

# Lexical cloning in English: A neo-Gricean lexical pragmatic analysis<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Lexical cloning, formally known as ‘contrastive focus reduplication’, refers to the phenomenon whereby there is a modifier reduplication of a lexical item. The reduplicated modifier, which receives a contrastive focus accent, is used to single out some privileged sense, in contrast to other senses, of an ambiguous, polysemous, vague or loose lexical expression (Huang, 2009). Lexical cloning is found in a variety of Englishes including American, Australian, British, Canadian, New Zealand, and South African English, but it is most widely used in American English. It is also a recent phenomenon. Furthermore, the use of lexical clones is largely restricted to a certain, informal conversational register of spoken English. Even the tokens of lexical cloning that are found in written English such as scripts for plays, films and TV programmes are largely representations of spontaneous spoken language (as a mode) in written form (as the medium). In this short paper, improving on Huang (2009), I shall first provide a description of lexical cloning in English. I shall then discuss context-dependency of lexical cloning. Finally, I shall outline a neo-Gricean lexical pragmatic analysis of this novel lexical phenomenon in the language.

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**Keywords:** Lexical cloning; Contrastive focus reduplication; Context-dependency; Neo-Gricean lexical pragmatics

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## 1. What is lexical cloning?

Lexical cloning, formally known as ‘contrastive focus reduplication’, refers to the phenomenon whereby there is a modifier reduplication of a lexical item. The reduplicated modifier, which contains a contrastive focus accent, is utilized to single out some privileged sense, in contrast to other senses, of an ambiguous, polysemous, vague or loose lexical expression (Huang, 2009). Some examples are given in (1)–(10).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) (Ghomeshi et al., 2004)  
I’ll make the tuna salad, and you make the **salad**-salad.
- (2) (London Heathrow Terminal 1, 23 July 2009)  
Survey assistant: Where were you born?  
Traveller: China.  
Survey assistant: Hong Kong, Macau or **China** China?  
Traveller: **China** China, mainland China.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, examples are from my own collection.

- (3) (Ghameshi et al., 2004)  
My car isn't **mine**-mine; it's my parents'.
- (4) (Hohenhaus, 2005)  
I started a really worthless thread [...] well, actually, I didn't **start**-start it, but. . .
- (5) (Ghameshi et al., 2004)  
I'm up, I'm just not **up**-up.
- (6) She is still a kind of sick, not **sick** sick, you know.
- (7) Perhaps this is one of the differences between a top university like [x] and a **top** top university like Cambridge.
- (8) A: Did he go snorkelling under the water?  
B: No, he went scuba-diving **under**-under the water.
- (9) (Dray, 1987)  
Oh, we are just **living together** living together.
- (10) (Hohenhaus, 2005)  
(From *Lovely and Amazing*)  
We are thirty-six, you know.  
Yeah, but we're not, like, **thirty-six** thirty-six.

As (1)–(10) indicate, lexical cloning can target nouns (1) including proper names (2), pronouns (3), verbs (4), adverbs (5), adjectives (6) and (7), (contentful) prepositions (8), lexicalized expressions (9), and even cardinal numbers (10).<sup>2</sup>

Lexical cloning is found in a variety of Englishes including American, Australian, British, Canadian, New Zealand, and South African English, but it is most widely used in American English.<sup>3</sup> It is a relatively recent phenomenon. A search of the *British National Corpus*, the British Component of the *International Corpus of English*, the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* and *Lampeter Corpus of Early Modern English Tracts* has found that the majority of lexical clones is from the 1990s onward, only a few are traced back to the 1980s, and only one to the 1970s (Hohenhaus, 2005: 315). Furthermore, as observed by both Ghameshi et al. (2004) and Hohenhaus (2005) independently, the use of lexical clones is largely restricted to a certain, informal conversational register of spoken English. Even the tokens of lexical cloning that are found in written English such as scripts for plays, films and TV programmes are largely representations of spontaneous spoken language (as a mode) in written form (as the medium) (Hohenhaus, 2005: 302).

## 2. Main function of lexical cloning

What, then, is the main function of lexical clones? According to Ghameshi et al. (2004), it is to specify a true, real, default, salient or prototypical denotation of the repeated lexical item. This reading is in contrast to a potentially looser or more specific interpretation. More specifically, Horn (2006) identified three types of meaning of lexical cloning: (i) prototypical meaning, (ii) 'value-added' or intensifying meaning, and (iii) literal, as opposed to figurative, meaning. Furthermore, he pointed out that meaning (i) is related especially to reduplicated nouns, and meaning (ii), especially to reduplicated adjectives. This is also echoed by Hohenhaus (2005: 301, 315), who postulated two formulas, one for reduplicated nouns and the other for reduplicated adjectives/adverbs/verbs.

- (11) Hohenhaus' formulas
  - a. For reduplicated nouns  
An XX is a proper/prototypical/precise/just X
  - b. For reduplicated adjectives, adverbs and verbs  
An XX = really/properly/extremely X

Construed thus, lexical cloning functions like what Lasersohn (1999) called pragmatic 'slack regulators' – words such as *exactly*, *precisely* and *perfectly*. These words serve to shrink what Lasersohn termed 'pragmatic halos' – the set of

<sup>2</sup> For an informative discussion of the morphosyntax, reduplicative phonology, prosodic and lexical constraints on lexical cloning, see Ghameshi et al. (2004).

<sup>3</sup> It is also found in a wide range of other languages in the world including many European languages (Huang, 2009), African languages (Tamanji and Mba, 2012), many Australian languages (Fabricius, 1998), many indigenous languages in South America (Gomez and Gale, 2014) and many Oceanic languages.

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