LESS IS MORE: EVIDENCE FROM DIMINITIVE REDUPLICATION IN CARIBBEAN CREOLE LANGUAGES
Silvia Kouwenberg & Darlene LaCharité
University West Indies / Laval University

Diminutives derived by reduplication are quite common cross-linguistically, despite the fact that they seem to be at odds with the iconic principle in (1).

(1) More of the same form stands for more of the same meaning (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:128)

To the extent that (1) governs the semantic properties of reduplication then unmarked interpretations of reduplication include iteration, continuation, augmentation, distribution. Diminutive formation via reduplication appears to provide the exact opposite, since it has a diminishing, rather than an increasing semantic effect. By that measure, it is a marked process, something hard to reconcile with its cross-linguistic frequency. This and the fact that diminutive formation neither changes the meaning of the base form, nor its syntactic category, prompted Kiyomi (1995) to broaden the notion of the prototypical semantic effect of reduplication, as indicated in (2):

(2) the prototypical interpretations of reduplication instantiate the semantic principle 'a higher / lower degree of'

While (2) may be observationally correct, it presents an unexplained paradox. How can two apparently diametrically opposed semantic interpretations of reduplication both be considered prototypical and, hence, unmarked? The semantic properties of diminutive reduplication in Caribbean Creole languages of diverse lexical stock (see Kouwenberg & LaCharité 2001) offer an answer to this question.

In this paper, we will show that iconic interpretations are not all equal. In particular, a contrast will be shown to exist between discontinuous and continuous iconic interpretations (see Dressler 1968, Xrakovskij 1997 for this distinction). We will see that verb/event and noun/object reduplications instantiate both these types of interpretation with fairly straightforward results: iterative and continuative interpretations for the former, distributive and augmentative interpretations for the latter.

In contrast, the most commonly attested interpretation of adjective/attribute reduplication is intensifying or emphatic, i.e. a continuous interpretation only. However, closer inspection of what a discontinuous interpretation of a reduplicated adjective/attribute might be led us to examples such as Jamaican Creole yelo-yelo 'yellow-spotted' < yelo 'yellow'. This reduplication is an instance of a dispersive, i.e. an interpretation involving scattered occurrence. Obviously, this is a discontinuous interpretation, and one that is easy enough to elicit for Jamaican Creole colour adjectives. Interestingly, this reduplication has another interpretation, viz. 'yellowish'.

It is this type of data that provides a clue for the likely source of the diminutive reduplication: "more of the same form" indeed stands for "more of the same meaning", but in the case of yelo-yelo, "more" means: "many occurrences distributed over a single surface". The effect of such scattered distribution is to tone down rather than intensify the colour, to diminish rather than augment.
Thus, we will argue that the diminutive interpretation of reduplication represents a dispersive, resulting from the extension of interpretations such as yellow-spotted to yellowish, from scattered occurrence to interpretations involving similarity, attenuation, tentativity, approximation. Thus, we also get Jamaican Creole bigi-bigi 'biggish' (with the connotation 'still growing') < big 'big' - as opposed to an augmented *very big, friedi-friedi 'timid, fearful' < fried 'afraid' - as opposed to an augmented *very fearful.

In this paper, we will also address the extent to which this category is restricted to adjective/attribute reduplication or includes also noun and verb reduplications, with similar semantic effects.

We will further consider the question why diminutive reduplication is, overall, less common than the more usual iterative, distributive, etc. iconic reduplications. We will argue that the diminutive introduces a competing interpretation for the same reduplicated segmental string as the more common iconic reduplications. Hence, additional formal complexity needs to be introduced to distinguish between these, compromising formal iconicity.

References


