Social action of syntactic reduplication

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Abstract

Reduplication has been shown to carry the semantic meaning of increased intensity, duration or emphasis. This study demonstrates that syntactic reduplication in Estonian is regularly used in responsive positions in action sequences. Instances of syntactic reduplication constitute specific social practices such as affiliative and disaffiliative urging, challenging the prior speaker, reinforcing answers to yes/no questions, and providing a non-elicited confirmation. Syntactic reduplication is a sedimented linguistic pattern grounded in the social actions it recurrently performs. Different reduplicative actions furthermore display characteristic prosodic features, involving initial prominence in affiliative actions and delayed pitch peak in disaffiliative ones. Mock repeats and disconfirming answers are produced with double pitch peaks. Grammar and prosody are complementary means of achieving social action in particular positions in interactive sequences. The paper shows that sequential and social contingencies may be essential in understanding a grammatical pattern.

1. Introduction

The study of linguistic patterns in relation to social actions has been a growing area of research during the last decades. It resides on the insight that people use language to accomplish meaningful actions while communicating in real time. Linguistic patterns are related to and grounded in the types of social action that they recurrently implement. Many language phenomena can be fully described by accounting for the activity sequences in which they occur (e.g. Goodwin, 1979, 1980, 2007; Fox and Thompson, 1990; Lerner, 1991; Ford, 1993; Ochs et al., 1996; Lindström, A., 1999; Sorjonen, 2001; Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2008). When it comes to language use in interaction, prosody often plays a crucial role in sense-making (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 1996; Couper-Kuhlen and Ford, 2004; Golato and Fagyal, 2008). Grammar and prosody together form intricate practices that aim at achieving different communicative actions in specific sequential positions in conversation.

This paper studies a linguistic pattern, syntactic reduplication, and its functioning in conversation, showing that this grammatical phenomenon can only be understood with regard to features of production and in terms of local interactional contingencies. A systematic look at the patterns of syntactic reduplication in Estonian aims at displaying

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the import of prosody when combined with a particular grammatical pattern and the intimate connection of grammatical/prosodic constructions to the nature of social action implemented by them.

There are numerous studies on reduplication by linguists who have underlined its iconic nature. It has been stated that more form stands for more content (Haiman, 1980; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:128). If the speaker repeats something, the utterance will acquire additional meaning. As Moravcsik (1978:316) put it: "(. . .) reduplicative constructions almost always entail everything that their unreduplicated counterparts do and, in addition, also some thing(s) that their unreduplicated counterparts do not". When accounting for the universal features of reduplication, she points out that reduplication recurrently expresses increased quantity and amount of emphasis (Moravcsik, 1978:317). Along the same lines, Estonian and Finnish reduplication has been demonstrated to achieve intensification, quantity, and aspectual duration (Erelt and Punttila, 1992, 1993, 1999; Erelt, 1997, 2008). Botha (1988:97, 115–117) who looks at Afrikaans reduplication arrives at the conclusion that there is a unit of semantic content called 'increased' that applies to reduplicative units. The increase may concern emphasis as well as intensity. In a discussion on Hindi reduplication, Abbi (1980) talks about intensification. It has thus always been claimed that reduplication has something to do with increased intensity, emphasis, duration, frequency or quantity cross-linguistically. The iconic explanation therefore sounds plausible. However, even diminution is frequently expressed with reduplication, which has led some linguist to argue against the iconic nature of reduplication (e.g. Kiyomi, 1995). In the Estonian practices discussed below, it could be the case is that two is more emphatic than one would have been. But the iconic value is not the only motivation of using reduplication. Reduplication is regularly implemented to accomplish certain kinds of social action.

Linguistic analyses of reduplication generally focus on the semantics of the construction in isolation, leaving context out of discussion altogether. In contrast, some studies have accounted for reduplication from a pragmatic viewpoint. In a study on Russian reduplication, Israeli (1997:607) argues that it is a device for requesting or promising a higher degree of cooperation. Similarly, Swedish reduplication has been shown to display increased social engagement (Lindström, J., 1999:59, 64–65). In other words, reduplication may be used for displays of personal interests and to satisfy the mutual need of appreciation by interactants.

Even more broadly, different kinds of repetition have been claimed to serve an over-arching need for interpersonal involvement (Tannen, 1987:584). Within the research tradition that acknowledges the centrality of conversation to the functioning of language, repetition has been shown to be used for keeping the floor, showing listenership, providing back-channel responses, stalling, gearing up to answer or speak, humor and play, savoring and showing appreciation of a good line or a good joke, persuasive effect, etc. (Tannen, 1987:583–584). It also establishes coherence in the conversation as a whole (Tannen, 1990:27). In their seminal study on politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987:112–113) claim that repetition of what the interlocutor has just said is a means of achieving positive politeness, it is used to stress emotional agreement with the utterance (or to stress interest and surprise). Nevertheless, the current study will argue that even in the cases where interpersonal involvement may be enhanced by syntactic reduplication, the sequential contexts in which this can be done are restricted. With this particular grammatical device, interpersonal involvement may be displayed in specific sequential positions. The paper will thus add a sequential argument to the discussion on reduplication thus far available in the literature.

Analysis of action sequences has been one of the core subjects of conversation analytic work (as presented comprehensibly in Schegloff, 2007). Conversation analysis has demonstrated that ordinary conversation is finely ordered and that every turn is designed in detail as a response to the previous one(s) (Sacks et al., 1974). Diverging actions will be marked as such and oriented to by the participants in relevant ways. Within this tradition of turn-by-turn analysis of the data, the researchers carefully account for the participants' interpretation of the preceding actions as displayed in subsequent turns. Participants' own analysis of the import of a prior turn is thereby disclosed and seen as an empirical proof of the meaning and function of what the turn accomplished.

The conversation analytic method has already been applied in a study on repetitions, the so-called *multiple sayings*, whose function is to bring the larger unit of interaction to a halt (Stivers, 2004). By repeating a unit in a multiple saying, the speaker shows that there is no need to continue within the same course of action. Along the same lines, the reduplicated verb as a response to an assessment in Finnish implies that the assessment is beyond doubt, and possibly something that has already been dealt with in prior conversation (Sorjonen and Hekulinen, 2009). It implies that there