

THE SEMANTICS OF REDUPLICATION IN IGBO

Phillip N. Anagbogu
Nnamdi Azikiwe University
Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

This article represents the first attempt to describe in detail the semantics of word reduplication in Igbo, one of the three main languages spoken in Nigeria. It is shown that word reduplication performs important roles in the grammar, roles which are often omitted in the linguistic literature. Seven examples of such are chosen and examined. The Igbo dialect studied here is Oka (spoken in the Anambra State capital city of Oka town) whose phonology, syntax, and morphology have been investigated by Enem (1969) and Anagbogu (1979, 1990). It is hoped that such a study would redirect attention to this linguistic phenomenon and encourage researchers to examine it in all its ramifications.

Cet article présente une première tentative de description détaillée du rôle sémantique du redoublement en igbo, l'une des trois majeurs langues du Nigéria. Le redoublement y joue des rôles grammaticaux importants, mais qui sont souvent passés sous silence dans les publications linguistiques. Nous examinons sept exemples de ce processus. Il s'agit ici du dialecte oka, dont la phonologie, la syntaxe et la morphologie sont le sujet d'études par Enem (1969) et par Anagbogu (1979, 1990). Souhaitons que notre étude serve à rediriger l'attention vers ce phénomène, et à en encourager l'examen dans toutes ses ramifications.

0. INTRODUCTION

In many Nigerian languages, word reduplication is used to lend emphasis to an utterance. In discussing the role of the adjective in intensification¹ in the Yoruba language, Bamgboṣe (1966:112) points out that "the intensive term has as its exponent a reduplicated form of the non-intensive term". The same situation prevails in several Nigerian languages such as Igbo, Nupe, and Hausa as demonstrated in (1).

(1)	NON-INTENSIVE TERM	INTENSIVE TERM
Igbo	akwụkwọ a book	akwụkwọ akwụkwọ very many books
Nupe	kāmā many	kāmā kāmā very many
	tsogwa to be fast	tsogwa tsogwa to be very fast
Hausa	nawà How much?	nawà nawà How much each?

Igbo uses word reduplication to achieve various kinds of intensification such as action, taste and smell, colour, quantity and size, unspecified plurality, manner, and distributive uses. They will be discussed in that order. There is also syllable and root reduplication which produce deverbal nouns or gerunds and other nominals. Both lack the semantic complexity observed in word reduplication and will not be considered in this article.

1. ACTION

A verb of action is used with a reduplicated word to convey the idea of an action which is continuous or one that is habitual.

¹The term INTENSIVE is usually used in this article to indicate word reduplication; but, in a few cases such as in the paragraph following (30), it refers to its original meaning: increasing either in size, colour, effect, or speed. The purpose of using it is to minimise the use of the term reduplication.

1.1 CONTINUOUS ACTION

In the case of continuous action, the idea of action to be conveyed (using the formula: verb of action + reduplicated word) is an action that started before the time of speaking and extends to the present moment. The verbs and the nouns involved occur with each other and with no other words. Examples (2)–(4) consist of a verb plus a noun (V + N or V + N + N).

- (2) a. **-kwụ ọtọ²**
stand standing stand
- b. **-kwụ ọtọ ọtọ** ọtọ
stand standing standing keep standing
- (3) a. **ọ kwù ọtọ**
he stand standing
He is standing.
- b. **ọ kwù ọtọ ọtọ** ọtọ
he stands standing standing
He remains standing.
- (4) a. **ọ nà-èbe akwā**
he PROG-cry cry
He is crying.
- b. **ọ nà-èbe akwa ākwa**
he PROG-cry cry cry
He has been crying continuously.

In (3a) as in (4a), the non-intensive form expresses continuous action but the intensive forms (3b) and (4b), in addition to expressing the idea of an action extending to the present time, also suggest that the action is likely to continue beyond the time of speaking. And, it is not possible to predict its end.

1.2 HABITUAL ACTION

Reduplication is used to express an action that has become habitual. The non-intensive form may make a general statement about an action, but the intensive form gives a habitual status to the action.

- (5) a. **òlìlè** the act of selling
b. **òlìlè òlìlè** always selling
c. **òlìlè òlù ọlù**
selling is work
The act of selling is difficult.
d. **òlìlè òlìlè òlù ọlù**
selling selling is work
The act of always selling is difficult.
- (6) a. **ìwò** anger
b. **ìwò ìwò** habitually angry
- (7) a. **ọ nà-èwò iwò**
he PROG-angering anger
He is angry.

² High and low tones, and the downstep (which is a slightly lowered high tone) operate in Igbo tonology. Mid tone has not been established. The high tone is left unmarked throughout, while the low tone is marked with /' / and the downstep is marked with a macron /" / . Tones in Igbo are marked on the vowel or syllabic nasal.

Two groups of Igbo vowels exist: those that have the feature [+ATR] which include i, e, o, u, and those that have [-ATR] including j, ɛ, ɔ, a.

Vowel harmony operates in Igbo, implying that in any given word, vowels belonging to one group must co-occur, except for /a/ which can occasionally occur with the [+ATR] group.

- b. \varnothing **nà-èwo** **iwò iwò**
 he PROG-angering anger anger
 He is habitually angry.

Occasionally the simple form shows that an action is habitual, but the reduplicated form intensifies the habitual nature of the action.

- (8) a. **daa** daily
 b. **daa daa** every day without fail
- (9) a. **ife è kà \varnothing na-ème daa**
 thing this that he PROG-do daily
 This is what he does daily.
- b. **ife è kà \varnothing na-ème daa daa**
 thing this that he PROG-do daily daily
 This is what he does daily without fail.

2. TASTE AND SMELL

A description of the ways the senses of taste and smell are expressed can be summarised with the simple formula: verb + reduplicated noun. Though the nouns are many and varied, the verbs concerned are **-tə** 'taste like' and **shì** 'smell of'.

The normal way of expressing the taste of anything is by using the Igbo word for taste along with the reduplicated form of what it tastes like. The verb **-tə** occurs with reduplicated words as frequently as, or perhaps more frequently than, it does with its cognate noun **-ùtə** 'sweet'. In fact, **-tə** never occurs with any other non-reduplicated word.

- (10) \varnothing **nà-àtə** **ùtə**
 it PROG-taste sweet
 It is sweet.

The formula in (11) summarises the pattern expressed in examples (12)–(15).

- (11) **-tə / -shì + reduplication (noun)** 'tastes/smells like (noun)'
- (12) a. **ji** yam
 b. **ji ji** a large number of yams
 c. **edè** cocoyam
 d. **edè edè** a large number of cocoyams
- (13) a. \varnothing **nà-àtə** **ji ji**
 it PROG[^]taste yam yam
 It tastes like yam.
 b. \varnothing **nà-àtə** **edè edè**
 it PROG[^]taste cocoyam cocoyam
 It tastes like cocoyam.
- (14) a. **nmja** palm wine
 b. **nmja nmja** a large quantity of palm wine
- (15) a. \varnothing **nà-èshì** **nmja nmja**
 it PROG-smell wine wine
 It smells like palm wine.
 b. \varnothing **nà-èshì** **anwulù anwulù**
 it PROG-smell smoke smoke
 It smells like smoke.

It is clear from the discussion that both verbs and their obligatory objects co-occur to convey perception in utterances.

There are slight differences, however, in the pattern of use of **-shì** and **-tə**.

2.1 **-shi**. **-shi** can occur with the single form of a word to express the sense of smell. The reduplicated form conveys the idea of intensity. The pattern is shown in (16) with examples in (17)–(19).

(16) non-reduplicated or reduplicated noun + **-shi**

- (17) a. **ofe** soup
 b. **ofe ofe** a large quantity of soup

(18) a. **ofe nà-eshì**
 soup PROG-smell
 There is a smell of soup (lit. soup is smelling)

- b. **ofe ofe nà-eshì**
 soup soup PROG-smell
 There is a strong smell of soup.

(19) a. **ùde nà-eshì**
 pomade PROG-smell
 There is a smell of pomade (lit. pomade is smelling)

- b. **ude ùde nà-eshì**
 pomade pomade PROG-smell
 There is a strong smell of pomade.

2.2 **-tọ**. Whereas it is impossible to invert the **-tọ** construction without a **ka**, as in (20), the noun phrase of place (**ibe è** or **unọ ọ**) can be used to invert the **-shi** construction without a **ka**. In such circumstances, the pattern becomes as in (21) with examples in (22)–(25).

(20) **ofe nà-atọ nnu ñnu ka ọ pjàlì m**
 soup PROG-taste salt salt that he PAST[^]give me
 He gave me soup with too much salt.

(21) noun phrase of place + **-shi** + reduplicated noun

- (22) a. **àmìlì** urine
 b. **àmìlì àmìlì** lots of urine

(23) **ibe è nà-eshì amìlì àmìlì**
 place this PROG-smell urine urine
 This place is smelling strongly of urine.

- (24) a. **akụ** palm kernel
 b. **akụ àkụ** a large quantity of palm kernels

(25) **unọ ọ nà-eshì àkụ àkụ**
 place this PROG-smell palm[^]kernel palm[^]kernel
 This place is smelling strongly of palm kernel.

No other verb, as far as I know, behaves exactly like **-tọ** or **-shi**.

3. COLOUR

The words which designate colour are usually reduplicated in Igbo. The exceptions are **ọcha** 'white' and **ọjì** 'black' which occur with their cognate verbs **-cha** and **-jì**, respectively, and the adjectives **ọcha** 'white' and **ọjì** 'black' which usually follow the noun.

- (26) a. **àfè ya nà-àcha ọcha**
 cloth his PROG-white whiteness
 His cloth is white.

- b. àfè ya nà-èjì òjì
 cloth his PROG-black blackness
 His cloth is black.
- (27) a. o yì àfè ọcha
 he wear SG-cloth white
 He is wearing a white cloth.
- b. o yì àfè ojìí
 he wear SG-cloth black
 He is wearing a black cloth.

The verb *-cha*, however, has selectional restrictions, especially when it occurs with a single colour word. It can easily occur with *ọcha* 'white' probably because both are cognate words, but it cannot occur with *mmeē* 'bloody', *èdò* 'bright yellow', or *nzù* 'chalky' as examples (28)–(31) show. But when the same words are reduplicated, *-cha* occurs with them.

- (28) àfè ya nà-àcha ọcha
 cloth his PROGwhite whiteness
 His cloth is white
- (29) a. *àfè ya nà-àcha mmeē
 cloth his PROG-white red
- b. àfè ya nà-àcha mmee mmee
 cloth his PROG-white red red
 His cloth is deep red.
- (30) a. *àfè ya nà-àcha èdò
 cloth his PROG-white yellow
- b. àfè ya nà-àcha èdò èdò
 cloth his PROG-white yellow yellow
 His cloth is bright yellow in colour.
- (31) a. *àfè ya nà-àcha ñzu
 cloth his PROG-white chalk
- b. àfè ya nà-àcha nzu ñzu
 cloth his PROG-white chalk chalk
 His cloth is very chalky in colour.

Since the formal way of conveying the idea of colour in an Igbo utterance is by word reduplication, intensification is achieved by using the verbs like *-cha* 'be white', *-nwu* 'shine', and *-jì* 'be black' with reduplicated words. When intensification is not intended, those verbs can be replaced with *-dụ* 'be' as in (31).

- (32) àfè ya dụ akwụkwọ ndụ akwụkwọ ndụ
 cloth his be book life book life
 His cloth is green.

There are co-occurrence restrictions in the use of those colour intensifiers. Although one can use the expression in (33) and (34), the one in (35) cannot be used.

- (33) àfè ya nà-ènwu ọcha ọcha
 cloth his PROG-shine whiteness whiteness
 His cloth is shining white.
- (34) àfè ya nà-ènwu mmee mmee
 cloth his PROG-shine red red
 His cloth is deep red.
- (35) *àfè ya nà-ènwu nzu ñzu
 cloth his PROG-shine chalk chalk

nzu nzu 'chalky' and **èdo èdo** 'yellow' must always select **-cha** 'white' to be grammatical and acceptable. Perhaps this is just a semantic restriction since **nzu** 'chalk' and **èdo** 'yellow' are objects that are not so bright in colour.

Similarly, although one can use the expressions in (36) and (38), the ones in (37) cannot be used.

- (36) **àfè ya nà-èji òji**
 cloth his PROG-black blackness
 His cloth is black.
- (37) ***àfè ya nà-àcha òji**
 cloth his PROG-white blackness
 ***àfè ya nà-ènwu òji**
 cloth his PROG-shine blackness
- (38) **àfè ya nà-èji oji òji**
 cloth his PROG-black blackness blackness
 His cloth is very black.

Apart from intensifying the degree of blackness, (38) also implies that there are no tiny specks of white or other colours interrupting the completeness of the blackness.

4. QUANTITY AND SIZE

Word reduplication is used to express quantity and size. The verbs **-pa** 'carry' and **-nwe** 'have' play very important roles in this context. The subject normally selects **-pa** to accompany the reduplicated word. There is a co-occurrence restriction here: the reduplicated word cannot take **-nwe** as its verb, whereas the single word must take **-nwe** but cannot take **-pa** which can only occur in contexts where the word has been reduplicated. The formula in (39) conveys the idea of indefinite but large quantities and sizes as exemplified in (40)–(42).

(39) subject + **-pa** + reduplicated word

- (40) a. **o nwèlù ñvø**
 he has nail
 He has fingernails.
- b. **ø pà mvø mvø**
 he carry nail nail
 He has very long fingernails.
- (41) a. **onu** neck
 b. **onu ònu** neck neck
- (42) a. **o nwèlù onu**
 he has neck
 He has a neck.
- b. **ø pà onu ònu**
 he carry neck neck
 He has a very long neck.

One must add that **bù sò** 'is all' can also be used in those contexts where **-pa** occurs, with little or no change in meaning.

Even though **-nwe** is always used with the single word and **-pa** with the reduplicated word, yet the single word **arụ** always selects **-pa** in such contexts as those in (43) and (44) where X and XX represent some body part, single and reduplicated, respectively.

- (43) a. **ø pà X n'arụ**
 he carry X in~body
 He is X. (lit. he carried X on the body)

- b. \varnothing **pà** **XX** **n'àrụ**
 he carry XX in^hbody
 He is very X.
- (44) a. **àrụ** **ya** **pà** **X**
 body his carry X
 His body is X. (lit. his body carry X)
- b. **àrụ** **ya** **pà** **XX**
 body his carry XX
 His body is very X.
- (45) a. \varnothing **pà** **òkpụkpụ** **n'àrụ**
 he carry bone in^hbody
 He is bony. (lit. he carries bones in his body)
- b. \varnothing **pà** **òkpụkpụ** **òkpụkpụ** **n'àrụ**
 he carry bone bone in^hbody
 He is very bony.
- (46) a. \varnothing **pà** **anụ** **n'àrụ**
 he carry meat in^hbody
 He is fat. (lit. he carries flesh in his body)
- b. \varnothing **pà** **anụ** **anụ** **n'àrụ** **ya**
 he carry meat meat in^hbody his
 He is very fat.
- (47) a. **àrụ** **yā** **pà** **aji**
 body his carry hair
 He is hairy.
- b. **àrụ** **yā** **pà** **aji** **āji**
 body his carry hair hair
 He is very hairy.

Quantity and size are expressed in animate things in a slightly different way. The use of **pà** 'carry' or **bụ sọ** 'is/are all' frequently presupposes an animate subject. Generally, where the subject of a sentence embodying the single or reduplicated word is inanimate, the verb **du** 'be' or **ju** 'be full of' usually occurs. The formula is in (48) with examples in (49)–(54).

- (48) reduplicated word + **du** or **ju** + complement
- (49) a. **ùlù** mud
 b. **ùlù ùlù** a large quantity of mud
- (50) a. **ùlù dụ ibe è**
 mud is here this
 There is mud here.
- b. **ùlù ùlù dù ibe è**
 mud mud is here this
 There is a large quantity of mud here.
- (51) a. **ofe** soup
 b. **ofe ofe** a large quantity of soup
- (52) a. **ofe jùlù ògòdù ya**
 soup covers cloth his
 His cloth is covered with soup.
- b. **ofe ofe jùlù ògòdù ya**
 soup soup covers cloth his
 His cloth is completely covered with soup.

- (53) a. **ñnu** salt
 b. **ñnu ñnu** a large quantity of salt
- (54) a. **ñnu dđ n'ofe è**
 salt is in^soup this
 There is salt in this soup.
- b. **ñnu ñnu dđ n'ofe è**
 salt salt is in^soup this
 There is too much salt in this soup.

5. UNSPECIFIED PLURALITY

Apart from suppletive forms like **nwa** 'child (SG)', **umụ** 'children (PL)', **onye** 'somebody', and **ndụ** 'people (PL)', there is no formal way of marking plurality in Igbo in parts of speech other than the pronouns. A word can express either a singular or a plural meaning. Plurality is usually specified in one of the following ways: by numerals, by context, or by reduplication. But, whereas numerals are specific, reduplication is vague and non-specific. Because of the absence of specificity, the examples used in this section, containing reduplicated, countable nouns, have dual semantic interpretations: 1) the idea of unspecified plurality, and 2) the idea of large quantities of certain things (animate and inanimate) to the total exclusion of others.

- (55) a. **ji** yams
 b. **ji ji** plenty of yams
- (56) a. **o nwèlù ji nà be yā**
 he have yams in house his
 He has yams in his house.
- b. **o nwèlù ji ji nà be yā**
 he have yams yams in house his
 1. He has plenty of yams in his house.
 2. He has only yams in his house.
- (57) a. **onono** bottle
 b. **onono ònono** bottles
- (58) a. **onono dđ nà be yā**
 bottle is in house his
 There is a bottle in his house.
- b. **onono ònono dđ nà be yā**
 bottle bottle is in house his
 1. His house is full of bottles.
 2. There is nothing in his house but bottles.

The examples in (59) and (60), however, do not suggest anything beyond unspecified plurality.

- (59) a. **nnekwu** big
 b. **nnekwu nnekwu** big big
- (60) a. **o nwèlù nnekwu unò**
 he has big house
 He has a big house.
- b. **o nwèlù nnekwu nnekwu unò**
 he has big big house
 He has many big houses.

6. MANNER

When reduplicated, adverbial nouns expressing manner have their meanings intensified as shown in (61)–(64).

- (61) a. **nwayò** slowly
 b. **nwayò nwayò** very slowly
- (62) a. **jili nwayò kwò okwù**
 take^{IMP} slowness say^{IMP} word
 Speak slowly.
- b. **jili nwayò nwayò kwò okwù**
 take^{IMP} slowness slowness say^{IMP} word
 Speak very slowly.
- (63) a. **nzuzù** foolishly
 b. **nzuzù nzuzù** very foolishly
- (64) a. **o ji nzuzù lee ànà nnà ya**
 he hold^{PAST} foolishly sell^{PAST} land father his
 He foolishly sold his father's land.
- b. **o ji nzuzù nzuzù lee ànà nnà ya**
 he hold^{PAST} foolishly foolishly sell^{PAST} land father his
 He very foolishly sold his father's land. (lit. he used foolishness
 foolishness to sell his father's land)

7. DISTRIBUTIVE USES

By the term DISTRIBUTIVE is meant individually or separately. Distributive use in the present context emphasises groups, however large or small, rather than whole entities. Numerals, when used with reduplicated words, behave as described in §6. The underlying pattern in the examples (65)–(68) is: reduplicated numeral + word(s) + reduplicated numeral → distributive (i.e., the reduplicated numeral followed by the relevant words or vice-versa, expresses the distributive meaning.) The numerals themselves lend specificity to the meaning so that the two-way ambiguity found in (55)–(58) is absent in these examples.

- (65) a. **lse** five
 b. **lse lse** in fives
- (66) a. **wète ji isè**
 bring^{IMP} yam five
 Bring five yams!
- b. **wète ji lse lse**
 bring^{IMP} yam five five
 Bring the yam in fives!
- (67) a. **ìno** four
 b. **ìno ìno** in fours
- (68) a. **kpòsa azù ìno**
 display^{IMP} fish four
 Display four fish!
- b. **kpòsa azù ìno ìno**
 display^{IMP} fish four four
 Display the fish in fours!

8. CONCLUSION

Although this article draws examples from the Oka dialect of Igbo, the examples do apply to several or all dialects of Igbo. Additionally, the examples from other Nigerian languages provided in the introductory paragraph suggests that this phenomenon is found in other languages as well.

This article has highlighted the functional virtues and limitations of word reduplication in the syntax of a natural language. Among the virtues is the fact that it serves in conveying various forms of intensification, and one of the weaknesses is that it cannot be used rigorously to mark plurality.

REFERENCES

- Anagbogu, Philip N. 1979. The Igbo relative clause. M.A. Project, Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ibadan.
- . 1990. The grammar of Igbo nominalizations. Onitsha: University Publishing Company.
- Bamgbose, Ayo. 1966. A grammar of Yoruba. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in association with the West African Languages Survey and the Institute of African Studies.
- Enem, Edith. 1969. An introduction to the dialect of Oka (a dialect of Igbo). Long Essay, Postgraduate Diploma in Linguistics, University of Ibadan.