

SOME RESTRICTIONS ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH

By John T. Platt

In an article "On Repeatability and Reduplication"¹, Peter H. Fries points out the difference between the repetition of functions as when the modifier function is repeated in *thin rectangular card* and the reduplication of a word which may be a filler of a function as in *a big big barn*. He also related reduplication to the use of intensifiers such as *very*.

He points out that "only certain fillers within (the modifier) 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."

What I wish to discuss are the restrictions on reduplication of adjectives. Why are the three examples above unacceptable? We can immediately rule out the last two because the adjectives are ones which do not permit of comparison and therefore do not co-occur with *very* as may be seen by:

*a very historical society
*a very rectangular card.

At least, *historical* does not admit of comparison in this sense where a historical society is one whose members are interested in history. Why *historical* does not permit reduplication in uses like *historical building* will be suggested later.

Also, it might seem that for reduplication to occur the adjective must have an antonym. In the case of *historical* (in the first sense) and *rectangular* there are no real antonyms whereas with *big*, *old*, *narrow* - and *young* there are the antonyms: *small* or

little, *new* or *young*, *wide*, *old*. Why is it then that:

*a young young man

seems to be unacceptable? Is the sequence *young young* acceptable before any nouns at all? It seems to me that if what is *young* is so young as to be newborn or newly made then *young young* is more acceptable. Thus:

a young young colt/lamb/piglet
a young young wine/nation

but it is true that *young young* does not occur as freely as *old old*. It may be that whereas *old old* refers to a concept without time limit *young young* is limited. If someone or something is *young* it cannot be younger than newborn or newly made but we cannot set a definite upper limit on age.

If we now turn to the other suggested antonyms for Fries' acceptably reduplicated adjectives, we find that *small*, *little*, *new*, *wide* are not equally acceptable when reduplicated. Thus:

a small small puppy
a wide wide river

are perfectly acceptable but:

a little little boy
a new new car

may seem dubious. I might mention in passing that *small small* seems to me to be more restricted than *wide wide*, possibly for the same reasons as those I have suggested for *young young*.

The reduplication of *little* and *new* appears to be more acceptable in some cases than in the examples I have given above. Thus:

a little little man in a green suit was sitting on a toadstool
seems to be quite acceptable and:

the poor little girl awoke to find herself surrounded by new new clothes and lots and lots of money
might be acceptable in a fairy story.

It may well be that although reduplication is, as Fries claims, a type of intensifier, it is not quite semantically the same as *very* or,

¹Peter H. Fries. "On Repeatability and Reduplication" TESL Reporter, volume 3, No. 4, pp. 1-2, (1970).

ON REDUPLICATION OF

for that matter, any other intensifier. To me, the substitution of *very* for the reduplication in the last two examples would render them less acceptable whereas the substitution of *very* would produce greater acceptability in:

a very little boy

a very new car.

To me, *an old old house* may not necessarily be as old as *a very old house* but it strongly exemplifies the qualities of 'oldness'. Similarly, *a big big barn* has that air of 'bigness' even if it is not so big that one might call it *very big*.

For me, at least, reduplication is emotively stronger than the use of intensifiers like *very* and yet it does not necessarily imply that the noun modified is actually *bigger, older* or whatever it may be than when reduplication is not used. It is rather a strong 'quality' that is indicated.

If we look at colour adjectives, we find, again, that some may and some may not be reduplicated. Thus:

a yellow yellow moon

a red red rose

the blue blue sea

the green green fields of home

but hardly:

(?) the purple purple dress

(?) the puce puce wall

or even:

*the orange orange sun.

It would seem that only the 'basic' colours (not necessarily primary) plus black and white may be reduplicated. Plain 'strong' words may be reduplicated to give a strong effect.

Notice too how in exclamations reduplication is obligatory instead of *very* or some other intensifier. Thus:

dirty dirty boy!

naughty naughty girl!

silly silly child!

but not:

very/extremely dirty boy!

very/extremely naughty girl!

very/extremely silly child!

Reduplication of adjectives does not seem to occur after the copula. Thus, whilst we have:

I saw a big big barn

we do not have:

Dr. John T. Platt, Deputy Chairman, Department of Linguistics at Monash University, Clayton, Viedtoria, Australia writes, "Recently I received from Dr. Peter Fries some copies of papers by him. Among them was the article "On Repeatability and Reduplication" from TESL Reporter Vol. 3, No. 4, Summer, 1970. This set me thinking about restrictions on reduplication and this article ensued."

*I saw a barn which was big big

*Joe is tall tall.

This suggests that a transformational approach in which pre-nominal adjectives are transformationally derived from embedded relative sentences could not derive; for example, *a big big barn* from *a barn which was big big*. A tentative suggestion is that it would have to be derived from an underlying structure more like: *a barn which was big - which was big*. The justification for this is that we do have such structures as:

he's a guy who's real sneaky - real sneaky

that meal was delicious - delicious which seem to be semantically closer to:

he's a real sneaky sneaky guy

that delicious delicious meal

than do:

he's a very real sneaky guy

that was a very delicious meal.

Thus, to summarize, it would seem that reduplication of adjectives is permissible when it is a plain, simple adjective which permits of comparison and which has a certain emotive quality and that reduplication is the only method of intensification of adjectives in exclamations.