

Reduplication reflects uniqueness and innovation in language, thought and culture

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In Hawaii, the state fish is called *Humuhumunukunuku‘apua‘a*, a word that employs *reduplication* which involves duplicating sounds to emphasize key aspects of the word and its meaning (“pig-like, short-snouted fish” – a *triggerfish*). In the world of linguistics, the term *reduplication* seems in itself to be ‘redundantly reiterative,’ for, after all, isn’t duplication the act of doubling something? Why the prefix *re-* (to do again)? Why not use the term *doubling* or, simply, *duplication*? From the Latin *re-* ‘again’ + *duplicare* ‘fold’ or ‘double,’ what is implied is the act of doubling sounds or entire words. Despite the arguments against redundantly coupling the meaning of the prefix *re-* to the word *duplication*, in linguistics the term *reduplication* has been widely accepted as the norm for well over a century or more. This superfluous debate over *re-/duplication* notwithstanding, the practice of (re-)duplicating words, roots, stems and contrived forms is found in most languages throughout the world – more in some and less in others. Many colorful examples of reduplication reflect upon the richness and uniqueness of language, thought and culture as expressed by those who use this form to create plurals, amplify meaning, change verb tenses or invent words to describe tangible or intangible parts of the world around us. Whether for practicality, necessity, amplification or animation, reduplicated words are a fascinating, and fun, aspect of language.

There are buses in Hawaii called *Wiki-Wiki*, duplicating the word *wiki* ‘fast,’ emphasizing that the bus service is VERY FAST. In South Africa, when one says *hier-hier* in Afrikaans, it implies ‘right here!’ And, in Kenya, a melon in Swahili is a *tiki*. The size of the melon gains emphasis through reduplication and is called a *tikitiki*, ‘a large melon.’ When one adds the Swahili word *maji* ‘water’ we arrive at *tikitiki maji* (or *tikiti maji*), ‘water melon.’ Speakers of Malay say *bunga* for ‘flower’ and duplicate it to make the plural form *bunga-bunga*, ‘flowers.’ In China, a young girl might be described in Mandarin as *xiǎo* ‘small’ and her little sister could be described as *xiǎo-xiǎo*, ‘tiny, very small.’ To say this in English, we might say *itty-bitty* or *teenie-weenie* which is a duplicative form in linguistics called *rhyiming reduplication*, and in less language-centric circles it is sometimes referred to as *echoing* or *ricochet words*.

Reduplication in language is a morphological type that – through doubling a word, element, root, or stem – enhances, emphasizes, amplifies, enlarges, diminishes, adds number or changes verb tense – to bring about significant meaning changes or shades of meaning. There are two basic forms – *full reduplication* and *partial reduplication* – and some related forms that apply the technique of doubling through rhyiming or vowel change. Reduplication in some cultures is a form of informal wordplay that is chosen over dry straight-forward discourse to convey intensity, humor, and playfulness, while applying cutesy, tongue-tickling or whimsical sounds and words. Doubling sounds, whether in words or parts of words, enables verbalization of thoughts to come alive in a colorful manner. It is a form of seasoning that salts and peppers language. Which sentence is more fun to say? *My dog likes to go slowly on a walk.* -- OR -- *My dog likes to ‘dilly-dally’ on a walk.* And, consider the jocular Yiddish forms of *shm-* as in *fancy-shmancy*, a unique form that evolved from Yiddish speaking immigrants in New York and other parts of the northeast United States. *That new deli in Brooklyn is fancy-shmancy, but too bad it’s owned by a real Joe Shmo (shmo = jerk).*

Reduplication is common in some languages and less common in others. Some world languages are believed to be reduplication-free, having no inherent reduplication constructs. Yet, languages from most families around the globe apply some form of reduplication, notably in early baby-talk (*ma-ma*), onomatopoeia (*bow-wow*) and endearing name doubling (*Jon-Jon*). Some use very few forms of reduplication. Take the Italian repeated word expression *piano-piano* ‘softly-softly’ which is used to tell someone to take it easy, to relax, to proceed calmly. While rich both phonetically and in lexicon, Italian, however, has few examples of true reduplication. A sampling of world languages from various families, groupings or isolated distinctions that apply reduplication include: Indonesian, Tagalog, Javanese, Malay, Fijian, Samoan, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Russian, Persian, Turkish, Arabic, Hebrew, Yoruba, Twi, Swahili, Basque, Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, Sioux, Dakota, Paiute, Salish, Bella Coola, Fox, Ojibwa and Warlpiri. Reflecting a need in grammar, expression of thought or sign of culture, the language family that has multiple examples of reduplication is the Austronesian (e.g., Malayo-Polynesian) Family. The following Austronesian languages employ either full reduplication or partial reduplication, or both: Balinese, Chamorro, Fijian, Hawaiian, Indonesian, Malagasy, Malay, Maori, Rapanui, Samoan and Tagalog.

Types of Reduplication:

Applying repetitive sounds to result in change in meaning is distinguished by any of the following types which are best illustrated in examples.

1. Full Reduplication – entire words duplicated

This type of reduplication applies doubling of the entire word. The word is simply repeated, often to yield plurals or to give various levels of intensity to a thought. Take the example of Malay in such words as *rumah* ‘house’ which in the plural form reduplicates to become *rumah-rumah* ‘houses.’ In Russian, a reduplicative adverbial form *chut* ‘a bit’ makes something ‘a tiny bit’ as in *Ya govoryu po-russki chut’-chut*. ‘I speak Russian a tiny bit.’ The Swahili word *choko* ‘poke at’ takes on the meaning ‘discord, trouble’ when fully reduplicated to *chokochoko*. Speakers of various forms of Arabic (e.g., Juba) use full reduplication such as *ketir* ‘many’ → *ketir-ketir* ‘very many’ and *neshif* ‘dry’ → *neshif-neshif* ‘completely dried out.’ Hawaiian language has many expressions built upon full reduplication: *wali* ‘smooth’ → *waliwali* ‘easy-going,’ *olu* ‘cool, soft’ → *olu’olu* ‘good-natured,’ *niho* ‘tooth’ → *nihoniho* ‘serrated, saw,’ *kiko* ‘dot’ → *kikokiko* ‘freckled, spotted’ and *kihi* ‘tip, corner’ → *kihikihi* ‘zigzag.’

2. Partial Reduplication – parts of words (element, root, stem) duplicated

This type of reduplication uses a part of the words, typically a syllable that is repeated, and not the entire word. Take the Hebrew word *chatul* ‘cat’ which inserts *-ta-* to change the word’s structure and meaning to *chatatul* ‘kitten.’ The Māori language of New Zealand internally produces some nouns through partial reduplication of one element of the word. Take the examples: *wahine* ‘woman’ → *waahine* ‘women’ and *tangata* ‘person’ → *taangata* ‘people, persons.’ Moreover, Māori distinguishes subtleties using reduplication as in *paki* ‘to pat’ → partially reduplicated *papaki* ‘to clap one time’ → fully reduplicated *pakipaki* ‘to applaud.’ From Karok, an indigenous language of northwestern California, the word *páchup* ‘kiss’ is partially reduplicated in *pachúpchup* ‘kiss a lot.’ (Crystal)

3. **Reduplication in Baby-Talk** – simplifying words as baby acquires language

As infants begin to develop speech, reduplication is an important feature of their phonologies. (Crystal) Words that the baby can understand but not quite articulate completely are easier to shorten into doubled syllables such as *water* which becomes *wawa*, *bottle* becomes *buh-buh*, *blanket* becomes *bay-bay* and so forth. As infants discover the ability to speak, they typically develop words such as *mama*, *dada*, *papa*, *boo-boo*, *poo-poo*, *bye-bye* and a whole array of words for grandparents (e.g., *pop-pop*, *gan-gan*), many of which are reinforced by parents or caregivers. Children universally develop the art of reduplication (but not to the same extent) and use it until an age that they are able to pronounce words fully. The disappearance of reduplication happens at different ages and depends upon reinforcement by adults in the child's life.

4. **Rhyming Reduplication** – different words with near duplicated sounds resulting in rhyming

In English there is a large collection of rhyming reduplication expressions: *itsy-bitsy*, *chick-flick*, *teenie-weenie*, *fender-bender*, *lovey-dovey*, *hanky-panky*, *fuddy-duddy*, *hoity-toity*, *hodge-podge*. Not all languages in the world use rhyming, but Russian is one that gives us many examples: *plaksa-vaksa* = crybaby, *kashka-malashka* = porridge, *krestiki-noliki* (crosses, zeroes) = tic-tac-toe or noughts and crosses, *pravda-krivda* (truth, crookedness) = distorted truth, and *ruki-kryuki* = clumsy hands. (Voiner)

5. **Ablaut Reduplication** – changing vowels of words that nearly rhyme

Altering vowels to produce near-rhyming outcomes results in such reduplicative forms as: *chit-chat*, *zig-zag*, *tick-tock*, *criss-cross*, *pitter-patter*, *mish-mash*, *bric-a-brac* and many more. This form is less prolific in world languages. Japanese uses *kasa-koso* 'rustle' and *gata-goto* 'rattle' and Chinese has *pīlipālā* 'splashing.'

6. **Reduplication in Onomatopoeia** – imitating animals and sounds in nature

Onomatopoeia has been a language universal since man developed the inherent ability for language. Imitation of sounds such as a dog's *bow-bow* to a Japanese speaker is *wanwan*, to a Russian *gavgav*, to a Spanish speaker *gufguf*, a Korean *mungmung*. A bee's buzz is *bzzz-bzzz* in French and Spanish, it's *zoum-zoum* in Greek, *zh-zh-zh* in Russian and *buzz-buzz* in Swedish. A rooster crowing in Italian is *chichirichi*, in Spanish is *quiquiriquí* and in German is *kikeriki*. The word *dokidoki* is Japanese onomatopoeia for 'heartbeat' and *barabara* refers to 'rain pouring down.' In Japanese *byun* means 'spin' but *byunbyun* means 'whizzing by.' Onomatopoeia is full of reduplication.

7. **Name Doubling (Reduplication)** – primarily used for close relationships, imparting an endearing quality that implies a quality of likability. This form is common in English and Chinese.

Take some English nicknames for example: Jon-Jon, Lou-Lou, BeBe, JoJo, Jay-Jay, Mo-Mo. These types of first names can come from a variety of sources and reasons. They add an affable quality to the way an individual addresses a friend or family member. The name of the famous French-born Chinese-American cellist Yo-Yo-Ma is not an intended form of reduplication. Yo, 'friendly' in Chinese, was "duplicated" to Yo-Yo, according to the master musician himself in an interview, since his sister's name is Ma-Yo Chang. In the Philippines it is quite common to reduplicate first names as a friendly gesture of endearment. In France children sometimes call their uncle *tonton*.

There are some languages (e.g., Chinese) that reduplicate elements for their surname. The name of the Hawaiian King Kamehameha (*ka* = the *meha* = quiet) means ‘the very quiet, (solitary) one.’ Place names around the world also employ reduplication in such examples as *Baden-Baden* (Germany), *Puka Puka* (Cook Islands), and *Tawi Tawi* (Philippines).

8. **Shm- Reduplication** – deprecativ e reduplication indicating irony, sarcasm, skepticism rhyming base words with the prefix shm- ____.

This form of reduplication originated with Yiddish speaking Jews who settled mainly in the New York area and spread to non-Yiddish speakers in the northeast U.S. In Yiddish-inspired English it is used to convey irony, sarcasm, skepticism, wit, poking fun and more by applying *shm-* (also written *schm-*) to the duplicated base word after dropping the initial consonant(s). *Bagel-shmagel, I want a full meal! Money-shmoney, you should think it grows on trees? Help-shmelp, they just stood around and watched us work!*

Uses of Reduplication:

Applying repetitive sounds result in grammatical or lexical distinctions which make profound or subtle changes in meaning. Here again, the various uses of reduplication are best illustrated in examples.

1. **Forming plurals** – Creating plurals via reduplication is seen in languages either in full or partial form. In Indonesian, the word *kapal* ‘ship’ simply becomes two or more in *kapalkapal* ‘ships,’ a form that doubles the entire word. In Dinka, a Nilo-Saharan language spoken in southern Sudan, some plurals are formed through internal reduplication of vowels: *pal* ‘knife’ becomes *paal* ‘knives’ – *gālám* ‘pen’ becomes *gālâam* ‘pens.’ Some plurals in the Austronesian language Samoan use the same form of internal reduplication, for example, *le tamaloa* ‘the man’ changes to *tamaloloa* ‘the men.’

2. **Verb tenses** – Reduplication is used to change tenses with a simple doubling of the first element to indicate future or perfective tense. In ancient Greek, the perfective was constructed by doubling the first element of the verb, as in *leipo* ‘I leave’ → *léloipa* ‘I have left.’ In some languages, notably, among the Austronesian languages, the future tense is formed through partial reduplication. Tagalog, spoken in the Philippines, provides excellent examples of this form.

Tagalog repeats a consonant-vowel sequence to form the future tense:

<i>tawag</i>	‘call’	<i>ta + tawag</i>	→	<i>tatawag</i>	‘will call’
<i>sulat</i>	‘write’	<i>su + sulat</i>	→	<i>susulat</i>	‘will write’
<i>hanap</i>	‘seek’	<i>ha + hanap</i>	→	<i>hahanap</i>	‘will seek’
<i>lakad</i>	‘walk’	<i>la + lakad</i>	→	<i>lalakad</i>	‘will walk’

(Pereltsvaig)

3. **Intensity, Amplification, Enhancement** – Doubling of entire words or stems enhances or significantly changes the quality of the idea intended by the word. In Finnish, the word *kauas* means ‘far away.’ Reduplication amplifies *kauaskauas* to mean ‘far far away.’ This is similar to the Russian *davnym-davno* (or, *davno-davno*) which means ‘a long long time ago.’ Relating to this, the Russians playfully use the rhyming reduplicative expression *davno-gavno* which means ‘It’s been

crap for a long time.’ In Chinese, *shēnyuǎn* ‘far-reaching’ reduplicates to *shēnshēnyuǎnyuǎn* by juxtaposing like elements from the original word resulting in amplified distance, ‘far-far reaching.’ The Hawaiian word *nula* ‘wave’ significantly amplifies the size of the wave when reduplicated – *nulanula* → ‘huge wave, tidal wave.’ To state that something is absolutely beautiful in Chinese, both elements of *piàoliang* ‘beautiful’ are reduplicated – *piàopiàoliangliang*. An expression in Nepalese, *rangi-changi*, is used to describe something that is extremely vivid and colorful, or something of great energy, complex to the point of being chaotic. One of those hard to translate words, the term *rangi-changi* can be used in reference to an intense work environment or an exciting night club. In Swahili *piga* means ‘to strike’ whereas *pigapiga* implies repetition, ‘to strike repeatedly.’ There is an example in a dialect of Indonesian in which the word *igi* ‘many’ is reduplicated four times, *igi-igi-igi-igi* meaning ‘more numerous than anything.’ (Lord)

4. **Specificity** – Some languages and the cultures that speak those languages apply a form of specificity to make certain there is no doubt about the meaning intended. In Norwegian, Danish and Swedish, the word *mor* means mother, whereas *mormor* means ‘mother’s mother’ (maternal grandmother). *Far* means ‘father’ and *farfar* means ‘father’s father’ (paternal grandfather). Further, *morfar* means ‘mother’s father’ (maternal grandfather) and *farmor* means ‘father’s mother’ (paternal grandmother). So, there is no doubt which grandparent a child is talking about. In English, if two teenage girls are chatting about a boy, you might hear one ask *Do you like him? Or do you like-like him?* Here, *like-like* is taken to mean *Do you REALLY like him?* Compare this to the Finnish word *ruoka* ‘food’ with *ruokaruoka* ‘proper food’ (in contrast to snack food). The Finns also make a distinction between the sense of ‘home’ *koti* versus ‘home where you grew up’ *kotikoti*, i.e., ‘your parents’ home.’ And, if you drink coffee at Starbucks, you might try “Katikati,” the Swahili-inspired ‘medium’ blend from Kenya described as *kati* ‘medium’ but set fully in the mid-range of your palate by *katikati* ‘middle-middle,’ specifying it is exactly in the middle between the flavors of light and dark beans.

5. **Diversity and Collectivity** – To distinguish between one thing and a group of that thing reduplication forms are used. Examples of this usage from Austronesian languages include: Indonesian *anak* ‘child’ becomes *anak anak* to signify ‘all sorts of children.’ (Pereltsvaig). Malay *daun* ‘leaf’ becomes a collection using *daun-daunan* ‘foliage, leaves’ and *sayur* ‘vegetable’ when reduplicated in rhyming form *sayur-mayur* renders the meaning ‘various vegetables.’ (Comrie) An example in Farsi, a rhyming form, *xert-o-pert* refers to ‘odds and ends.’

6. **Similarity** – In reduplicating the lexeme, the doubled form often relates closely to the original as in the Indonesian word *kuda* ‘horse’ which becomes *kuda kuda* to signify ‘saw horse.’ (Comrie). The Indonesian word *langit* ‘sky, heaven’ is rendered into a related meaning when reduplicated – *langit-langit* meaning ‘ceiling.’

7. **Playfulness**– The English expression *razzle-dazzle* brings life to what is being described. *The razzle-dazzle of that basketball team made the entire game exciting to watch.* Conversely, in Farsi, reduplication is sometimes used to mock words of non-Persian origin. At German beer festivals one might hear the phrase *Zicke zacke zicke zacke hoi hoi hoi*. While there have been attempts to make sense of the reduplicated phrase, it merely represents a bunch of nonsensical sounds that together are fun to chant out after a few mugs of brew. But, in German colloquial language, *zack-zack* is used to say ‘Get going!’ (which corresponds to English *chop-chop*). The German *Misch-Masch* corresponds also to English *hodge-podge*. Usage of shm- reduplication is frequently used for humor or poking fun. *Dead-shmead, Yiddish is still a spoken language!*

8. **Aimlessness and Vagueness**— Words or stems doubled may be used to signify doing something *willy-nilly*, haphazardly, without direction or distinct purpose, or to denote a lack of distinction. *Děng* in Chinese means ‘to wait’ but gives an open-endedness when reduplicated – *děngděng* ‘to wait for a while.’ In Malay, *duduk* means ‘sit’ but when reduplicated, *duduk-duduk* mean ‘sit around doing nothing.’ And, *mérah* means ‘red’ but to indicate reddish, the reduplicated form *kemérah-mérahan* is constructed. (Comrie) In Turkish *yeşil* ‘green’ has a rhyming duplicative *yeşil-meşil* that means ‘greenish.’ Finally, in Tagalog, *linisin* means ‘to clean’ and *linis-linisin* means ‘to clean a little.’ (Comrie) In Japanese, the word *fura* ‘drift, dizziness’ when reduplicated to *furafura* means ‘to roam or to hang out with no intended aim or purpose.’

9. **Reciprocity** – Reduplication takes on a reflexive characteristic in some languages such as Malay in the example *hormati* ‘respect’ which becomes reflexive in *hormat-menghormati* ‘to respect each other.’ (Comrie)

10. **Statements on Life** – In Fijian the word *bula*, literally, ‘life’ is similar to Hawaiian *Ahoha* (‘peace, love, calm’) in that it encompasses an aspect of life that is not translatable to an exact word, or at least has multiple senses of the word. *Bula-bula*, used for ‘Hello,’ ‘good-bye,’ ‘welcome,’ or a blessing when one sneezes, refers to ‘Here’s to life’ and it comes from the hearts of Fijians. The Swahili expression *Hakuna wasi wasi* ‘no worries’ is based on the word *wasi* ‘concern, doubt.’ The Japanese art of finding beauty from imperfection is called *wabi-sabi*, a rhyming reduplicated term that embodies looking past the blemishes on a face and cracks in walls to find inherent beauty. *Wabi* stems from the Japanese *wa-* meaning ‘harmony, peace, tranquility,’ whereas *sabi* means ‘the bloom of time.’

Linguist Ken Sakoda, provides an excellent example of reduplication in Hawaiian Creole – a mix of Hawaiian, English, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Portuguese – that his mother used to say:

You likee banana you wiki-wiki kau-kau mai-tai.

You likee = English *wiki-wiki* = Hawaiian ‘quickly’ *kau-kau* = Chinese ‘eat’ *mai-tai* = Tahitian ‘good’

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To you readers who find reduplication a fascinating aspect of language, thought and culture:

Bula-Bula !

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