A Tiny Tiny Paper: A Null Theory of the Intensive Semantics of Doubled Adjectives

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1   Introduction

In English, and perhaps in all languages with a class of adjectives, doubling an adjective is a common means of intensifying it.

(1)   I saw a tiny tiny bird (= I saw a very tiny bird)

(2)   I went on a long long walk (= I went on a very long walk)

Specifically, I will be addressing cases like the above where the two copies are crucially not separated by an intonational boundary. As pointed out by Jackson (2016, p.147), in a sentence like (2) without an intonational boundary, all that is communicated by the doubling of the adjective is information about the length of the walk, namely that it was very long. In contrast, the same string of words with an intonational boundary between the two instances of *long* does more than convey something about the length of the walk, it also conveys something about the attitude of the speaker towards the walk and its duration and it adds what Jackson calls some poetic effects.

In many languages, doubled adjectives behave as single words and must be analyzed as reduplicated structures as in Sundanese (3). This is most obvious in the case of intensification via partial reduplication as in Agta (4).

(3)   Sundanese: rame 'jolly'; ramerame 'be very jolly' (Moravcsik, 1978, citing Robins 1959)

(4)   Agta: dána 'old'; dádána 'very old' (Moravcsik, 1978, citing Healy 1960)

This article is not about the semantics of such reduplication. I assume a distinction between reduplication and repetition along the lines of Gil (2005). Reduplication is a morphological operation and repetition is a stylistic device or discursive structure. Reduplication is part of the narrow grammar, such that adding or removing it from a sentence will usually make it ungrammatical or change its literal truth-conditional meaning. Repetition in contrast tends to be optional and to not change literal meaning, conveying, if anything, pragmatic effects such as emphasis or emotional valence. Although there may be a diachronic relationship between the English-style adjective doubling and morphological reduplication, the semantics of reduplicated forms is better ascribed to the arbitrary semantics of the reduplicative construction or of the RED morpheme that triggers it, depending

on details of morphological theory that are not pertinent in this article. In languages such as English on the other hand where the two copies of the adjective behave as individual words, adjective doubling has usually been attributed to stylistic repetition and pragmatics.

Stylistic repetition abounds in language. One may emphasize an affirmative answer to a question by repeating the word 'yes' (5), the emotional valence conveyed by a verb like 'hate' can be increased through repetition (6), repetition of 'never' can convey determination (7), or excitement can be conveyed by repeating a single noun as in (8). The interpretation of intensity associated with these forms is a matter of pragmatic, poetic, and rhetorical effects of the stylistic repetition.

(5)   'Would I like to go to the cinema? Yes yes YES! (Jackson, 2016, p.38)

(6)   I hate hate hate him!

(7)   I shall never, never, never drink Zubrowka again! (Jackson, 2016, p.74)

(8)   Coffee, coffee, coffee!

Jackson (2016) makes a useful further distinction between stylistic repetition which conveys pragmatic meaning and non-stylistic repetition which does not. Repetition of the 'yes yes YES!' and 'never, never, never' type are stylistic in that they convey something pragmatic above and beyond the meaning of what is reduplicated. This contrasts with repetition that merely consists in re-using the same word or words for the same purpose each time. Answering 'yes' to multiple questions in a row would not usually convey anything above and beyond agreement to each respective question, in contrast to an emphatic 'yes yes YES!'. Although this article will focus on small local repetition, repeated structures can be at any distance and of any size. The repetition of the word 'repetition' in this text is not intended to convey anything, it is simply the natural way to refer to this concept throughout a text. This is in a sense a 'necessary' repetition, in the sense that if I were to come up with a different term or expression each time to refer to the concept, this choice itself would have more stylistic consequences than simple repetition. Non-stylistic repetition is neutral repetition. As Jackson (2016, p.16) puts it 'The intention behind such repetitions is just to communicate the same interpretation as was intended the first time around'. For example in (9), the repetition of *dog* does not convey anything in and of itself beyond the respective compositional contribution of each instance of *dog*.

(9)   Your dog bit my dog

In this article, I will refer to such non-stylistic repetition where each instance communicates the same interpretation each time with the more descriptive term *compositional repetition*, to circumscribe repetition where each contributes to the meaning of the whole in compositional ways, without a clear additional semantics brought by the repetition itself. Compositional repetition is therefore the use of two instances of some unit, whose semantic contribution to the meaning of the whole is just what is expected from compositional semantics.

A specific type of compositional repetition is *recursive repetition* which Hurch & Mattes (2005, 2009) exemplify with forms like *great-great-grandparent*, where the repetition of the prefix *great-* is not reduplication, nor stylistic repetition, but simply the recursive application of the same prefix twice, each conveying the same interpretation. This will be the account I propose for (1), namely

that the two adjectives are recursively modifying the noun.[1]

The question then is whether the doubled adjectives like (1) without intonational boundaries require an account as stylistic repetition with a pragmatic meaning. This is the analysis of Jackson (2016), who devotes a chapter to such adjective repetition within intonational groups, giving an account of their meaning in Relevance Theory. She proposes that gradable adjectives constrain the process of narrowing the meaning of an utterance and that their repetition has the effect of encouraging the addressee to narrow the meaning further.

In this article I want to argue for an alternative analysis of adjective doubling within the same intonation group, namely a null theory: the intensification semantics of doubled adjectives in the same phrase follows without further assumptions from the compositional semantics of a noun phrase modified by the same adjective twice. Thus I am arguing that adjective doubling is compositional repetition. I propose that English forms like (1) do not require any special stylistic construction or pragmatic account, as the compositional semantics of the parts already yields the required semantics.

The proposal in this paper is not intended to be universal. Clearly many languages exist that do have reduplicative and/or stylistic repetition of adjectives beyond compositional repetition, and therefore analyses of these phenomena must still exist. But the null analysis given here works well for adjective doubling in languages like English. As such whether we should see the content of this article as an alternative that challenges Jackson's proposal, or merely as a supplement that completes it, might be a matter of taste.

Section 2 will summarize the semantics of intensification, specifically the semantics of *very*. Section 3 will connect the dots between this literature and the semantics of doubled adjectives. Finally, section 4 will discuss some syntactic properties of English doubled adjectives noticed by Jackson (2016) that follow straightforwardly from the compositional semantic account I will defend here.

2   The semantics of intensification and *very*

In order to discuss intensification we must first address the semantics of gradable adjectives. It is well known that gradable adjectives are relative. A "small elephant" could very well be much larger than a "big mouse". At least since Wheeler (1972), this fact is attributed to gradable adjectives requiring a comparison class. Essentially a 'big mouse' is big for a mouse and a 'small elephant' is small for an elephant. The noun usually (but not always, see Kennedy 2007) provides the comparison class and the adjective is relativized to this class.

Wheeler further proposes that *very* is 'an instruction to iterate the attributive that follows it'. That is, while an adjective like *big* in 'big mouse' is interpreted as taking the class of mice and picking out the ones that are big in that class, *very* in 'very big mouse' takes the class of big mice

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[1]It goes without saying that compositional repetition can happen in more complex configurations (as in (i), uttered by many early-career academic) or involving longer stretches of repeated material (as in (ii), said recently by singer Chappell Roan, echoing an old reference).

(i)   This is my first first-author publication.

(ii)   I'm your favorite artist's favorite artist.

and picks out the ones that are big in that new class. A 'big mouse' is big for a mouse; a 'very big mouse' is big for a big mouse.

Thus if 'big' is a function and we represent 'big mouse' as big(mouse), then the semantics of 'very big mouse' is big(big(mouse)).[2]

According to this theory of 'very', the intensification of adjective can be characterized semantically as recursive application of the adjective in the logical form.

3   A Null Theory of adjective doubling

If an intensifier like 'very' involves semantic recursion in the logical form of intensification, a very simple and attractive analysis of languages with adjective doubling is that in these constructions overtly do what the word *very* covertly does: recursively apply the semantics of the gradable adjective. If gradable adjectives operate on a comparison class such that a "tiny bird" is tiny for a bird, then a second instance of the same adjective as in "tiny tiny bird" is predicted to pick out the things that are tiny relative to the comparison class of tiny birds, i.e. tiny for a tiny bird. This is exactly the semantics of *very* according to Wheeler. Nothing else is needed.

Assuming Wheeler's analysis of *very*, the intensive semantics of doubled adjectives follows from compositional semantics. The intensive semantics of doubled adjective is derivable as essentially a theorem of compositional semantics.

This also applies to repetitions of *very* itself. Rather than being stylistic, Wheeler (1972) analyzes each instance of very as yet another instance of the adjective in logical form, thus if a 'very big mouse' is a big(big(mouse)), a 'very very big mouse' is a big(big(big(mouse))), and so on.

This is all compositional repetition under the proposal here, specifically recursive repetition. Recall that I defined compositional repetition above as the case where the meaning of the whole one where the meaning of each part appears twice, and thus since 'big big mouse' corresponds to a meaning along the lines of big(big(mouse)), adjective intensification via doubling is a case of compositional repetition.

The rest of this paper will discuss additional circumstantial evidence in favor of this null theory.

4   The syntax of adjective doubling

Additional evidence supporting the connection between adjective doubling intensification without intonation boundary in English and the word *very* comes from the fact that both are pragmatically strange with nongradable adjectives, as noticed by (Jackson, 2016, p.207) with the following examples. This parallels the strangeness of nongradable adjectives with *very*.

(10) ???He chose a spotty spotty shirt

(11) ???I've never met someone with such a closed closed closed heart.

Jackson (2016, 207-208) also observes that adjective doubling without intonation boundary is ungrammatical in predicates.

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[2]Since the only part of the analysis that is pertinent to us is the recursion in logical form, I will omit the formal details of the gradable adjectives, which mostly serve to interface with Wheeler's theory of comparatives.

(12)   *The walk was long long

(13)   *I am tired tired.

Jackson attributes this to the order of the adjectives and the noun they modify influencing the stylistic interpretation of epizeuxis, but it is not clear in her entirely pragmatic account why order would cause ungrammaticality rather than interpretive differences or infellicity. Instead, under the compositional repetition analysis, this follows from narrow grammar: the strings above are ungrammatical because although there can be multiple attributive adjectives in a noun phrase, there can only be one adjective in a predicate. The grammaticality pattern of two identical adjectives exactly parallels the grammaticality of two different adjectives.

(14)   I saw a tiny blue bird

(15)   *The bird was tiny blue

The grammaticality of (14) and the ungrammaticality of (15) follow from the standard assumption that AdjP's are specifiers to NPs and that the recursion in (14) is a recursion of NPs. In contrast, (15) is not possible because this would require recursion of AdjP's, which is only possible if the first adjective modifies the second, rather than simply conjoining to it, compare with (16).[3]

(16)   The bird was bright blue

5   Conclusion

This article examined adjective doubling in light of the distinction between stylistic vs non-stylistic repetition and the formal semantic literature on adjective intensification. I argued that, at least in some languages such as English, adjective doubling conveying intensification is fully accounted for by conventional assumptions about the semantics of gradeable adjectives.

This account raises some questions and problems that go beyond the goals of this paper. For example according to the analysis defended here, almost all examples of reduplication in Stolz et al. (2015) are not reduplication. The study of reduplication and stylistic repetition has long suffered from the difficulty of distinguishing the two in practice, and the analysis I propose here suggests that a third type of configuration may need to be taken into account in the typology of doubling.

It also raises interesting questions for diachrony, as the null theory predicts that doubling conveying intensification is a "freebie" in any language with gradeable adjectives, which could be a diachronic source of reduplication and stylistic doubling as conventionalized constructions.

This article also highlights the value of a broad theoretical outlook on language. Here the the formal semantics of *very* comes to bear on a phenomenon that has so far been studied largely from the point of view of phonology, morphology, stylistics.

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[3]I would like to thank Sameer ud Dowla Khan (p.c.) for this syntactic account.

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