

Productive reduplication in a fundamentally monosyllabic language

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Abstract

The question to be addressed in this paper is how a language which is fundamentally monosyllabic in structure can have about a dozen different reduplication types with at least eight different linguistic functions. The language under discussion, American Sign Language (ASL), is one representative of a class of languages that makes widespread use of reduplication for lexical and morphological purposes. The goal here is to present the set of phonological features that permit the productive construction of these forms and a first approximation to the feature geometry in which they participate. Reduplication forms are dependent on the event structure of the predicate and the associated aspectual modifications.

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Personally, I like reduplication as a topic.
Chuck Kisseberth, in a letter, May 27, 1971

1. Introduction

When talking about reduplication in spoken languages, the phonological pieces that can be repeated generally include consonants (and clusters), vowels, and syllables (whole/total reduplication may consist of a morpheme/word consisting of multiple syllables; Wilbur, 1973). Copying of sub-segmental features (one or more distinctive features that do not constitute an entire segment, e.g., place or manner specifications) may also be possible. In an essentially monosyllabic language, then, one might expect reduplication of syllables to create two-syllable forms, and rarely triplication to create a three-syllable form, but not beyond. Another expectation might be partial reduplication and modified forms along the lines of *shm*-reduplication, shown in (1) for English and in (2) for Hindi (Grohmann and Nevins, 2004):

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- (1) Money, **sh**money, who needs it anyway?
 (2) māi paan-vaan nahiin khaataa huuN
I paan-ECHO NEG eat-IMPF AUX.I.PRES
 ‘I don’t eat paan or other such things.’ [Hindi]

Looking at reduplication in sign languages reveals a number of creative options that permit a wider range of possible forms, each of which is distinct enough to be assigned a morphemic function. To begin with, the vast majority of lexical signs in ASL and other sign languages (SLs) studied to date are monosyllabic. A well-formed syllable in a sign language must have *movement* (Brentari, 1998), that is, a change of something: hand-shape configuration (HS), orientation (O), place of articulation (POA), or location (LOC). Reduplication then is the repetition of that change, e.g., that syllable. One interesting observation is that ASL uses both two-syllable and three-syllable reduplications, but makes no further distinction with respect to number of repetitions. Thus frequently occurring four or five repetitions do NOT mean anything distinct from three.¹

It is not clear that it makes sense to talk about partial vs. full reduplication in SLs. Partial reduplication requires the ability to copy (a) a single syllable of a multisyllabic word or (b) a portion of a syllable but not the whole syllable. Regarding possibility (a), in SLs, the majority of lexical items are monosyllabic, thus copying is repeating the whole word. Those signs that are lexically disyllabic repeat both syllables when reduplicated, so copying of them is full reduplication as well. Under option (b), copying only a part of the sign configuration, for example only the handshape or location or orientation, for partial reduplication is impossible, because none of these can occur without the others and the movement as well. Furthermore, the ‘money–shmoney’ type partial reduplication cannot occur because substitutions of handshapes, locations or orientations (consonant equivalents; Brentari, 1998) are very often phonemic. As a result, only full reduplication seems to be productive in SLs. Having said this, it is quite remarkable then that such a large variety of options remain available.

2. History of research on reduplication in ASL and other SLs

The earliest work on ASL reduplication Fischer (1973) identified ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ reduplication and categories of verbs [+/–stative] and [+/–durative] (for non-stative verbs). She correlated [slow] reduplication with ‘continuation of some kind’ and noted that a rocking movement contributed the meaning ‘excessive’. Similarly, she found a correlation between [fast] reduplication and habitual (i.e., iterations over time). Finally, Fischer was the first to identify the collective plural morpheme, phonologically [arc] movement; in her system, it fell out naturally as [+horizontal movement, –reduplication] and could not be disrupted by iterations that would destroy the collectivity of its meaning. Hence, it stands in opposition to the ‘distributive’, which requires the movement to stop at distinct points in space along the arc.

Klima and Bellugi (1979) further identified formational features that could be combined to create different modulation templates that apply to both adjectival predicates and verbal predicates. In their analysis, they refer to formational terms such as Planar locus (whether the form is horizontal or vertical), Cyclicity (whether the form is repeated or not), Direction (whether the movement is e.g., upward or downward), Geometric array (whether the movement is a straight line, arc, circle or other arrangement), Quality (whether the movement is small or large), and Manner (whether the movement is continuous, hold or restrained). Thus, in their system, each morphological function (e.g., Iterative, Durative) involves a template composed of some of the available relevant formational features (Fig. 1). However, the choices of feature combinations in each template are not explained.

Anderson (1982) reanalyzed these treatments, starting with a different verb categorization: punctual vs. durative/stative, which led him to observe a similarity with reduplication in Micronesian. In particular, in

¹ If additional DPs (QP with numeral quantifiers or pronouns using the non-dominant hand fingers for listing up to five referents) are present, it might be possible to construct meaningful four or five repetition forms, but then the repetition comes from the quantification inside the argument and not from aspectual specification.

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