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## On Repeatability and Reduplication

By Peter H. Fries

It frequently occurs that a function within a construction is described as being repeatable. (Note: The style of grammar I will use here distinguishes between a function and the fillers of the function. Terms such as *modifier*, *head*, *determiner*, *subject*, and *predicate*, etc. are labels for function, while terms such as *adjective*, *adjective phrase*, *noun phrase*, *clause*, *noun*, etc. are labels for classes which are fillers of functions.) The article "English Word Order" by Alice C. Pack presents a chart of the English noun phrase where each of the

the sequences of words in the examples cited so far (with no regard for the meaning they convey) one might say that the two occurrences of each modifier function are independent: usually they differ (as in *thin rectangular card*) but occasionally they are identical (as in *blue blue sea*).

The semantic interpretation of the two types of examples presented indicates that they are not parallel. When the two fillers are different, the two modifiers cumulatively modify the head noun. When they are the same, one merely intensifies the other. Several types of formal evidence support this distinction.

1) One reason to distinguish between the two types of repeatability (let me call them repeatability (the first example) and

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13 columns may be taken as representing a function while each of the words in the columns is a potential filler of the function. The modifier functions of the noun phrases such as *the thin rectangular card* and *the blue translucent fishbowl* in which *thin*, *rectangular*, *blue* and *translucent* all fill a shape modifier function (*thin* and *rectangular*) or a color modifier function (*blue* and *translucent*).

Sometimes apparently similar examples are also cited to demonstrate the repeatability of the modifier functions. These examples involve repetitions of identical words, such as *a round round ball* and *a blue blue ocean*. If we consider only

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reduplication (the repetition of the identical lexical item)) would be to find a word which may be reduplicated, but which does not occur in a repeatable function. It seems to me that the occurrence of *very* in the intensifier function of the adjective phrase is exactly this sort of situation. We find

a *very big boy*  
an *awfully big boy*

but not

\**an awfully very big boy*  
\**a very awfully big boy*

The last examples show that the function is not repeatable. On the other hand we do find

a *very very big boy*  
an *awfully awfully big boy*

These examples show that *very* and *awfully* may undergo reduplication.

2) Another reason to distinguish the two types of repetition is the effects of many repetitions of the function or the fillers. If the modifier function is repeated many times within one noun phrase, the result may be hard to understand but it does not automatically become funny.

*The old delapidated big red barn*

Four repetitions of *very* or *blue*, on the other hand, produce a comical effect rather than any addition in meaning of the type gained from repetition of the function.

*the very very very very big barn*  
*the blue blue blue blue sea*

3) Reduplication does not co-occur with any other filler of the intensifier function within the adjective phrase.

\**the very old old man*  
\**awfully big big barn*

This is formal evidence that reduplication is a type of intensifier, similar to *very* or *awfully*.

4) Finally, it is useful to note that only certain words may undergo reduplication comfortably. Within the intensifier function of the adjective phrase we find the following words undergoing reduplication: *very*, *awfully*, *really*, *quite*, *real*, and *terribly*. The following fillers of the intensifier function of the adjective phrase do not undergo reduplication: *pretty*, *fairly*, *such*, *rather*, and *most*.

Similarly, while the modifier function of the noun phrase is repeatable, only certain fillers within that function may undergo reduplication:

a *big big barn*

*an old old house*  
*a narrow narrow channel*

but not

\**a young young man*  
\**an historical historical society*  
\**a rectangular rectangular card*

By contrast there is no limitation on what fillers may occur within repeated functions. The adjective *blue* may occur in a color modifier function whether or not there is another color modifier immediately preceding or following. There are, however, restrictions on what color modifiers may co-occur within the same noun phrase. One may find *the blue translucent fishbowl* but probably not *the blue orange fishbowl*.

Note that sequences like *blue-green* and *bluish-green* are taken not as sequences of two color modifier functions

|                |                |                 |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| color modifier | color modifier |                 |
| <i>blue</i>    | <i>green</i>   | <i>fishbowl</i> |
| <i>bluish</i>  | <i>green</i>   | <i>fishbowl</i> |

but as complex fillers of the same color modifier function

|                     |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| color modifier      |                 |
| <i>blue-green</i>   | <i>fishbowl</i> |
| <i>bluish green</i> | <i>fishbowl</i> |

That is to say *blue* and *orange* cannot co-occur within the same noun phrase, where as *blue* and *translucent* can. Co-occurrence restrictions of this type are different from the restrictions on reduplication mentioned above, since every word or phrase which may occur within the color modifier function may co-occur in the same noun phrase with at least some other filler of that function. In terms of the examples above, we find that *blue* and *orange* cannot co-occur in the same noun phrase but *blue* and *translucent*, and *orange* and *translucent* may.

The conclusion to draw from this discussion is a) reduplication and repeatability are to be distinguished b) repeatability is a feature of functions while reduplicability is a feature of word items and may be a filler of a function and c) reduplication (in the adjective phrase at least) is a kind of intensifier.

#### References

- 1) Alice C. Pack. "English Word Order" *TESL Reporter*, volume 3, pp 6-7, (1969).
- 2) W.C. Watt. "English Reduplication" *Journal of English Linguistics* volume 2, pp 96-129 (1968).