

## **A note on the suffix *-i* in colloquial Spanish: iconic motivation, distribution and values**

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### **Abstract**

*The Diccionario de afijos del español contemporáneo (Fábregas 2023) reports the presence of an unstressed suffix -i, “of uncertain origin, possibly sound symbolic”, in Spanish. Fábregas notes that this suffix is primarily found in noun hypocoristics (e.g. Paqui, Juani, Pedri) but it also attaches to other categories, including adjectives (e.g. cuqui ‘cute’) and terms of address (e.g. mami ‘mummy’, cari ‘dear’). This article has three main goals. Firstly, building on previous studies as well as an examination of additional colloquial Spanish data, I aim to describe the specific distribution of the suffix, exploring whether there are other bases to which it may attach. Secondly, I examine the main semantic and pragmatic values of the affix, noting its productivity in colloquial Spanish, particularly among certain groups of speakers. Finally, building upon traditional and more recent works on sound symbolism, and drawing from the enactive theory of language, I discuss why the suffix -i may be said to have acquired iconic meanings among Spanish-speakers.*

**Keywords:** sound-symbolism – colloquial Spanish – high vowel – size iconicism – mitigation

### **Résumé**

*Le Diccionario de afijos del español contemporáneo (Fábregas 2023) signale la présence d’un suffixe atone -i, « d’origine incertaine, probablement symbolique du son », en espagnol. Fábregas note que ce suffixe se trouve principalement dans les hypocoristiques de noms (par exemple, Paqui, Juani, Pedri), mais il se fixe également à d’autres catégories, y compris les adjectifs (par exemple, cuqui ‘joli’) et les termes d’adresse (par exemple, mami ‘maman’, cari ‘chéri’). Cet article a trois objectifs principaux. Premièrement, en s’appuyant sur des études antérieures ainsi que sur l’examen de données supplémentaires en espagnol colloquial, je cherche à décrire la distribution spécifique du suffixe, explorant s’il peut se fixer à d’autres bases. Deuxièmement, j’examine les principales valeurs sémantiques et pragmatiques de l’affixe, notant sa productivité en espagnol colloquiale, en particulier parmi certains groupes de locuteurs. Enfin, en m’appuyant sur des travaux traditionnels et plus récents sur la symbolique sonore, et en m’inspirant de la théorie éactive du langage, je discute les raisons pour lesquelles le suffixe -i pourrait avoir acquis des significations iconiques parmi certains groupes d’hispanophones.*

**Mots-clé :** phonosymbolisme – espagnol colloquial – voyelle haute – symbolisme de taille – atténuation

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## 1. Introduction: sound symbolism and iconicity

It has been traditionally assumed that sound and meaning have an arbitrary relationship to each other within the linguistic sign (Saussure 1916, Hockett 1958, Pinker 1994). However, several studies have called into question this alleged strict arbitrariness based on a wide array of experiments and exceptions, which seem to indicate some sort of connection between sound and meaning (see, among others, Köller 1929, Sapir 1929, Hinton, Nichols and Ohala 1994, Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz, Feist 2013, Haynie et al. 2014, Nobile and Vallauri 2015, Blasi et al. 2016, Nobile 2019).

This non-arbitrary linkage between sound and meaning is often defined as *sound symbolism*. The term has been used in linguistics to cover varied phenomena, including onomatopoeia (e.g. *miau* ‘meow’ in Spanish), ideophones (e.g. *kitdik kitdik* ‘manner of shaking, vibrating’ in Didinga, de Jong 2002: 124; *plasta-plasta* ‘crashing down’ in Basque, Ibarretxe 2017: 200) and interjections (e.g. *huh?* in English), as well as to refer to specific associations of meaning and individual consonants and vowels (or their specific features), particular clusters of segments, and suprasegments (e.g. stress, tone or length).

As pointed out by Monneret (2019), it would probably be more accurate to characterise this kind of association between sound and meaning as *iconic* rather than *symbolic* in Peirce’s tradition, where icons are reserved for signs that display some kind of similarity between the signifier and meaning, while in symbols, this relationship is purely arbitrary. However, given that the term ‘sound symbolism’ is generally used in the literature to refer to any motivated (i.e. non-arbitrary) relationship between the phonological manifestation of a word and its meaning (Nobile 2019), I will use the term here (although I will return to the notion of iconicity later).

Within this broad understanding of sound symbolism, Hinton, Nichols and Ohala’s (1994) classic study on sound symbolism established a typology of four categories, ranging from less to more conventionalized relationships. The authors position at one end of their typology *corporeal sound symbolism*, in which “sound only has meaning in that it directly reflects an internal state of the body or mind” (Hinton, Nichols and Ohala 1994: 2) This includes, for example, involuntary coughing or hiccupping, as well as other phenomena – not exactly corporeal – like vocatives, turn-taking signals, and other sounds that are used to gain the attention of the hearer. However, the authors admit that these cases represent not true symbols, but rather signs or symptoms.<sup>2</sup>

The second case of sound symbolism is imitative sound symbolism, which mostly covers onomatopoeia and words of onomatopoeic origin that mimic environmental sounds (e.g. *bang*, *swish*). In many of these words and expressions, the acoustic or visual representation of the sign is similar to its meaning in some respect. Unlike corporeal symbolism, imitative sound symbolism is not usually related to a particular emotional or physical state of the speaker.

The third class of sound symbolism, which is particularly relevant to the present study, is *synaesthetic sound symbolism*. This encompasses (Hinton, Nichols and Ohala 1994: 4):

certain vowels, consonants and suprasegmentals [that] are chosen to consistently represent visual, tactile, or proprioceptive properties of objects such as size or shape. For example, segments such as

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<sup>2</sup> Monneret (2019: 13) proposes that these cases of sound symbolism are better classified as *indexes*.

palatal consonants and high vowels are frequently used for diminutive forms and other words representing small objects. Expressive intonation patterns are also used synesthetically, as in the use of deep voice and vowel lengthening in speaking of large objects (“*It was a bi-i-ig fish!*”).

In connection to this type of sound symbolism, it is worth noting that a wide range of interdisciplinary studies have reported a cognitive ability of humans to *translate* information from one specific sensorial modality to another. This ability is the basis for this type of iconicity, in which two different domains are linked on the basis of their similarity (see, among others, Köhler 1929, Ramchandran and Hubbard 2001, Melero Carrasco 2015 and references in Monzó Gallo 2017: 11, and Nobile 2019). In this article, I will explore the iconic motivation underlying some of the uses of the final unstressed high vowel *i* in colloquial Spanish, an ending that is gaining popularity among certain groups of speakers in informal contexts, as we will see.

The fourth type of sound symbolism in Hinton, Nichols and Ohala’s (1994) typology is *conventional sound symbolism*, which refers to the “analogical association of certain phonemes and clusters with certain meanings”. These are often called *phonaesthemes*. For instance, Nobile (2019: XLIV) reports that the initial consonant cluster *fl-* in French verbs often refers to a fluid type of movement; in fact, this author reports that 80% of the verbs beginning with this cluster are linked to that particular meaning. According to Nobile, a plausible motivating factor for this connection is that “the voiceless fricative /f/ is one of the most suitable to represent a light aerial noise (with /s/) and the lateral approximant /l/ is in turn one of the consonants that exert the least resistance to the passage of air”. Hinton, Nichols and Ohala observe that conventional sound symbolism is largely language-specific, contrary to the previous three categories, for which there tend to be many cross-linguistic similarities. However, the authors acknowledge the existence of phonaesthemes with universal properties that also fit into the previous categories. In fact, once it is accepted that there is some kind of analogical association between sounds and certain meanings in conventional sound symbolism, the boundary between conventional and synaesthetic sound symbolism is blurred.

In this article I investigate some of the most salient iconic values associated with a particular affix in colloquial Spanish, the unstressed final /i/, commonly used by particular subgroups of speakers to create a more informal atmosphere in conversations or convey various sorts of affective connotations (e.g. *guap-i* < *guap-o* ‘beautiful’, *fiest-i* < *fiest-a* ‘party’, *guarr-i* < *guarr-a* ‘dirty FEM’). The structure of the article is as follows. In section 2, building on previous research and the inspection of additional colloquial data, I first summarise the bases to which *i* can be attached, the main sources of this ending (which, as we will see, is not always a suffix), the sorts of speakers who tend to use it most and its most frequent values. Next, in section 3, traditional explanations of the sound symbolism of the high front vowel /i/ are reviewed and connected to enactive approaches in the study of language. It will be argued that the enactive paradigm facilitates a comprehension of the iconic values linked to some of the recent functions of this particular ending in colloquial Spanish. Finally, section 4 concludes the article.

## **2. The data: the final -i in colloquial Spanish**

Although unstressed *-i* is otherwise a relatively rare ending in Spanish, it has been reported to be common in modern colloquial usage, typically in informal contexts and with affective

connotations (De Bruyne 1995, Monzó Gallo 2017, 2019, de Benito 2021). De Bruyne (1995: 78) observes that this unstressed suffix “seems to function (...) as a genuine appreciative suffix (essentially diminutive in nature)”. Regarding its origins, the *Diccionario de afijos del español contemporáneo* (Fábregas 2023) states that they are uncertain, though “possibly sound symbolic”. Monzó Gallo (2019) proposes that the roots of this suffix may lie in adult-child interactions.

Elaborating on recent studies on the topic, I will first review the bases to which *-i* can be attached in colloquial Spanish (§2.1), describe the different factors that favour its appearance, discuss its affixal nature (§2.2) and characterise the groups of speakers that tend to employ it most (§2.3). I will then discuss the most common values of the affix (§2.4), which will be argued to be iconic in nature. To support my assertions, I will provide data on colloquial Spanish obtained from two sources, the University of Valencia’s Val.Es.Co<sup>3</sup> corpus of oral colloquial Spanish and my own sampling of colloquial written interactions that took place over the *WhatsApp* social network.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.1. Bases to which *-i* can be added and some distributional properties

According to Fábregas (2023), the unstressed suffix *-i* is primarily found in noun hypocoristics (e.g. *Paqu-i*, *Juan-i*, *Pedr-i*), in certain adjectival formations (e.g. *cuqu-i* ‘cute’) and in terms of address (e.g. *mam-i* ‘mummy’). In fact, in the linguistic corpora inspected for this study, noun hypocoristics are the most frequent nominal bases to which *-i* is added. A few examples are presented in (1) (here and in all subsequent examples the suffix will be marked in boldface). It is important to note that these hypocoristics do not only arise as vocatives, when a particular speaker is addressed, but are also commonly found in referential speech, as illustrated in (2).

### (1) Hypocoristics with the affix *-i* appearing in WhatsApp chats, 2021

- a. Blanqu-**i** > Blanca
- b. Ev-**i** > Eva
- c. Estef-**i** > Estefanía
- d. Monch-**i** > Montse
- f. Pabl-**i** > Pablo

### (2) Hypocoristics in referential speech

*Después llamo yo a Juan-**i** y le digo a ver si tiene el otro para que me lo traigaa y y lo cambiamos / ¿¿eh??* (Val.Es.Co, 1996.PF.14)

‘Afterwards, I’ll call Juan-**i** ↑ and ask her if she has the other one so that she can bring it, and we’ll exchange it, okay?’

Several authors have confirmed the productivity of the *-i* ending in Spanish hypocoristics (Monzó Gallo 2017, 2019, García-Page 2018). García-Page (2018) points to various

<sup>3</sup> Directed by Salvador Pons Bordería and available at <<https://www.valesco.es>>.

<sup>4</sup> I am greatly indebted to the various informants who gave me permission to investigate their online interactions on this application for purposes of the present study.

morphological processes that can contribute to its appearance. First, he observes that truncation frequently leads to the emergence of a final *-i* in Spanish personal names, given that many contain an internal syllable with *-i*, as in *Desi* < *Desiderio*, *Virgi* < *Virginia*, *Adri* < *Adriana*, *Javi* < *Javier*, *Toni* < *Antonio*. In these cases, the final *-i* is not a true affix. However, a second group of common hypocoristics ending in *-i* arises through the replacement of the final vowel of the noun with *-i*, as in *Rosi* < *Rosa*, *Evi* < *Eva*, *Pabli* < *Pabo*; note that sometimes it is not the final vowel that is deleted and replaced with an *-i* but rather a group of segments at the right edge of the prosodic word, as in *Pili* < *Pilar* or *Migui* < *Miguel* (García-Page 2018: 242). Finally, while less productive, another mechanism of *-i* hypocoristic formation involves adding *-i* to a base, as seen in *Flori* < *Flor*, *Luci* < *Luz* (García-Page 2018: 245). Only in the latter two processes can the final *-i* be analysed as a genuine suffix.

Beyond hypocoristics, the affix *-i* is attested in various nominal forms in colloquial Spanish. Although it is most commonly associated with countable nouns (e.g. *fiest-i* < *fiest-a* ‘party’, *suegr-i-s* < *suegr-o-s* ‘parents in law’, *mierd-i* < *mierd-a* ‘shit’), in the speech of some speakers it can also appear in uncountable nouns (e.g. *fuegui* < *fuego* ‘fire’). In informal registers, it is commonly found in adjectives (e.g. *loqu-i* < *loc-o/a* ‘crazy MASC/FEM’ *pij-i* < *pij-o/a* ‘posh MASC/FEM’, *pav-i* < *pav-a* ‘foolish FEM’, *guap-i* < *guap-a* ‘beautiful FEM’). Monzó Gallo (2019: 15-16) specifies that the *-i* ending often emerges in kinship nouns (e.g. *pap-i* < *pap-á* ‘dad’, *mam-i* < *mam-á* ‘mum’), in nouns and adjectives related to the world of babies and children (e.g. *chul-i* < *chul-o* ‘lovely’)<sup>5</sup> and in affectionate appellatives such as *cari*, truncated from *cariño* ‘darling, baby’ and *gord-i* ‘babe’ from *gordo* ‘fat’ (probably from *gord-it-o/a* ‘fat DIM MASC/FEM’).

With respect to the phonological properties of the nominal and adjectival bases to which *-i* can be attached, it seems that *-i* is not generally suffixed to words that end in a consonant (e.g. *\*mar-i* < *mar* ‘sea’, *\*pan-i* < *pan* ‘bread’, *\*fácil-i* < *fácil* ‘simple’, *\*felic-i* < *feliz* ‘happy’) or in *-e* (e.g. *\*libr-i* < *libr-e* ‘free’, *\*inteligent-i* < *inteligente* ‘intelligent’). Likewise, besides *mami* ‘mummy’ and *papi* ‘daddy’, words ending in a stressed vowel do not generally surface with *-i* in colloquial Spanish (*\*men-i*, *\*menúi* < *menú* ‘menu’). In a nutshell, according to the data documented in the literature (and confirmed by the additional colloquial data consulted here), it seems likely that the *-i* affix is permissible only in bases classified as *o*-stems (e.g. *tont-i* < *tont-o* ‘silly MASC’) and *a*-stems (e.g. *loqu-i* < *loc-a* ‘crazy’ FEM). This apparent restriction does not apply, however, when the *-i* is part of the larger suffix *-uqui*, typical in the language of adolescents and young adults, as in *calor-uqui* < *calor* ‘heat’. Nonetheless, conclusive confirmation that *-i* epenthesis is banned in all nominal bases ending in a consonant, *-e* or a stressed vowel will have to wait for future research based on larger oral corpora.

Interestingly, de Benito (2021: 269) has recently pointed out that in the informal written Spanish used on the Twitter networking service the final *-i* is not restricted to nominal and adjectival bases but can also appear with other bases. For instance, she observes that final *-i* is very common in the greeting form *holi* < *hola* ‘hello’, in *por fi* (from the truncated form *por fa*

<sup>5</sup> In some of these words associated with adult-child speech, the ending *-i* is not always a true affix. For instance, in *chupi* ‘great, awesome’, *chachi* ‘cool, awesome’ and the compound *chachipiruli* the final *-i* seems to be part of the base; these words do not derive from the etymons *\*chup/chupa/chupo* or *\*chach/chacho*.



‘Fine, although we already have a case nearby... My brother-in-law (Juan’s brother) is getting a PCR test today.’

B: *Jolines... pero no está muy grave, ¿no? Ánimo y mucho cuidado, ya nos vais contando...* 🙄🙄🙄

‘Jeez... but he’s not feeling too bad, is he? Keep your chin up and take care, keep us posted...’ 🙄🙄🙄

C: *Bon dia chicas! ¡Ostris! Un abrazo* 🤗

‘Good morning, girls! Wow! A hug 🤗’

(WhatsApp group chat among nine women in their late 30s, 27-7-2020)

The *-s* in the base *ostras* is retained in the more affectionate (or even attenuated) version *ostris* (4c). Likewise, the ending *-is* arises in plural forms, where the *-s* is an inflectional ending for the plural, as in *bes-i-s* < *bes-o-s* ‘kisses’, *amigu-i-s* < *amig-a-s* ‘friends FEM’. Interestingly, de Benito (2021: 266-7) claims that the sequence *-is* is sometimes an allomorph of *-i*. She bases this claim on the observation that the variant *-is* occurs in forms that do not contain an *-s* in the base, and in some dialects where the *-is* ending has no plural interpretation. For instance, de Benito documents *por fis* as a variant of *por fi* < *por favor* ‘please’ and the emergence of *-is* with a singular meaning in kinship and close relations in Bolivian and Costa Rican Spanish (e.g. *prim-is* < *prima* ‘cousin FEM SING’ de Benito 2021: 267).

Though Kornfeld (2021: 276) notes that diminutives with “an affectionate or attenuating interpretation” – which are possible nuances of *-i* (see §2.4 below) – can also arise in pronouns, I found no such instances in my own data. Nonetheless, as a native speaker, I would not characterize as ungrammatical the pronominal forms *nosotris* < *nosotras* ‘we’ or *vosotris* < *vosotras* ‘you PLURAL’ in contexts of close familiarity.

In short, it seems that *-i* can be added to almost every syntactic category except for three types of functional words, namely prepositions (*\*di* < *de* ‘of, from’, *\*coni* < *con* ‘with’), conjunctions (*\*qui* < *que* ‘that’, *\*peri* < *pero* ‘but’) and determiners (*\*li* < *la* ‘the FEM’, *\*esti* < *esta* ‘this FEM’). Future research involving larger colloquial corpora will need to corroborate (or falsify) this claim.

Another noteworthy property of the affix *-i* is that it may occur in conjunction with other suffixes as long as they have compatible meanings (5a, b). Kornfeld (2021: 270) notes that this is a “distinctive feature of appreciative morphology” in general (e.g. *poqu-it-ín* ‘a bit. DIM DIM’). The affective *-i* always follows the other suffixes and is therefore generally located closer to right edge of the prosodic word. This is illustrated in (5a-c), where *-i* occurs after other appreciative affixes. Note that in the case of plural nouns or adjectives (5b, 5d), the plural affix always appears after the *-i*.

- (5) a. *poqu-it-ín* > *poqu-it*<sub>DIM</sub>-*ín*<sub>DIM</sub>-*i*<sub>AFFECT</sub><sup>7</sup> (Twitter, 12-12-2012)  
 ‘little, a bit (informal)’  
 b. *buen-orr*<sub>AUGM-O-TV-SPL</sub> > *buen-orr-i*<sub>AFFECT-SPL</sub><sup>8</sup> (Twitter, 28-8-2014)  
 ‘very attractive guys, good looking guys (informal)’  
 c. *cop-ich*<sub>INTERFIX-uel</sub><sub>DIM-a-TV</sub> > *cop-ich*<sub>INTERFIX-uel</sub><sub>DIM</sub>-*i*<sub>AFFECT</sub>  
 ‘(alcoholic) drink (informal)’

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <<https://twitter.com/armxndo/status/278643372758036480>> on 15-12-2023.

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <<https://twitter.com/Ichabod1880/status/505087271075602434>> on 15-12-2023.

d. *can-a*-S<sub>PL</sub> > *can-i*-AFFECT-S<sub>PL</sub>  
 ‘grey hair’

(Val.Es.Co, 2020\_36)

Finally, the affective affix *-i* can also be attached to forms that have themselves undergone other derivational processes such as compounding, as illustrated in (6a, b). These forms, also without the *-i* ending, are only used in very informal registers. The first *-i* between the two components of the compound *putivuelta/i* (6a) seems to be a linking element which is quite common in Spanish compounds (e.g. *pelirrojo* ‘red hair’, *altibajos* ‘ups and downs’), rather than the affective *-i*. In (6b), the final *-i* in *cuchi*, which is used as an affectionate appellative, seems to be part of the base rather than a suffix.

- (6) a. *puta + vuelta* > *putivuel-t-a* > *putivuel-t-i*-AFFECTIVE<sup>9</sup>  
 ‘whore + tour’  
 ‘Making the rounds of a nightclub or party to see if there is anyone of sexual interest’
- b. *cuchi + panda* > *cuchipanda* > *cuchipand-i*-AFFECTIVE  
 ‘cute + group of friends’  
 ‘tight-knit group of friends’

## 2.2 Sources and (non) affixal status of the final *-i*

The final *-i* can be regarded as a true suffix in adjectival and nominal forms like *chuli* (< *chul-o* ‘nice, lovely’), *fiest-i* (< *fiest-a* ‘party’) or *asqu-i* (< *asc-o* ‘disgust’), in which the final theme vowels are replaced by *-i*, and in verbal bases like the ones we saw in (3a-b), where a final *-o* – the masculine 1st person singular suffix – is replaced by *-i*. The affix *-i* also seems to behave like an appreciative affix in greeting and farewell forms (*holi*, *hasta luego-i*) and adverbs (*muchi*, *poqui*). Likewise, *-i* is an affix in contexts where the *-i* is added to a base that ends in a consonant, although this has only been reported for personal name hypocoristics like *Juan-i* < *Juan* (see §2.1).

In all these cases, as in other instances of appreciative morphology, the insertion of the affix *-i* on no account shifts the base to a new word class, although its semantic and pragmatic values may become modified, conferring a general tone of affection and familiarity to the conversation (7) (see §2.4 for further details).

- (7) The suffix *-i* does not change the category of the base

<i>coleg-a</i> -NOUN ‘colleague’	>	<i>colegu-i</i> -NOUN ‘colleague’
<i>fiest-a</i> -NOUN ‘party’	>	<i>fiest-i</i> -NOUN ‘party’
<i>quier-o</i> -VERB ‘I love you’	>	<i>quier-i</i> -VERB ‘I love you’
<i>hart-a</i> -ADJECTIVE ‘fed up FEM’	>	<i>hart-i</i> -ADJECTIVE ‘fed up’

In colloquial Spanish, however, the final *-i* does not only result from the replacement (e.g. *asqu-i* < *asc-o* ‘disgust’) or insertion of a new suffix into a particular base (e.g. *Juan-i* < *Juan*). On the contrary, as already observed in some of the examples in the preceding subsection, a final *-i* often arises as the result of a morphological process of word truncation in words that contain an internal *i*, and not just in hypocoristics (de Benito 2021: 267). Some examples from

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from <https://es-es.facebook.com/lavecinarubia/videos/mi-amiga-laura-vamos-a-dar-una-putivuelta-yo-vale-pero-sin-llamar-mucho-la-atenci/311810649721907/> on 16-10-2023.



our colloquial data, both oral and written, are provided in (8). In all of these forms, both the truncation and the *-i* ending contribute to the expression of familiarity, proximity and affectivity connotations.

- (8) Final *-i* in colloquial Spanish as a result of truncation
- |                   |                                |                           |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. <i>poli</i>    | < <i>policía</i>               | ‘police, policeman/woman’ |
| b. <i>uni</i>     | < <i>universidad</i>           | ‘university’              |
| c. <i>cari</i>    | < <i>cariño</i>                | ‘darling’                 |
| d. <i>chiqui</i>  | < <i>chiquitín, chiquito/a</i> | ‘little one’              |
| e. <i>flequi</i>  | < <i>flequillo</i>             | ‘fringe’                  |
| f. <i>tranqui</i> | < <i>tranquilo/a</i>           | ‘calm’                    |
| g. <i>ofi</i>     | < <i>oficina</i>               | ‘office’                  |
| h. <i>hosti</i>   | < <i>hostia</i>                | ‘bloody hell’             |
| i. <i>competi</i> | < <i>competición</i>           | ‘competition’             |
| j. <i>publi</i>   | < <i>publicidad</i>            | ‘publicity’               |

Interestingly, all of these types of truncated forms ending in *-i* surface with a trochaic stress pattern, which represents the default stress pattern in the language. Furthermore, most of them display a disyllabic configuration, the preferred size for truncated forms in Spanish (Prieto 1992, Piñeros 2000).<sup>10</sup>

Both the fact that many processes of regular truncation and hypocoristic formation give rise to a final *-i* in truncated forms and the fact that truncation is a morphological process that typically applies in colloquial registers probably reinforce the productivity of the suffix *-i* in informal registers. Given that this final vowel *-i* is already present in informal registers via truncation, with connotations of affection and familiarity, it is not completely unexpected that the affix *-i* develops similar values.

Various authors have established a link between the affix under study and the diminutive affixes, which generally also contain the vowel *i* (*-it-o/a*, *-ic-o/a*, *-ín*, etc.) (De Bruyne 1995: 78, Monzó Gallo 2019, Casado Velarde 1999), not only because of their shared semantic nuances, but because *-i* sometimes results from shortening the diminutive *-it-o/a*, as in *Luisito* > *Luisi* (Fábregas 2023, see also de Benito 2021). Even though such an interpretation cannot account for all the forms that contain *-i(s)*, since “there is not always an equivalent diminutive form with the relevant segment (cf. *Susi*, but *Susanita*)” (Fábregas 2023), or *por fi(s)* < *por favor* (de Benito 2021: 267), it will be shown that the informal *-i* shares various features with the diminutives.

<sup>10</sup> The bisyllabic trochee is the unmarked truncated form, but there are also cases of monosyllabic and trisyllabic truncated forms in Spanish, as shown by, among other authors, Grau Sempere (2013) and Martínez-Paricio and Torres-Tamarit (2019).

## 2.2 Main users of the final *-i*

The final *-i* can be produced by different individuals and groups of speakers in colloquial Spanish, but it is mostly used by three groups of speakers. First, as noted by Monzó Gallo (2017, 2019) this final *-i* is very common in child-directed and child-produced speech, not only in terms of address (*mami*, *papi*) but also generally with any vocabulary associated with the child's world (e.g. *pipi* 'pee', *bibi* < *bibe* < *biberón* 'baby bottle'). Interestingly, this is a feature of child-directed speech in not only Spanish but also other languages (see Monzó Gallo 2019 for cross-linguistic examples).

Secondly, Casado Velarde and Loureda Lamas (2012) have documented the presence of this final *-i* in the language of Spanish teenagers and young adults, either as part of the aforementioned suffix *-uqui* (e.g. *fiestuqui* < *fiesta* 'party') or, more commonly, on its own, as we saw in *colegu-i* from *coleg-a* 'colleague, friend' and *chupi* 'great' (Casado Velarde and Loureda Lamas 2012: 62; see also Gómez Capuz 2007 for additional examples).

Finally, some women – especially those under age forty or fifty – seem prone to incorporating this ending into their colloquial speech, especially in written formats such as online text messages, but also in their oral interactions. The use of the *-i* ending (whether affixal or non-affixal) is common in their interactions not only with children but also, more importantly, with other women. This is not surprising, since the affective *-i* has always been associated with the diminutive, and women have been reported to use it more frequently than men in a number of Spanish varieties (e.g., Paredes 2012, Manjón-Cabeza 2016, Samper Hernández 2019, 2020).

More generally, de Benito (2021: 266) has recently characterized this final *-i* as a morphosyntactic innovation typical of the 'Spanish of the internet', that is, the Spanish employed in online social networks and for computer-mediated communication in general (de Benito 2021: 258).

## 2.3 Main values of the affix *-i*

In appreciative morphology, a lexical base "receives meanings that are connotative rather than denotative" (Kornfeld 2021: 269), and these are precisely the types of meanings that *-i* adds to the bases to which it attaches. Indeed, the characterization of the affix *-i* as a manifestation of appreciative morphology emerges not only from its distributional properties but also from its semantic and pragmatic values. In particular, previous studies have shown that *affectivity* and *familiarity* are among the values most commonly associated with this ending, as well as the fact that it is typical of child speech (De Bruyne 1995, Monzó Gallo 2017, 2009, García Page 2018, de Benito 2021).

Closely related to these values are those of *intimacy* and *proximity*, which explain the use of the *-i* suffix – like other diminutives – to stress in-group membership (Blum Kulka 1992). According to Dressler and Barbaresi (1994: 233, *apud* Caffi 2007), diminutives in general may be seen as "in-group identity markers that fall into the sphere of our notions of familiarity, intimacy and decreased psychological distance". This favours the extensive use of *-i* among certain groups of speakers who share a close relationship such as intimate friends or members

of a single family, not only with hypocoristics, kinship nouns and all types of affective appellatives but also with all the different grammatical categories reviewed in §2.1. A few examples of the *-i* in colloquial Spanish with these affective and proximity/intimacy nuances are given in (9a-d), excerpts from interactions over WhatsApp among a group of close friends, all women in their late thirties. In all these examples the *-i* is a true affix: in the adjectives *cuqui-i* < *cuco* ‘cute MASC’ (9b) and *guap-i* > *guap-a* ‘beautiful, gorgeous FEM’(9c) – the latter also functioning as a vocative and thus textually given final lengthening, mimicking oral production – and in the two nouns *amigu-i-s* < *amigas* ‘friend FEM PL’ (9a) and *chiqu-i-s* < *chicas* ‘girl FEM PL’(9d)<sup>11</sup>, which are also acting as vocatives.

- (9) a. *Gustazo veros, amiguís. ¡Feliz verano!*  
 ‘So nice to see you, friends. Have a happy summer!’ (WhatsApp, 18-7-2023)
- b. A: *¿Esta es la casa de tu bro?*  
 ‘Is this your bro’s house?’  
 B: *Sip. La tienen muy cuqui*  
 ‘Yup. They keep it very cute.’ (WhatsApp, 15-8-2023)
- c. *Muchas felicidades guapiiiii* 🥰🥰  
 ‘Happy birthday, gorgeous!’ (WhatsApp, 1-12-2020)
- d. *Chiquís, voy este finde, ¿os apetece que comamos el sábado?*  
 ‘Girls, I’m coming this weekend. Would you like to have lunch on Saturday?’  
 (WhatsApp, 28-8-2023)

Below in (10a, b) it can be seen that some of the *-i* forms that are used as vocatives in (9) are not restricted to this function and can be employed to designate animate referents.

- (10) a. A: *¿Qué tal con las amiguís? ¿Anoche a tope?*  
 ‘How did it go with your friends? Did you have a blast last night?’  
 B: *Nooo*  
 ‘Noo!’ (WhatsApp, 18-11-2023)
- b. *Los primis han ido esta mañana*  
 ‘The cousins went [to the park] this morning.’ (WhatsApp, 9-9-2023)

In connection to these affective and informal values, Dressler and Barbaresi (1994) have proposed the semantic feature [–SERIOUS] as the basic feature of the diminutive suffix. This can also be posited to be present in all the examples of the informal *-i* we have seen here. Moreover, more than codifying the notion of *smallness*, which is implicit in other diminutives, or just affectivity and familiarity, very often the *-i* conveys a general playful tone and adds a humoristic effect to the interaction (de Benito 2021: 269), which that can be argued to emerge from this [–SERIOUS] feature, as illustrated in (11).

- (11) A: *¿Cómo vas? ¿Cunden las horas?*  
 ‘How are you doing? Being productive?’  
 B: *De puti culi voy. Pero bueno, ya dormiré menos la [semana] que viene.*  
 ‘I’m doing fucking awful. But, well, I’ll sleep less next week.’  
 (WhatsApp, 26-4-2020)

<sup>11</sup> The form *chiquis* could also be argued to be a truncation of *chiqu-it-a-s* ‘girl DIM PL’.

Note that in (11) the *-i* is added twice, in the two components of the vulgar phrase *de puti culi* (< *de puto culo* ‘fucking awful’), which helps to reinforce the intimacy and playful tone of the interaction. More importantly, it is also very likely that the *i-* is used here to attenuate the negative connotations of using taboo words. Likewise, the [–SERIOUS] feature of *-i* helps to mitigate the severity of B’s negative response: generally, in response to the question “How are you doing?” such a negative answer is not expected. Here, given that the two speakers are very close friends, B decides to be honest, but to mitigate her response and comply with positive politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987), she relies on two means, one morphological – adding the *-i* – and the other syntactic – using *Pero bueno* to soften the effect of the preceding *De puti culi*. With these attenuating strategies the speaker attempts to reduce the bluntness of her answer and ensure that her interlocutor is not offended.

Previous studies have pointed out that diminutive markers have generally started out denoting small size but then, “from this concrete, experiential basis, the diminutive has extended its domain of application to functions that the contemporary speaker may or may not readily relate to the concept of size” (Mendoza 2011: 140). One of these functions, which is often linked to *-i* and which we have observed in our data, especially in the speech of women, is mitigation, as already illustrated in (11). This mitigating function has been proposed for other diminutive suffixes as well (Caffi 2007, Mendoza 2011).

This attenuating function and the playful connotations of *-i* are further illustrated in (12a, b) and (13). In the two examples in (12) the *-i* emerges as a means of mitigating certain utterances that contain what are in effect insults (*zorri* > *zorrra* and *golfi* > *golfa*, both meaning ‘whore, slut’). Gaviño Rodríguez (2008: 85) notes that in colloquial speech insults may lose their original abusive value, instead serving to show social proximity and a “high degree of familiarity and complicity” between speakers. This is obvious in (12a): after the insult – with an *-i* to diminish its negative effects – the two participants in the conversation laugh, something that would be unexpected after a true insult.

(12) a. A: *Lo has dicho varias veces, ¡te encantas con mascarilla y lo sabes!*  
 ‘You’ve said it several times, you love yourself in a mask, and you know it!’

B: *Zorriiii* 🤪🤪🤪🤪  
 ‘Whore!’

A: 🤪🤪 (WhatsApp, 28-3-2021)

b. *Yee, golfis. Fotito de Oporto y las amiguís, Laura.*  
 ‘Heey, sluts! [Send a] picture of Oporto and your friends, Laura’.

(WhatsApp, 19-11-2023)

Along the same lines, De Bruyne (1995) and Monzó Gallo (2017, 2019: 16) observe that the suffix *-i* can play the mitigating role characteristic of euphemisms, as in the use of *chichi* instead of *chocho* ‘pussy [vaginal]’ or *me cachis* instead of *me cago [en Dios]* ‘I shit [on God]’ but serving the same function roughly as ‘God damn it!’. Indeed, it seems that this pragmatic mitigating value of *-i* is increasingly exploited recently, at least among certain groups of speakers (particularly woman), and not only to euphemise taboo words, but also to attenuate the negative connotations of any adjective or noun, as illustrated in (13). Here two friends A and B are talking about A’s young son, who has spent the night in pain from an ear infection.

Showing sympathy, B agrees that ear infections are very painful, using a rather vulgar term *perr-a-s* ‘bad, terrible FEM PL’ but mitigating it by adding the *-i* affix to get *perr-i-s*. In this way, the strong negative connotations of this adjective are attenuated, while the bond of familiarity between the two friends is enhanced.

(13) A: *Aunque Juan, pobre, mucho dolor esta noche*  
‘Although Juan, poor thing, [was in] a lot of pain last night.’

B: *Claro, las otitis son perris. ¿Y de qué? Qué mala pata. Mocos supongo.*  
‘Of course, ear infections are terrible. And what’s the cause? What bad luck. I suppose it’s mucus.’

A: *No sé*  
‘I don’t know.’

(WhatsApp, 12-11-2022)

Elsewhere, the affix’s attenuating function is applied to other nouns and adjectives. For example, the *-i* occurs in one conversation about hairdressers with the noun for ‘grey hair’ (*canas* > *can-i-s*, Val.Es.CO 2020\_36) and in another with reference to ‘junk food’ (*comida guarra* > *guarr-i*). The latter appears in a conversation where the speakers are organizing a birthday party where they want to serve some healthy food-but also some not-so-healthy food like sweets; by adding this *-i* to the adjective qualifying this type of food, its negative values are mitigated, helping the speaker to cushion her embarrassment about wanting to eat something she believes she shouldn’t eat.

### 3. Iconic motivation for the affix *-i*

A century ago, linguists like Sapir (1929) Jespersen (1933) had already observed that in the languages of the world there was a clear tendency for certain types of segments to represent objects of specific sizes. In Hinton, Nichols and Ohala’s (1994) typology of sound symbolism, what they call size sound symbolism falls within the broader category of synaesthetic sound symbolism referred to above (§1), in which certain phonological or phonetic properties of given segments and suprasegments are systematically regarded as representing some property of reality, such as size or shape.

As we noted above, the existence of this type of iconic motivation within the linguistic sign system is evidence of a human cognitive ability to translate information from one specific sensorial modality to another, based on the similarity between some aspect of the sound and different dimensions of its meanings. In connection to our study, high front vowels – and, in general, high frequency sounds and suprasegments – have been traditionally linked to concepts such as ‘smallness’, precisely because these vowels are the *smaller* in the sense that the oral cavity is less open than in other vowels, and their F2 values (which correspond to degree of closeness) are the highest (see, among others, Jespersen 1933, Sapir 1929, Ohala 1984, 1994, De Bruyne 1995). For example, in many languages, diminutives tend to be realized with high front vowels (Ultan 1978) and palatal consonants (Nichols 1971). This is relevant for our case study, since the final unstressed *-i* in colloquial Spanish has been shown to share several properties and semantic features with diminutives (see §2).

The correspondence between small size and high frequency sounds was formulated under Ohala’s (1984, 1994) *Frequency Code* hypothesis, which specifically posited that high

frequency sounds and suprasegments tended to be associated with concepts such as ‘small size’ and low frequency sounds and tones tended to be associated with concepts like ‘big size’. Even though the strong version of this hypothesis and some of its predictions have been partially challenged in recent studies (e.g. Winter et al. 2021, Molineaux 2024), its main tenets in connection to ‘high pitch’ and ‘small size’ are still regarded as broadly valid. In this respect, for instance, Blasi et al.’s (2016) recent cross-linguistic study has revealed a statistically significant association between the concept of ‘small’ and high front vowels in words across nearly two-thirds of the world’s languages, though the association between ‘low vowels’ and ‘big size’ was not shown to be statistically significant on the same global scale (Blasi et al. 2016: 18021).

In this study, we have confirmed that the affix *-i* does not literally codify the expression of smallness, but it expresses semantic and pragmatic connotations akin to other diminutives, such as ‘affectivity,’ ‘informality’, ‘proximity’ and ‘intimacy’, along the lines of previous research (Monzó Gallo 2017, 2019, de Benito 2021). Additionally, our observations indicate that *-i* is often associated with ‘non-seriousness’ and, in specific contexts, functions as a marker of in-group membership. Furthermore, in other contexts, it serves as a pragmatic strategy for mitigation and politeness, like other diminutive affixes. This has been documented not only in words of euphemistic nature, as pointed out by Monzó Gallo (2017, 2019), but also in insults and general vocabulary.

The association of *-i* with these specific pragmatic values in the utterances of certain groups of speakers in colloquial Spanish, such as groups of women who are close friends, can be better understood within a conception of cognition and language where both the individual and her/his experiences, as well as the world itself and the constant interrelation between them, play a crucial role in the construction of reality. This is conception is embedded in the enactive paradigm (see, among others, Maturana, Varela, and Uribe 1974; Varela, Thomson, and Rosch 1991, Bottineau 2010, López García-Molins and Jorques 2017). Within the enactive paradigm, Bottineau (2010: 267) proposes that language:

(...) is to be reconsidered in terms of sensorimotor interactions with an environment in which both the individual and the environment are modified; in which not one, but several individuals are involved; an experience which is, all in one, that of the speaker and hearer at the instant of uttering or thinking; that of the child developing into an adult through social intercourse; that of the tribe turning [in]to a full-fledged civilization; and that of the linguist interfering with his object of scrutiny by linguistic means.

In our case study, “embodied experience”, and more specifically, the small oral cavity in the articulation of *i* and its high F2 values seem to favour the iconic development of certain values and pragmatic functions in association with *-i* in colloquial Spanish. In this respect, following Monneret (2004, 2019), the relationship between [-i] and some of its meanings and pragmatic values – affectivity, intimacy, mitigation, politeness – can be better understood within a perspective where analogy plays a crucial role in the ascription of meaning to the linguistic sign, since it is a cognitive mechanism that establishes similarity relationships between different dimensions, based on our collective experience. In this context, the affix *-i* can be argued to be iconic in nature, since it is prototypically linked to the linguistic diminutive, often related to the concept of physical smallness, and this high front vowel exhibits the smallest aperture and highest F2 values in Spanish. The iconic relation arises because the sound itself, being the

“smallest”, is used to express the values linked to the diminutive, the appreciative suffix canonically expressing smallness. Likewise, our experience and the interaction with the environment is crucial in motivating additional analogies between the size dimension (*small in size*) and other dimensions in reality, from which additional pragmatic functions for *i*- arise: *small in distance ~ familiarity, proximity; small impact of negative effects ~ mitigation*.

Although this affix in colloquial Spanish is assumed to have originated in adult-child interactions (Monzó Gallo 2017, 2019), the data examined here reveals that this phenomenon is also present in adult-adult interactions, especially among women, who use this ending in their speech often as a marker of strong personal bonds, but also as positive politeness strategy to mitigate the negative connotations of some words (e.g. insults or taboo words) or the negative effects of discourse in specific interactions. It might be observed that women are generally physically smaller than men, and their speech is generally characterized as displaying higher frequencies than that of men. In this sense, the *-i* can be said to maintain an iconic relationship with some of its users. The tendency of women to use this vowel more than men was noted already by Jespersen (1933), and even by Plato in his *Cratylus* dialogue.

I thus follow authors like Grégoire (2012: 315) and Bottineau (2003), who claim that not only the acoustics but also the “specific mouth-closing movement” in the articulation of [i] possibly involves these broader associations. Indeed, in Bottineau’s approach, the articulatory instruction to reduce the degree of aperture at the oral cavity is sometimes matched with a lexical instruction to express diminution. Along these lines, it is proposed that attenuation, mitigation and politeness can also be interpreted as an iconic way to decrease the (negative) impact of the connotations linked to some of the bases to which *-i* attaches (see examples 11-13). In this sense, the interactions of the speaker with her/his environment and embodied experiences seem to shape the values embodied by this high vowel.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this article I have reviewed the bases to which *-i* can be added, explored its more common values and distributional properties in colloquial Spanish, and examined whether there is an iconic relationship between this sound and some of its meanings. It has been observed that this affix is commonly used in colloquial interactions, particularly in very informal contexts of familiarity, and expresses a wide array of related semantic and pragmatic values such as affectivity, informality, proximity, intimacy, non-seriousness, in-group membership, mitigation and politeness. Although the use of this affix in colloquial Spanish has been posited to originate in adult-child interactions (Monzó Gallo 2017, 2019), the data examined here reveal that adults, especially friendship groups of women, often use this ending when speaking to each other rather than infants. Finally, I have argued that the semantic and pragmatic values expressed by this affix seem to be iconic in nature, as there appears to be a connection between the articulatory and acoustic properties of *-i* and its meanings and pragmatic functions, which may be argued to emerge through analogy.

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