What does reduplication intensify?
The semantics and pragmatics of reduplicated forms in Italian and their equivalents in German

Silvia Bonacchi
University of Warsaw

In the present paper, the semantics of reduplication forms in Italian is analyzed on the basis of their intensifying pragmatic functions in regard to their base-forms (duration, graduation, modulation, disambiguation, accreditation of speaker, appeal to hearer) and to their “embodied” character (evoking gestuality and suprasegmentality) and compared with their possible equivalents in German. Reduplicative forms in Italian not only modify the truth-conditional value of verbal units – in the direction of a quantitative or qualitative intensification –; furthermore they express a new use-conditional (pragmatic) meaning. Reduplication is, in face-to-face-communication, therefore to be considered an important instrument of emotive communication (as strategic and intentional conveying of emotional information about feelings and attitudes towards things, events, interlocutors), used in specific contexts to express an affective register. Its main function is the modulation of affective intensity and the evocation of conversational and emotional (affective) implicatures. Instead of reduplicated forms, German uses other language resources which produce use-conditional (pragmatic) meanings: intensifiers, intensifying prefixes, modal particles, adverbs, verbal forms.

Keywords: reduplication, intensification, modulation of affective intensity, implicatures, embodied communication

1. Introduction

Reduplication is an important mechanism in most languages for the creation of new words and for the modification of meaning (Pott 1863; Watts 1968; Moravcsik 1978; Skoda 1982; Antoniak 2005). It is based on the repetition of language units used as source material for the repetition (the base), which leads to a verbal “unit” with a new meaning (the reduplicant). According to the definition by Bzdega (1965),
Reduplication is the iteration *(duplication or even triplication)* of a verbal “primary existing simplex”,\(^1\) accompanied by a morphological integration (for example with grammar morphemes) which leads at the end to the lexicalization of the new unit. This “primary existing simplex” can be a phoneme, a morpheme, an onomatopoetic expression, a homophone, a word, part of it or a stem. In later studies, the notion of *reduplication* has converged to the more general one of iteration, and has been extended to more complex bases, like autonomous lexical items, phrases, and sentence equivalents (for example Wierzbicka 1986; Topczewska 2007).\(^2\)

The immediately given “iconicity of intensification” (Kouwenberg & LaCharité 2001: 60ff.) in the reduplicative mechanism is one of the key reasons for its semantic productivity in new word formation. It is assumed, that the original “gesture of repeating” a lexical item as an expression of multiplicity, duration, iterativity, abstraction and generalization (for example in the case of reproducing an onomatopoetic expression) leads to a consolidation of the duplicated form (reduplicant) in the new, intensified meaning.\(^3\) Many words in our current vocabulary stem from this: for example, verbs like New German *murmeln* (from Old High German *murmuron/*murmulon*) and Italian *mormorare* (from Latin *mormorare*) can both be traced back to the onomatopoetic element *mur-* as an imitation of the sound of the wind or the flowing of water (durative intensification). The same onomatopoetic element *mur-* also leads to the formation of non-reduplicated forms, such as the German verb *murren* (‘grumble’). The Italian verbal form *sussurro* (‘I whisper’) derives from the reduplicated Latin form *sur-sur-rus* (< Indo-European stem *sur-*,-*suar-*,-*svar-* as an onomatopoetic expression of the sound of the wind, later found in the meaning ‘I sing’) and can be considered an example of mitigating intensification.

Reduplication is considered a language universal, nevertheless its frequency, and its morphological and semantic potential in various languages vary (Fabricius 1998; Rubino 2005). In some languages, such as in Austronesian and in various African languages (Castagneto, this volume), reduplication expresses grammar

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1. See Bzdęga (1965: 6): “Unter Reduplikation ist […] eine wort- oder formbildende Doppelung von Morphemen und Wörtern bzw. eine primäre, d.h. ohne Präexistenz selbstständiger Simplizia auftretende Doppelsetzung von Silben zu verstehen, jedesmal also ein Verfahren, das zu einer Worteinheit führt”.

2. Even though some scholars consider these cases to be forms of repetition and not reduplication (Dingemans 2015), from the pragmatic point of view the reduplicant is a new item, which is different from the base, so in this sense it can be considered a reduplication.

3. According to the definition by Bolinger (1972: 15ff.), intensification can be defined as a linguistic device for the expression of degree, which scales upwards or downwards the property related to a given identity. The principle means of intensification are intensifiers, which can be realized in different ways in the various languages. See also Bierwisch (1987).
functions. It is used for the formation of the plural,\(^4\) for the determination of the degree of adjectives, for the expression of the verbal aspect (intensification, duration and iteration). Furthermore, in nonverbal languages (for example in signed languages) reduplicative forms (of sign gestures) can have grammatical functions, such as the expression of the plural in substantives, numerals, the degree of adjectives and the aspect in verb tenses (for an overview see Ast 2011).

Reduplication is an important mechanism in language acquisition (reduplicative babbling, mostly consonant-vowel combinations) and in baby talk, as the following expressions show:

\(\text{(1)}\) Italian: *mam-ma, pa-pà, pi-pì*  
German: *Ma-ma, Pa-pa, Pi-pi*  
‘mum, dad, wee wee’

Reduplication is the basis for onomatopoeic expressions, interjections and homophones:

\(\text{(2)}\) Italian: *bau-bau, toc-toc, ahi-ahi!, bla-bla*  
German: *waw-waw, klopf klopf, aua!, bla-bla*\(^5\)  
‘woof woof, knock knock, ow!, blah blah’

Reduplication is also an important mechanism for the formation of neologisms and ad-hoc-formations. For example, the Italian word *bunga bunga*, used by journalists in 2010 to designate the sexual escapades of the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunga_bunga>, last view 6.10.2016), goes probably back to the reduplicated Korean expression *Boong-ga Boong-ga*, which is the name of an arcade game that involves spanking. Particular cases of reduplication are the rhyming reduplication (English: *razzle-dazzle, hoity-toity*) and the ablaut reduplication (with vowel alternation in the stem vowel). Examples in English of ablaut reduplication are *ding-dong*, which expresses the iterated sounds of bells, *zig-zag* for designing a path with many abrupt turns, *tip-top* for designing something which is deemed perfect.

So far, reduplication has been studied above all from a morphological point of view, often in a diachronic perspective (often from an etymological point of view, see Brandstetter 1907; Bzdęga 1962 and 1965; Bolinger 1972; Schindler 1991; Wiltshire; Marantz 2000), but in more recent times semantic and pragmatic aspects

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\(\text{4.}\) The Italian word *barbaro* and the German word *Barbar* come from the Sumeric word *bar* (‘foreigner’), in which the reduplicated form indicates the plural form. An older explanation of German *Barbar*, Italian *barbaro* as reduplication of the syllable *ba-* as expression of an unclear way of speaking also assumes an analogic word-formation-mechanism.

\(\text{5.}\) For a wide analysis of *bla bla* in German see Finkbeiner (2016).
have been moving to the forefront (Bazzanella 1995; Dovicchi 2010). A new interest has been registered for the cognitive processes to account for how reduplication takes place (for example through iconicity and deicticity, see Bonacchi 2012) and how speakers represent reduplication in their mental lexicon (Singh 2005: 274).

2. The semantics and pragmatics of reduplicative forms in Italian and their equivalents in German

Italian is a language in which reduplication is not only an important mechanism for the formation of new words, but also for the pragmatic modification of meaning of full lexical items, like words and sentence equivalents.6 Reduplicated forms of full lexical items (verbal forms, adjectives, adverbs, nouns and answer particles) in Italian have very specific pragmatic values and function as markers of the relation between speaker, hearer and referents. The key question that arises in this context is the following one: if it is true, that reduplication provokes a semantic modification in direction of an intensification, what kind of intensification characterize the pragmatic functions of reduplication in Italian? And how can this particular modification i.e. pragmatic intensification of meaning be conveyed in German, which is a language that uses reduplication of full lexical items much more sparingly than Italian?

In the following part of this paper, I will consider in detail the following pragmatic functions of reduplicated forms connected to intensification and their possible equivalents in German:

a. Qualitative intensification (in sense of modulation, i.e. enhancement or mitigation)
b. Duration and gradation
c. Appeal to the hearer
d. Accreditation of the speaker, disambiguation and contrastive focus

In the conclusive part of the paper, I will show how reduplicative forms are an excellent case of embodied communication, and therefore convey body-based modalities, such as gestuality and suprasegmentality.

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3. Qualitative intensification (of adjectives and adverbs)

If we can compare non-reduplicated forms of adjectives and adverbs in Italian with their reduplicated equivalents and other semantically related forms, we can ascertain that the reduplicative forms express more than the morphological modified base (Calpestrati, this volume; Grandi, this volume). A good example is given by the elative gradation of adjective:

\[(3) \quad \text{è bella} \quad \text{‘she is beautiful’} \quad > \quad \text{è bellissima} \quad \text{‘she is very beautiful = she is terrific’} \quad \text{è bella} \quad \text{bella} \quad \approx \quad \text{‘she is beautiful beautiful’} \]

The expression \text{è bella} \quad \text{bella} \quad \text{designates more than ‘she is very beautiful’. It designates speaker’s attitude to the referent (‘I am impressed by it’) and a contrastive focus (‘when I say bella, I really mean it, it is not just a conventional bella’).}

In German we have the following equivalents:

\[(4) \quad \text{è bella: sie ist schön} \quad \text{è bellissima: sie ist sehr schön, sie ist wunderschön} \quad \text{è bella} \quad \text{bella: sie ist sehr schön, sie ist wunderschön, sie ist wirklich schön, sie ist aber schön!} \]

In German the effect of intensification (expressed in Italian by the elative form) can be obtained both with intensifiers (\textit{sehr}) and with intensifying composition morphemes (\textit{wunder-}). The expressions with the modal particle \textit{aber} (literally ‘but’) and the modal adverb \textit{wirklich} (literally ‘really’, ‘indeed’) expresses more than a simple enhancement of the predicate (\textit{schön}): \textit{aber} and \textit{wirklich} indicate not only a qualitative intensification, but also a particular attitude of the speaker to the predicative content of the utterance (to the addressee and to the referent). A comparison of the Italian and German forms shows that beyond the truth-conditional semantic modification, we have in the expression \textit{è bella} \quad \textit{bella} \quad a use-conditional pragmatic modification. The speakers using the reduplicated forms wants to express a particular attitude to the addressee and to the referent: (i) ‘I am impressed by it’ and (ii) ‘I really mean bella’. In the following sentences we have a similar modification of meaning (a literal English translation is provided):

\[(5) \quad \text{Italian: tua sorella ha un cuore grande grande} \quad \quad \quad \text{German: deine Schwester hat ein wahrhaft großes Herz} \quad \quad \quad \quad \quad \quad \text{(intensifier: wahrhaft)} \]

‘Your sister has a big big heart’
4. Duration and gradation

The reduplication of imperative verb forms and adverbs can express duration or a durative action. So in the following expression in Italian:

\[(6)\] Gratta gratta sono arrivata a capire cosa voleva

‘By dint of scratch, I was able to understand what he wanted’ (literal translation)

The Italian form gratta gratta\(^7\) (from the verb grattare, literally: ‘scratch, rub’, metaphorically used in the sense of ‘insisting, asking with tenacity’) can be substituted by a forza di grattare (a forza di + verb correspond to English ‘by dint of + substantive’). A possible equivalent in German for this expression is the following periphrasis:

\[(7)\] Nach hartnäckigem Bohren habe ich endlich verstanden, worum es ihm ging

In a similar way the Italian expression i nostri politici è tutto un magna magna\(^8\) can be translated into German as unsere Politiker verfressen nur unser Geld, which is an explication of the object of the metaphor – mangiare < mangiare ‘to eat’ (of animals) > das Geld verfressen ‘to consume greedily/eat like animals money’. Possible

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7. We can find this form in songs (Gratta gratta amico mio by Francesco Califano), in the press: gratta gratta sotto il russo trovi il cosacco <http://www.liberoquotidiano.it/lettere/lettere-al-direttore/1423838/Gratta-gratta-sotto-il-russo-ci.html> (‘by dint of scratch, behind the Russian you will find a Cossack’).

8. The idiomatic expression è tutto un magna magna indicates the activity of eating a lot, disorderly and without pauses, see for example: <http://www.ilpost.it/2012/03/13/foto-politici-che-mangiano/>
translations in English of the above sentence is ‘politicians – everyone has his hand in the cookie jar’ or ‘politicians – everyone is on the take’ or ‘politicians are the whole time just consuming greedily our money’. As a participant in a chat room noticed in a discussion about the Italian expression è tutto un magna magna, this reduplicated expression is often accompanied by a particular hand gesture (probably an illustrator showing the activity of eating) and a particular phonetic realization (the Sicilian accent, alluding to criminal mafia association):

(8) X wrote: I’ll try to explain the meaning: it’s a tipical Italian expression to indicate that everybody tends to “take” (eat) all that he can to the detriment of the others. [sic] Example: “la politica è tutto un magna magna”, “in quell’ambiente è tutto un magna magna” and this expression is usually said with a particular hand gesture and sometimes with sicilian accent… [sic] 😅 (magna is a dialectal for[m] of “mangia”).


5. Appeal to the hearer (conative function)

With a reduplicative form the speaker can realize an appeal to his interlocutors, which can be made explicit through the reconstruction of implicatures, as in the following examples:

(9) Parla, parla!
‘Speak! Please, speak!’

In German the expression can be given with:

(10) Also sag! Sag doch!

The speaker urges the hearer to speak, which is clear through the discourse marker also (‘so’) and the modal particle doch (‘come on, in this sense ‘please’). The implicature to be reconstructed is:

(11) /+> Ich bitte dich! Sag doch!/ (‘come on, tell me!’)

A strong appeal to the hearer to act is shown in the next example:

(12) Mi fa freddo freddo
‘it is cold cold’
/+>scaldami!!
‘warm me up!’
The speaker can show with a gesture that s/he is shivering with cold. In German the same appeal can be made with the expression

\begin{align*}
\text{(13)} & \quad \textit{Es ist mir furchtbar kalt} \\
& \quad /+'Oh, bitte, tu etwas, damit es mir wärmer wird!/}
\end{align*}

The intensification is given by the German adverb \textit{furchtbar} used as an intensifier. A further appeal to the hearer can be realized through the involvement of the addressee, at the same time tuning down the illocutionary force of a directive speech act.\footnote{This case is illustrated in the following examples:}

\begin{align*}
\text{(14)} & \quad \textit{Quasi quasi vengo anche io} \\
& \quad \text{‘Perhaps I can also come'} \\
& \quad /+'che dici?/} \\
& \quad \text{‘what do you think about it?’}
\end{align*}

The uncertainty conveyed through the expression \textit{quasi quasi} provokes the involvement of the addressee (see also Voghera & Collu, this volume), who is called to reinforce the speaker. In German the same appellative function can be expressed by:

\begin{align*}
\text{(15)} & \quad \textit{Allmählich überlege ich mir, ob ich nicht auch kommen soll} \\
& \quad /+'was sagst du dazu?/
\end{align*}

In this expression there are also uncertainty markers (\textit{allmählich} as a tuning down indicator, the verb \textit{sich überlegen}, and the last-verb-sentence with rhetorical negation).

6. **Accreditation of the speaker, disambiguation and contrastive focus**

This function of accreditation of the speaker leads to a disambiguation and a contrastive focus expressed through the reduplicative form. This function has been studied under various labels: \textit{accreditation of the speaker} (Wierzbicka 1986), \textit{disambiguation} (Bonacchi 2012) and \textit{contrastive focus} (Ghomeshi, Jackendoff, Rosen & Russell 2004). The speaker using the reduplicative expressions wants to convey that saying a word he really means that, and not for example what could be suggested by a conventional use of the word. In emotive communication this function is particularly important, because it enhances the sincerity of the speaker and the

\footnote{This is the reason way reduplicative forms in Italian are often used in the polite communication, see Bonacchi (2013: 94.)}
illocutionary force of the utterance. In Italian, the reduplicated lexical item is usually a substantive or an adjective. The following examples illustrates this:

(16) *un amore grande grande*

‘a big big love’

Also in this case, we can compare the expression containing reduplication with an alternative expression with an elative form of the adjective:

(17) *un amore grande grande vs. un amore grandissimo*

‘a big big love vs ≈ a very big love, an infinite love’

Saying *un amore grande grande* the speaker expresses his/her affective involvement, his/her sincerity. Often the expression is accompanied by gestures (for example illustrators of hugs) and a particular prosodic contour (normally with lengthening of the vowel *a* and the nasal *n*). In German the meanings can be expressed as follows:

(18) **Italian:** *un amore grandissimo*

**German:** *eine riesengroße Liebe*

**Italian:** *un amore grande grande*

**German:** *eine wirklich große Liebe*

In the first case we have the intensifying word-formation morpheme *riesen-*, in the second case the *accreditative* modal adverb *wirklich* (‘indeed, really’), which expresses that the speaker is really sincere when saying this utterance.

In some cases this accreditation of the speaker is conveyed by reduplicative forms expressing an absolute tautology or a contrastive focus (see further Ghesquiére, this volume). In the case of the absolute tautology we have the reduplication of a substantive, which also implies a contrastive focus (‘it was a *x x* = it was a real *x*, and *not* a *y’), which can be explicated in a negative sentence (‘it was NOT *y’), as in the following examples:

(19) *era un amore amore*

‘it was a love love’

In this case, in German this function can be expressed by an adjective (*echt*):

(20) *es war eine echte Liebe*

/+*+ es war keine oberflächliche Liebe/

‘it was a NOT a superficial love’
Similarly, a contrastive focus can be reconstructed in the following reduplicated expressions:

(21)  
\begin{align*}
\text{Lucia è una mamma mamma} & \quad \text{‘Lucy is a mother mother’} \\
\text{Cristina ist eine hundertprozentige Mutter} & \quad \text{‘Christina is NOT a bad mother’} \\
\text{Maria è una donna donna} & \quad \text{‘Maria is a woman woman’} \\
\text{Maria ist eine echte Frau} & \quad \text{‘Maria is NOT a half woman’}
\end{align*}

7. Reduplication as mechanism of embodied communication: Gestuality and suprasegmentality

Reduplication in Italian is an important instrument of the so-called embodied communication because it evokes gestures, facial expressions and suprasegmental features. Hence, reduplicative forms have an essential iterative kinetic character, as the following expressions show:

(22)  
\begin{align*}
\text{un abbraccio forte forte!} & \quad \text{‘a big big hug!’} \\
\text{Ich umarme dich ganz fest!} & \quad \text{‘I embrace you strongly’} \\
\text{Fühl dich umarmt!} & \quad \text{‘Feel embraced!’}
\end{align*}

With this expression the speaker convey in a very concrete way the act of hugging. In German the same effect can be conveyed in the expression:

(22)  
\begin{align*}
\text{Ich umarme dich ganz fest!} & \quad \text{‘I embrace you strongly’} \\
\text{Fühl dich umarmt!} & \quad \text{‘Feel embraced!’}
\end{align*}

The Italian expression \text{zitto zitto!} also evokes the gesture of the placing the index finger in front of a closed mouth as an appeal not to speak, or other gestures which express an appeal to the hearer not to speak (see Picture 1). In German this meaning can be conveyed through the German expression \text{leise, bitte!} (‘be quiet, please!’).
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Picture 1. A scene from Gioacchino Rossini’s La Cenerentola, in which the tenor sings the reduplicated expression zitto zitto in the Duo Zitto zitto piano piano <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9xiPBqYlio> (28 June 2016)

The meaning conveyed by reduplicated expressions depends on an appropriate prosodic realization. An example of disambiguation through prosody (phonetic realization) in Italian is the following one:

(23) *Dai, dai!*  
‘Come on!’

According to the way this reduplicated expression is pronounced, the speaker can express two conveyed meanings to the hearer: an appeal to hurry up (impatience) and an appeal to minimize a problem.

Picture 2. Prosodic realization of the expression *dai dai* as an impatience signal
Picture 3. Prosodic realization of the expression *dai dai* as an appeal to minimize a problem

In German an equivalence for the reduplicated expression as an impatience signal and its implicature can be:

\[(24) \textit{Mach schon!} \text{ (imperative verbal form + modal particle)}
\/+/> \textit{Lass mich nicht warten!}
\textit{‘Do not let me wait!’} \]

An equivalent for the reduplicated expression as an appeal to minimize a problem and its implicature can be:

\[(25) \textit{Ach, komm!} \text{ (interjection + imperative form)}
\/+/> \textit{Bitte sei nicht überempfindlich!}
\textit{‘Do not be too susceptible!’} \]

8. Final remarks

Italian is a language in which reduplication is widely used. In Italian there is a high frequency of reduplicative forms of full lexical items and of sentence equivalents. In the present paper, the semantics of reduplication forms in Italian is analyzed on the basis of their intensifying pragmatic functions in regard to their base-forms (duration, graduation, modulation, disambiguation, accreditation of speaker, appeal to hearer) and to their embodied character (evoking gestuality and suprasegmentality). Reduplicative forms in Italian not only modify the truth-conditional value of verbal units – in the direction of a quantitative or qualitative intensification –, furthermore they express a new use-conditional (pragmatic) meaning (see also Malloggi, this volume). Reduplication is in face-to-face-communication therefore to be considered an important instrument of emotive communication (as strategic and intentional conveying of emotional information about feelings and attitudes.
towards things, events, interlocutors),\textsuperscript{10} used in specific contexts to express an affective register. Its main function is the modulation of affective intensity and the evocation of conversational and emotional (affective) implicatures.\textsuperscript{11}

Some semantic mechanisms related to the embodied nature of reduplicate utterances can be described through a multimodal analysis, which considers not only the verbal, but also the vocal (see Cosentino, this volume) and the kinetic display. As an important instrument of embodied communication, reduplication has a multimodal quality which is based on its essential iterative kinetic character, hence it evokes gestures and facial expressions and it requires appropriate prosodic realization (Raimy 2000). In German, the intensifying semantics (duration, graduation, modulation, disambiguation, accreditation of speaker, appeal to hearer) of Italian reduplication forms are reproduced through other linguistic means, for example, through a particular use of verbal tenses, adverbs, modal particles, graduating particles, by which a functional (pragmatic) equivalence\textsuperscript{12} (based on intensification quality) can be reached, but not a formal aesthetic one (based on the embodied quality). Therefore, we can conclude that reduplicative forms represent a serious challenge for translators and for L2-learners.

References


\textsuperscript{10}. See Alfonzetti (2009: 150): “Per comunicazione emotiva si intende la segnalazione strategica e intenzionale di informazioni affettive, che si manifesta nell’uso appreso culturalmente e mediato cognitivamente di segnali verbali, prosodici, cinesici e prossemici, miranti ad esprimere sentimenti ed atteggiamenti verso cose, eventi, concetti e interlocutori”.

\textsuperscript{11}. See Schwarz-Friesel (2010: 12): “e-implicature [is] based on emotional knowledge, that has to be inferred by the recipient”.

\textsuperscript{12}. See Koller (1979: 216ff.). See also Napoli & Ravetto (this volume); Foschi (this volume); Costa (this volume).


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