

Reduplication revised: reduplication in Sign Languages

This work shows that data from sign languages (SLs) support theoretical analyses on the computational mechanisms of language. Specifically, SLs demonstrate that morphological reduplication only affects strictly grammatical features and can be distinguished by other kinds of reduplicating phenomena on this basis: reduplication operates before the lexical item is sent to the interfaces while repetition has merely semantic effects. In this account, reduplicating phenomena are grouped into three types: phonological, morphological (here, reduplication proper) and syntactic (repetition). Although space prevents discussing phonological reduplication here, the other two types are distinguished as follows. Reduplication is the doubling of a morphological category (1). In the Japanese example, reduplication is used to change category ([V+V]Avv), in Chinese it changes the aspectual properties of the verb and in the Indonesian example it is used to form the plural. I propose this kind of reduplication is purely formal and does not include processes pertaining just to semantics. Conversely, identical words can be juxtaposed. This is considered repetition: it does not serve grammatical purposes, and does not form new words (2). Among such reduplicating phenomena, contrastive repetition is attested (e.g. English: coke-coke). Where relevant, such repetition comes after inflection (3), substantiating the view that such repetition comes after the spell out. As far as SLs are concerned, reduplication refers to phenomena such as cyclic reduplication, triplication, iteration, while repetition refers to oscillation and wiggling. For example, in Swedish Sign Language (Tecknad Svenska (SSL/TS)), the sign WAIT consists of one repetition of the root, but if the sign is reduplicated, the root sign is repeated three times (4). As to conversion, in ASL for example, nouns are formed from verbs: GET made with smaller repeated movement means ‘acquisition’. Interestingly, the meaning is not compositional, a characteristic of morphological processes and not of syntactic processes (5). With regard to aspect, ASL adjectival predications can have aspectual modulation with a reduplicated form. Telic predications can become atelic through reduplication (6). This modulation is not, as with repetition, an optional expressive change. Compare (7a) with (7b): the sign SICK cannot occur non reduplicated. It follows that also this reduplicative process takes place before being sent to the interfaces. Similarly, ASL verbs have their aspectual properties changed through reduplication. LOOK-AT, for example, has a punctual form made with a short directional-path movement; instead, the durative form (‘to gaze at’) has smooth, circular reduplicated movement. In German Sign Language (Deutsche Gebärdensprache – DGS), then, the plural of mid-sagittal nouns is formed through triplication (8). So, reduplication has the following characteristics: it is category-changing rather than meaning-changing, it affects the aspectual contours of predications and it is pluralizing. Repetition, on the other hand, affects semantics but not the formal aspects of grammar. Thus, the proposal can be further defined: reduplication outputs items at X level, while repetition results in X’ level objects. Such generalization appears empirically adequate both in Spoken and in Signed languages: it can consequently be considered universal, showing that SLs provide fundamental contribution to the theoretical study of natural languages.

Examples

- (1) Jap. hore-bore ‘fall in love+fall in love=fondly’
Ch. zuozuo ‘sit+sit=sit for a while’
Indon. Buku buku ‘book+book=books’
- (2) It. Piano piano ‘slow+slow=very slow’
Palauan beot > bebeot ‘easy+easy=fairly easy’ (Josephs 1943: 232)
Swahili: maji > maji-maji ‘somewhat wet’ (Ashton 1944: 316)
- (3) Fin. Menetkö kotiin vai kotiinkotiin? (koti is the uninflected form).
‘Are you going home or home-home?’
- (4) WAIT WAIT ‘wait wait’
WAIT WAIT WAIT ‘be waiting’ (Bergman & Dahl 1994: 402f)
- (5) JOIN+JOIN=COMPOUND (Klima & Bellugi 1979:296)
- (6) TO GET SICK+TO GET SICK=TO BE SICK (Klima & Bellugi 1979:246)
- (7) a. BOY TEND (HIS) ALL-HIS-LIFE SICK-SICK
b. *BOY TEND (HIS) ALL-HIS-LIFE SICK.
‘That boy has tended to be sickly all his life’ (Klima & Bellugi 1979:253)
- (8) HOUSE+HOUSE+HOUSE=HOUSES (Pfau & Steinbach 2006:146)

References

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