

Revisiting dissyllabic reduplication in Mandarin Chinese

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Mandarin Chinese (MC) is known as a language with poor morphology, but this is true only if by morphology one means inflection. MC has rich compounding and reduplicating morphology. In this contribution I will focus on the reduplication patterns of dissyllabic words, that is, an AB type words reduplicated as AABB or ABAB, where A and B stand for monosyllabic morphemes. For example: *zi3-xi4* ‘careful’ > *zi2-zi3-xi4-xi4* ‘very careful’, or *xue2-xi2* ‘study’ > *xue2-xi0-xue0-xi0* ‘study a little’, with eventual tonal changes.

Several parameters intervene in the reduplication patterns. Since a language is a system, only the consideration of all existing forms could lead to faithful conclusion. An analysis based on part of the data will only give a simplistic view.

Yip (1980) is a thorough study on the reduplication patterns. She first assumes two kinds of reduplications: that of morpheme and that of word. Then she proposes that a correlation exists between word category, the unit duplicated (morpheme or word) and reduplication schema (AABB or ABAB). She claims that adjectives and nouns have the AABB pattern and the reduplicated unit is the morpheme; verbs have the ABAB one and the unit reduplicated is the word.

Subsequent works in the literature follow more or less Yip (1980). For example, Feng (2003) also confirms that verbs are reduplicated as ABAB and adjective AABB.

But let’s examine the following data that Yip and Feng haven’t considered. They are not exceptions but productive, so can’t be negligible (see Zhang 2015 for the productivity of AABB verbs ignored by Yip and Feng).

(1) ABAB type adjectives (that I collect myself)

- a. *xian1-hong2* > *xian1-hong2-xian1-hong2*
vivacious-red ‘scarlet’
- b. *xue3-bai2* > *xue3-bai2-xue3-bai2*
snow-white ‘purely white’

(2) AABB type verbs (from Zhang 2015)

- a. *duo3-shan3* > *duo2-duo0-shan2-shan3*
hide-avoid ‘dodge a lot’
- b. *da3-nao4* > *da2-da0-nao4-nao4*
hit-fight ‘hit and fight a lot’

These data show that Yip and Feng would have underestimated the complexity of the phenomenon. In fact, in (1) the two morphemes of an adjective are not of dvandva type, and can’t be reduplicated as AABB, but have to be ABAB; in (2), the two morphemes are of dvandva type and thus can be reduplicated as AABB. There is therefore an important parameter in the reduplication patterns: the internal structure of the AB form.

Observations based on data of (1) and (2) type:

- 1) The reduplicating words of AABB type, noun, adjective or verb, A and B are of the dvandva type.
- 2) The reverse is not true: a word having a dvandva structure AB can be duplicated as ABAB.
- 3) The AABB type is always iconic (Morgenstern & Michaud 2007, = intensive).
- 4) The reverse is not true: ABAB type can also be iconic.
- 5) Dissyllabic word AB, if not of dvandva type, cannot be duplicated as AABB, but only ABAB.
- 6) The reverse is not true: ABAB form can be derived from a dvandva AB word.
- 7) ABAB verb is always attenuative; AABB verb always iconic.

Based on these observations, I will propose a morphophonological solution which aims to unify the interpretation of the data and to account for different tonal changes in the reduplicated forms as well.