er	insect	
穿儿	chuān-er	clothing	
窗儿(子)	chuāng-er	window	
锤儿(子)	chuí-er	hammer	
词儿	cí-er	spoken or written words	abstract
刺儿	cì-er	small and pointy object; thorn thorny (persons)	
袋儿(子)	dài-er	bag	
蛋儿	dàn-er	egg	
弹儿(子)	dàn-er	pellet	
刀儿	dāo-er	small knife	
凳儿(子)	dèng-er	stool; small seat	
底儿	dǐ-er	most bottom part	abstract
地儿	dì-er	place; position	abstract
颠儿	diān-er	to leave	
店儿	diàn-er	small store	
钉儿(子)	dīng-er	nail	
法儿(子)	fǎ-er	method; way	abstract
方儿(子)	fāng-er	prescription	
风儿	fēng-er	breeze news; rumor	
盖儿(子)	gài-er	object used to seal the top of another object	
岗儿(子)	gǎng-er	small hill or slope	
哥儿	gē-er	term for younger and older brothers	human
个儿(子)	gè-er	height; stature; build	abstract
个儿	ge-er	single person or object	
爪儿(子)	guā-er	feet of animals	
冠儿	guān-er	old times: round object on top of the head	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
		for binding one's hair	
馆儿(子)	guǎn-er	common name for the branches that offer service	
罐儿	guàn-er	small pot or jar often used in pottery	dim. funct.
光儿	guāng-er	weak light	
柜儿(子)	guì-er	cupboard; cabinet	
棍儿(子)	gùn-er	long and narrow object; stick; rod	
滚儿	gǔn-er	action of rolling over	
果儿(子)	guǒ-er	fruit	
孩儿(子)	hái-er	child	human
好儿	hǎo-er	grace; favor; good thing	abstract
号儿	hào-er	mark; sign	abstract
		measure word	
盒儿(子)	hé-er	case	
齄儿	hōu-er	very; tremendously	
后儿	hòu-er	day after tomorrow	
花儿	huā-er	flower	
话儿	huà-er	words; speech; discourse	abstract
谎儿	huǎng-er	lie	
活儿	huó-er	product work	
火儿	huǒ-er	furious; anger	abstract
夹儿(子)	jiā-er	small container for keeping money clip; thongs	
架儿(子)	jià-er	shelf; frame	
尖儿	jiān-er	sharp and small end of an object	
角儿	jiǎo-er	role (plays, etc) actor/actress	
街儿	jiē-er	street	
姐儿	jiě-er	term for younger and older sisters	human
今儿	jīn-er	today	
驹儿(子)	jū-er	young offspring of a horse, mule, etc.	
句儿(子)	jù-er	sentence	abstract
坑儿(子)	kēng-er	hole; pit; hollow	
口儿(子)	kǒu-er	hole; opening; cut; gash	
口儿	kǒu-er	measure word for people and amount of movements made by the mouth	
块儿	kuài-er	position: here, this place part of an object	
肩儿	jiān-er	shoulder	
脚儿	jiǎo-er	foot step	
蓝儿(子)	lán-er	basket	
乐儿(子)	lè-er	happy event	abstract
泪儿	lèi-er	tear	
力儿	lì-er	power; strength	abstract
帘儿(子)	lián-er	curtain	
瘤儿(子)	liú-er	tumor	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
篓儿(子)	lǒu-er	basket	
炉儿(子)	lú-er	stove; oven; furnace	
轮儿	lún-er	wheel	
轮儿(子)	lún-er	measure word	
码儿(子)	mǎ-er	symbol for numbers or characters	
帽儿(子)	mào-er	hat	
帽儿	mào-er	things that resemble hats	
门儿	mén-er	door or that what resembles a door	
梦儿	mèng-er	dream	
命儿	mìng-er	luck; fate	abstract
膜儿	mó-er	membrane	
模儿(子)	mó-er	mould; matrix; pattern	
年儿	nián-er	year: years	
鸟儿	niǎo-er	small bird	
拍儿(子)	pāi-er	batting and hitting tool; bat; racket	
牌儿(子)	pái-er	mark; symbol name (of thing or organization)	
盘儿(子)	pán-er	tray; plate; dish	
盼儿	pàn-er	hope	
派儿	pài-er	manner; style	abstract
皮儿	pí-er	hide; outside	
瓶儿(子)	píng-er	bottle; vase; flask	
瓶儿	píng-er	measure word	
坡儿(子)	pō-er	slanting surface; slope	
铺儿(子)	pū-er	shop; store	
腔儿	qiāng-er	that what is said; words	
亲儿	qīn-er	to kiss	
球儿	qiú-er	glass balls children play with; marble	
人儿	rén-er	people; person	
散儿	sǎn-er	sloppy (clothing, etc)	
嗓儿(子)	sǎng-er	voice	
山儿	shān-er	small mountain	dimin. funct.
声儿(子)	shēng-er	sound	abstract
声儿	shēng-er	measure word	
绳儿(子)	shéng-er	cord; rope; string	
食儿	shí-er	feed (for animals)	
事儿	shì-er	thing; matter work; business to attend	abstract
梳儿(子)	shū-er	comb	
水儿	shuǐ-er	juice in fruit or other juices	mass noun
毯儿(子)	tán-er	blanket	
桃儿(子)	táo-er	peach	
桃儿	táo-er	things that resemble peaches	
蹄子	tí-er	foot of animals such as horses and sheep; hoof	
兔儿(子)	tù-er	rabbit; hare	
腿儿	tuǐ-er	the part of the object that supports the weight, often leg-shaped	

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
玩儿	wán-er	to play	verb
腕儿(子)	wàn-er	wrist	
网儿(子)	wǎng-er	net worn on the top of a woman's head; hairnet	
味儿	wèi-er	taste; flavor; smell	abstract
窝儿	wō-er	position; place	abstract
屋儿(子)	wū-er	house	
想儿	xiǎng-er	hope	
小儿	xiǎo-er	times when one was young male baby	human
些儿	xiē-er	few; little (bit)	
性儿(子)	xìng-er	temper	abstract
鸦儿	yā-er	kind of crow	
牙儿	yá-er	measure word for objects shaped like the crescent moon (food, etc.)	
样儿(子)	yàng-er	shape; form	abstract
样儿	yàng-er	measure word	
叶儿(子)	yè-er	leaf	
页儿	yè-er	measure word for page	
鱼儿	yú-er	small fish	
缘儿	yuán-er	fate	abstract
远儿	yuǎn-er	far	
院儿(子)	yuàn-er	courtyard; yard	
月儿	yuè-er	moon	
崽儿	zǎi-er	small and young animal	
簪儿(子)	zān-er	ornament on a woman's head	
凿儿	záo-er	term for an ugly appearance	
渣儿(子)	zhā-er	residue	
珠儿(子)	zhū-er	pearl	
桌儿(子)	zhuō-er	table	
桌儿	zhuō-er	measure word	
昨儿	zuó-er	yesterday	

List of -er suffixed words corrected or discarded by the native speaker

Mandarin Chinese	Pinyin	Meaning	Notes
表儿	biǎo-er	schedule small watch	
长儿	cháng-er	length (absolute and of time)	
吃儿	chī-er	food	
空儿	kōng-er	not dependable or honest	
胖儿	pàng-er	fatty child	
身儿	shēn-er	body	
血儿	xuè-er	small amounts of blood	
药儿	yào-er	tablets for mostly children	