

# A Comparative Study on Reduplication in English and Chinese

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**Abstract.** Reduplication is a pervasive phenomenon across human languages, and it has long been an area of significant linguistic interest. This paper compares reduplicates in English and Chinese from aspects of morphological structure, semantic properties and pragmatic functions. It aims to provide some suggestions for second language learning and teaching.

## 1. Introduction

Reduplication is a pervasive phenomenon across human languages, it is often regarded as a morphological process of complete or partial repetition of a stem. Reduplication has long been an area of significant linguistic interest, and much attention has been paid to it in terms of various theories and perspectives. In China, some scholars (Zhang, 2011 et.al.) focused on this topic and had done a lot of research on Chinese reduplicates. However, reduplication in English, has been an ignored field because of its small quantity in the total number of vocabulary. Only a few scholars (Terry, 1994, Motomi, 2005 et.al) have focused this issue in detail. Since the researches on reduplication in English and Chinese are quite limited, it is very significant to make a systematic study on reduplication in English and Chinese. Therefore, this paper makes an effort to analyze reduplicates in English and Chinese from aspects of morphological structure, semantic properties, pragmatical functions, and aims to provide some suggestions for second language learning and teaching.

## 2. Basic concepts on Reduplication

As a prevalent phenomenon in human languages, reduplication has been of great interest to linguists, especially in phonology and morphology. Since different researchers have been devoted to the study of reduplication from different perspectives, the definition of reduplication varies as well. According to Moravcsik (1992), reduplication is “ a pattern where the double or multiple occurrence of a sound string, syllable, morpheme, or word within a larger syntactic unit is in systematic contrast with its single occurrence, with the iterated elements filling functionally non-distinct positions”.

Generally speaking, reduplication can be classified into two types: full (or total, complete) reduplication and partial reduplication. Full reduplication refers to the repetition of the whole meaningful constituent, such as “*cha-cha*”, “*quack-quack*” in English and “*renren*”, “*taoluntaolun*” in Chinese. Partial reduplication deals with the repetition of part of a constituent, for instance, “*nitwit*”, “*criss-cross*” in English and “*Hongtongtong*”, “*fengyanfengyu*” in Chinese.

## 3. Morphological structure of reduplicates in Chinese and English

Reduplication is regarded as one kind of word formation both in Chinese and English. However, this phenomenon in Chinese is far more productive than that in English. For a derivational and inflectional purpose, reduplication is also quite active to reduplicate the element of word. The classification of reduplication varies with different perspectives. Based on Chinese character,



hand, includes three main types: rhymes, ablauts and echoes, in form of ABC-DBC, ABC-ADC, ABC-ABC respectively. Reduplication of rhymes are most common one, and echoes belongs to full reduplication, while rhymes and ablauts belong to partial reduplication. Besides, several atypical types of reduplication can be found as well. The reduplicating based on the syllables, monosyllabic and disyllabic is more pervasive than trisyllabic ones.

#### **4. Semantic properties of reduplicates in Chinese and English**

Languages around the world employ reduplication as a way of expressing various meanings. For example, in English, reduplication can denote emphasis (e.g. coke-coke). In Japanese, reduplicates express diversity of referents (e.g. kami-gami). Despite this diversity, however, crosslinguistic similarities exist.

In terms of meaning, onomatopoeic words is an important source for reduplicates. In Chinese, many reduplicates are created to imitate the natural sounds, such as "*miaomiao*, *gege*, *chanchan*" and so on. In English, onomatopoeic words appears as well, for example, "*drip-drip*", "*thump-thump*", "*quack-quack*". In Chinese, there are many words that imitate sounds at the beginning, and then they gradually relate to the object and as names, including "*guoguo*", "*ququ*" and so on. The similar reduplicates also occurs in English, such as, "*yo-yo*", "*pee-pee*".

From the perspective of emotional meaning, the reduplicates in Chinese and English both have the functions of strengthening mood, enhancing emotional meaning of words and making language more vivid. The reduplicates in Chinese are more vivid than the common forms, such as "*hong - honghongde - hongtongtong*", "*hei - heiqiqi*" and so on. The reduplicates in English also has the similar examples, such as "*tip-top*" and "*super-duper*". The mood of these words is stronger than the basic form, and their emotional meanings are enhanced as well. However, the forms of English reduplicates are far less than those of Chinese.

In terms of stylistic meaning, a large number of reduplicates in Chinese are used to express intimate and informal meaning. For example, "*jiejie*" and "*gege*" are more intimate than "*jie*" and "*ge*", while "*tutu*" and "*gougou*" have children's tone. The similar phenomena appears in English, such as *papa* and *mama*, but the number is small. Most of the reduplicates in English are informal, and they are rarely used in formal occasions. The reduplicates in English are often used in oral English and dialects.

#### **5. Pragmatical function of reduplicates in English and Chinese**

As far as grammatical functions are concerned, there are significant differences between English and Chinese reduplicates. The reduplicates in Chinese can be classified by different syllables. For disyllabic reduplicates, many of them are nouns and adverbs. Kinship reduplicates in addressing are always nouns, for example, "*mama*, *baba*, *gege*, *jiejie*" etc. While the reduplicates created from quantifier are nouns or adverbs, such as "*renren*, *gege*, *shishi*". Reduplicates consists of non-morphemes can be adverbs, adjectives, verbs according to different contexts, for example, "*kankan*, *duoduo*, *shasha*, *mangmang*". The reduplicates formed by other morphemes depend on the part of speech of the constituent, they do not change their class after being reduplicated, for example, "*mingming*, *jiujiu*, *dudu*" etc.

For trisyllabic reduplicates in Chinese, they are always regular. This kind of reduplicates can be subdivided into two classes. One type is in the form of ABB, the reduplicates in this type are mainly created by nouns, verbs and adjectives plus additional reduplicated constituents, such as "*xiaomimi*, *xiangpenpen*, *maorongrong*," etc. However, the function of reduplicates does not correspond to their constituents. The reduplicates created by nouns and verbs plus reduplicated constituent may not necessarily be nouns or verbs, most of them are adjectives, and adjectives or adverbs. The other type of reduplicates are in form of AAB. The number of them is relatively few. The part of speech of these words is based on the class of base, for instance, the bases "*che*, *yu*" and their reduplicates "*pengpengche*, *wawayu*" are all nouns.

For four-syllable reduplicates, their part of speech corresponds basically to the original words for

reduplicating, for example, the words “*kuti, diezhuang*” and their reduplicates “*kukutiti, diediezhuangzhuang*” are all verbs. The four-syllable words correspond basically to the adjectives before reduplication, such as “*guguai, hutu*”, while the AliAB reduplication form “*guliguguai, hulihutu*” is also an adjective. However, the part of speech of reduplicates in form of AABB depends on the elements of B and C, for example, the words “*zिसun, shengzhang*” are respectively noun and verb, their reduplicates “*tuzitusun, tushengtuzhang*” are noun and verb as well.

Most of reduplicates in English are nouns, and the part of speech of them is not very complicated. In addition, a few reduplicates in English have more than one grammatical functions. For example, the reduplicate “*hurry-scurry*” can be used as adverbs, adjectives, nouns and intransitive verbs. It has four grammatical functions.

Comparatively speaking, English and Chinese reduplicates show great differences in part of speech. Reduplicates in Chinese are mainly nouns, adjectives and verbs, and the number of them is not fixed. In many cases, they can be created in a relatively free way. In English, however, most reduplicates are nouns, followed by adjectives, and verbs are very few, which can not be created at will. On the other hand, the parts of speech of Chinese reduplicates are relatively single, and the reduplicates in English are often used as the words of different part of speech.

## 6. Conclusion

As an important language phenomenon, reduplication abounds in English, Chinese and other languages. This paper makes an effort to compare reduplication in English and Chinese from the aspects of morphological structure, semantic properties and pragmatic functions, and summarizes the similarities and differences of reduplication in two languages.

To be more specific, from the perspective of morphological structure, both English and Chinese reduplicates belong to full reduplication and partial reduplication. However, the subcategories of reduplication in English and Chinese are quite different. Reduplicates in English can be subdivided into three typical categories, including rhymes, ablauts and echoes, while reduplicates in Chinese can be subdivided into different forms based on the syllables.

From the perspective of semantic properties, both Chinese and English reduplicates are created from onomatopoeic words. For emotional meaning, the reduplicates in Chinese and English both can strengthen mood, enhance emotional meaning and make language more vivid. In addition, in terms of stylistic meaning, reduplicates in Chinese can express intimate and informal meaning, English reduplicates, on the other hand, are informal in most cases.

From the perspective of pragmatic function, reduplicates in Chinese and in English are quite different in word class. The parts of speech of Chinese reduplicates are comparatively single, and that of English reduplicates are various. To be more specific, most reduplicates in Chinese are mainly nouns, adjectives and verbs, while English reduplicates are mainly nouns.

By comparing the reduplication in English and Chinese, this paper makes an effort to analyze the similarities and differences of reduplication in the two languages, aiming to provide some suggestions for second language learning and teaching.

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