

## On the Function of Verbal Reduplication in Nigerian Pidgin

**Asoro, Ota Kingsley**

Dept. Indigenous Language, Edo State College of Education, Abudu, Nigeria  
[kingsleyasoro@gmail.com](mailto:kingsleyasoro@gmail.com)

**Evbuomwan, Obed Osaigbovo**

University of Benin, Benin City  
[osaigbovo.evbuomwan@uniben.edu](mailto:osaigbovo.evbuomwan@uniben.edu)

### Abstract

Reduplication is the repetition of a word in whole or part in speech and it is a prominent feature in Nigerian Pidgin (NP), spoken as a lingua franca in the different regions of Nigeria. The present paper examines this feature of reduplication in Nigerian Pidgin verbs with the aim of revealing the different functions or roles that the phenomenon plays in the language. The data for the study were collected from different parts of Nigeria, especially Sapele and Warri areas in the Southern region of the country. These formed a part of a corpus of primary data collected for the study of sentence modes in the language but were later observed to manifest reduplicative forms. The verbs with reduplicative forms were organized according to the different functions that they are observed to play in the language and later reviewed in different interview sessions with speakers of the language in view of verification before observations were made. The findings of the study revealed that reduplication of Nigerian Pidgin verbs perform two main functions, including emphasizing actions as well as marking iterative properties of the verbs that are repeated. The paper concludes that reduplication of verbs in Nigerian Pidgin is important in expressing the adjectival aspects of the action expressed by the verb.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Pidgin (PN), morphology, verb, reduplication.

### 1. Introduction

This paper examines the function of reduplication in Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth, NP). It seeks to show that when a verb is reduplicated in NP, it may be used to indicate that a given

action takes place repeatedly, i.e. more than once, in addition to existing notions in which reduplication in NP is thought to mark emphasis. This work is motivated by the need to clearly demonstrate this iterative and emphatic function of reduplication in the language.

Reduplication is a word formation process in which a word or a part (usually a segment or syllable) of it is repeated, with or without any modification (Spencer, 1991; Mensah, 2011; Holm, 2000; Li & Rawski, 2024). Ofulue (2015) is, however, of the opinion that reduplication in NP can also be a simple case of repetition of an existing word, provided that it gives rise to an extension in its original meaning. It is notable, however, that reduplication in languages may affect a part or the whole of a word, thus languages manifests both partial and full reduplication which Mustafa (2022) referred to as morphological doubling. In NP, full reduplication is very productive while partial reduplication is hardly observed.

This paper is organized as follows; this section provides an introduction to the thoughts in the paper, section 2 is an overview of the concept of NP, while the methodology employed in the paper is discussed in section 3. In section 4, the observed functions of reduplication in NP are examined with appropriate illustrations, and the concluding remarks are contained in section 5.

## **2. Nigerian Pidgin (NP)**

NP is the pidgin that is spoken all over Nigerian. A pidgin is a hybrid language that is developed for ease of communication in a language contact situation. It is, therefore, also called a contact, trade, makeshift, marginal or an auxiliary language (Reineke, 1964; Todd, 1974; Elugbe & Omamor, 1991; and Faraclas, 1996). In a simplified form, Ugot and Ogundipe (2011: 227) define it as “a communication system that develops among people who do not share a common language”. The development of a pidgin involves, at least, two languages: “a superstrate language and a substrate language. The superstrate is usually the language of power while the substrates are usually the local languages” (Ifechelobi & Ifechelobi, 2015: 208).

NP is a lingua franca in Nigeria. The language is spoken all over the country. Its speakers cut across ethnic, social, religious and regional classes (Omamor, 1982; Gani-Ikhillama, 1990; Faraclas, 1996; Ugot & Ogundipe, 2011; Oreoluwa, 2016). Many studies in NP (e.g. Agheyisi, 1971; Elugbe & Omamor, 1991; Ihemere, 2006; Mensah, 2011; Ifechelobi & Ifechelobi, 2015; and Ofulue, 2015; Ajaps, 2024) suggest that English is the superstrate language in NP that

provides the bulk of the lexical resources, while the various indigenous languages in the country are substrates, providing the structural, segmental and supra-segmental phonological features. The language also employs several tonal and intonational patterns in distinguishing sentence modes (Ugot & Ogundipe, 2011; Evbuomwan, 2018). Although NP is predominantly spoken, widespread, and thought to be the best choice as a national language for Nigeria (Faraclas, 1996, 2021; Omozuwa, 2003; Eze, 2023; Yakpo, 2024; Lin, Scholman, Saeed & Demberg 2024), it has not gotten the desired attention from language policy makers, making the general attitude towards it to remain negative.

### **3. Methodology**

The data that were analyzed in the study include NP verbs that were observed to contain reduplicated forms. The first set of the data were extracted from free-flowing conversations that were recorded in Edo, Sapele and Warri areas of Nigeria for an earlier study that sought to investigate the different pitch patterns that are employed in distinguishing sentence modes in NP. In that process, certain reduplicated forms were observed to indicate repeated actions. Subsequently, more interviews were conducted in the selected areas to verify the extracted data. In these interviews, NP speakers were engaged in storytelling, family interactions and other free-flowing discourses that facilitate the ordinary use of the language. The speeches were recorded by means of a digital voice recorder. The recordings were re-played with the aim of extracting the reduplicated words and sentences in which they occur, for analysis. The analysis of data was carried out by means of careful observation of the words and the uses to which they are put in sentences.

### **4. The Role of Reduplication in NP**

The present work observes that the process of reduplication in NP is motivated by the need to satisfy two similar, but different, purposes. This section demonstrates that reduplication perform two functions in NP – emphasis and iterative functions. However, this section will begin by giving an overview of some existing assumptions on the role of reduplication in the language.

#### **4.1 Previous Assumptions**

There has been a number of divergent views on the role of reduplication in NP. Although there are many existing works on NP, this review will focus on those that have made definitive statements on the implications of reduplication in the language.

Faraclas (1996) can be described as a comprehensive work on NP grammar. The work examined several aspects of the language, including reduplication. On his consideration of NP reduplication, Faraclas (1996:158) argued that “reduplication is used with frequentative, durative, iterative and habitual meaning”. In his example,

1. Im go tek tu oklòk-tu oklòk de baf  
3sg -R take-V two o'clock-R -C bathe  
'(S)he will bath at two o'clock every day'

The assumption, here, is that tu, oklòk ‘two o'clock’ is repeated to express the iterative nature or frequency of the bath. It is notable, however, that a repetition such as tu oklòk should not be considered as an example of reduplication as these are two different concepts that play different semantic roles in the NP, as this paper will demonstrate later.

In Mensah (2011), reduplication is argued to be an important device in the formation of nouns, adverbs and adjectives. Here, “the reduplicative process may signal increase in size and intensity” (p. 220) as in the following examples.

- 2a) small small ‘gently’
- b) weluwelu ‘very well’
- c) magomago ‘deceitful’
- d) jagajaga ‘confusable’
- e) chacha ‘gambling’

(Mensah, 2011:219)

Although NP words such as smòl 'small' and wèl 'well' may be reduplicated as smòlsmòl and wèlwèl, respectively, for emphatic reasons, the present study observes that there are no such words as \*mago, \*jaga and \*cha in NP from which the reduplicated forms in 2c –e can be said to have been formed. In reduplication, the base form from which the reduplicate is formed is usually an existing word in the language.

In Ugot & Ogundipe (2011), the process of reduplication is examined as an aspect of NP morphology. The paper sought to show how reduplication is employed in enriching the vocabulary of NP and reports that the following can be derived in the process.

3. Adjectives
  - a) lukluk 'a stare' (from luk 'look')
  - b) pispis 'a bed wetter' (from pis 'to urinate')
4. Emphasis marker
  - a) welwel 'very well' (from wel 'well')
  - b) skataskata 'very scattered' (from skata 'scatter')
5. Adverb
  - a) nyafunyafu 'plenty'
  - b) kiakia 'quickly'
6. Onomatopoeic expressions
  - a) gbangbam 'heavy sound'
  - b) piompiom 'whistle'

The study also observed that only fully reduplicated forms are attested in the language.

Osisanwo (2012) examined the morphology of NP and identified the following as examples of reduplicated forms.

7.	word	meaning	word class
a)	wel-wel	very well	adverb
b)	atoll-atoll	not at all	adverb
c)	kpata-kpata	totally	adverb
d)	kai-kai	quickly	adverb
e)	fek-fek	fake	adverb
f)	ple-ple	easily	adverb

(Osisanwo, 2012:48)

In his consideration, Osisanwo (2012) opines that the function of reduplication in NP "tends towards emphasis" (p.48).

Ofulue (2015) focused on vocabulary expansion process in NP, towards the standardization of the language. In this, she considered reduplication to be one of the processes

for vocabulary expansion in NL (i.e. Naija Language, a name with which she referred to NP). Ofulue (2015) opined that "reduplication is a morphological process common in the contact ecology of NL: it is a very productive process in NL" (p.48). Using examples such as:

- 8a) waka 'walk'  
 b) wakawaka 'roam about'

She argued that reduplication in NP "is for the purpose of creating new words" (p.48).

#### 4.2 Emphasis Motivated Reduplication

The study observes that one of the functions of reduplication in NP is to emphasize the intensity or severity of an action. This function of reduplication in the language is widely documented in the literature and is thought to be the only function that the process plays in the language by many linguists. The following demonstrate that an action is emphasized when the term that refers to it is reduplicated.

- 9a) sɔfa 'suffer' → sɔfasɔfa 'excessive suffering'  
 b) Aɛ sɔfa → Aɛ sɔfasɔfa  
 I suffer I suffer-R  
 'I suffered' 'I suffered excessively'
- 10a) diɛ 'cost' → diɛdiɛ 'very cost'  
 b) Di fud diɛ → Di fud diɛdiɛ  
 the food cost the food cost-R  
 'The food is costly' 'The food is very costly'
- 11a) shaɛ 'shy' → shaɛshaɛ 'very shy'  
 b) Shi de shaɛ → Shi de shaɛshaɛ  
 she asp shy she asp shy-R  
 'She is shy' 'She is very shy'
- 12a) sɔfri 'softly' → sɔfrisɔfri 'carefully'  
 b) sɔfri kari am → kari am sɔfrisɔfri  
 softly carry it carry it softly  
 'Carry it softly' 'Carry it carefully'
- 13a) fɔlo 'follow' → fɔlofɔlo 'a cling'

- b) fọlo mi go → yu bi fọlofọlo  
follow me go you be follow-R  
'Accompany me' 'You are a cling'
- 14a) laẹ 'to lie' → laẹlaẹ 'excessive lying'
- b) Na laẹ → Na laẹlaẹ  
it-be lie it-be lie-R  
'It is a lie' 'It is an excessive lie'

The reduplicated forms in 9 - 14 above, therefore, restate the actions expressed in the items, emphasizing the degree to which an action is performed. In 9a, *sofasofa* 'excessive suffering' is an emphasized form of the verb *sofa* 'suffer'. The verb *diẹ* 'cost' in 10b is reduplicated as *diẹdiẹ* 'very cost(ly)', indicating emphasis on the extent to which the food is costly. Reduplication is also observed to function in this light in 11 – 14 where *shae*, *sofri*, *fọlo*, and *laẹ* are reduplicated as *shaeshae*, *sofrisofri*, *fọlofọlo*, and *laẹlaẹ*, respectively.

### 4.3 Iteration Motivated Reduplication

In addition to the above in which reduplication is shown to perform emphatic function, the present study observes also that reduplication in NP performs an additional function: it expresses the fact that the action of a verb so reduplicated is iterative. Consider the following examples.

- 15a) tọk 'talk' → tọkutọku 'always talking/talkative'
- b) Yu de tọk → Yu de tọkutọku  
you asp talk you asp talk-R  
'You are speaking' 'You are always talking'
- 16a) họri 'hurry' → họrihọri 'always in a hurry'
- b) Aẹ no fit họri → No de họrihọri  
I NOT can hurry NOT asp hurry-R  
'can not hurry' 'Stop acting in hurry'
- 17a) ple 'play' → pleple 'always playing/playful'
- b) Yu tu ple → Yu tu pleple  
you too play you too play-R

- 'You played too much' 'You always play too much'
- 18a) luk 'look' → lukuluku 'always looking/a stare'  
 b) Dẹm de luk → Dẹm de lukuluku  
 them asp look them asp look-R  
 'They are looking' 'They are always looking'
- 19a) bẹn 'bend' → bẹnibẹni 'having several bends/crooked'  
 b) Im bẹn → Im bẹnibẹni  
 It bend it bend-R  
 'It is bent' 'It be crooked'
- 20a) shọp 'eat' → shọpushọpu 'always eating/glutton'  
 b) Aẹ de shọp → Yu sabi shọpushọpu  
 I asp eat You can eat-R  
 'I am eating' 'You eat a lot'
- 21a) sik 'sick' → sikisiki 'always sick/sickler'  
 b) Jọẹ sik bifo → I no laẹk sikisiki  
 Joy sick before I NOT like sick-R  
 'Joy was sick' 'I do not like a sickler'
- 22a) waka 'walk' → wakawaka 'always walking/walkabout'  
 b) Waka kọm → Wakawaka no gud  
 walk come walk-R NOT good  
 'Come forward' 'It is not good to be a walkabout'
- 23a) travo 'travel' → travotravo 'always travelling (about)'  
 b) Aẹ travo → Aẹ bi travotravo  
 I travel I be travel-R  
 'I travelled' 'I am always travelling'
- 24a) bẹg 'beg' → bẹgibẹgi 'always begging'  
 b) Bẹg am → Kọl dat bẹgibẹgi kọm  
 beg him/her call that beg-R come  
 'Apologize' 'Call that begger'
- 25a) lọv 'love' → lọvilọvi 'always loving/lover'



- b) Aɛ ɔv yu → Dɛm bi ɔvilɔvi  
 I love you                      Them be love-R  
 'I love you'                      'They are lovers'

A careful observation of the examples above show that the reduplicated forms imply that the actions are not performed in a single instance. The actions are performed severally, i.e. iteratively. This suggests that several similar actions are embedded in each of the examples in 15 – 25. It is worthy of note that appropriate vowels are added to the base forms in some of the verbs above, before they are reduplicated. The vowel /i/ is added to each verb presented in example 19b, 21b, 24b, and 25b, /u/ is added to each verb presented in 15b, 18b, and 20b, while such additions are not observed in 16, 17, 22, and 23. The respective vowel is added to the end of the root before the entire word form is reduplicated, accounting for the corresponding occurrence of the observed affix at word final positions in each of the final realizations. This study observes that the introduction of appropriate vowel is motivated by the need to avoid the occurrence of any closed syllable in the forms and in the realized reduplicates.

## 5. Conclusion

The study has shown that reduplication is an important aspect of the lexical formation resources of NP. The paper has examined the reduplication of NP verbs and the implication of the lexical process on the meaning of the utterances in which the verb is repeated. The paper demonstrated the functions of reduplication in NP verbs and through these functions, it is able to show how reduplication enhances the expressive potentials of the speakers of the language in meeting their communicative needs.

This present study represents an insight into the roles played by reduplication in NP and a call on linguists to examine the phenomenon in other languages in Nigeria. This is so, given that the different morphological phenomena in NP are usually drawn from one or more of the indigenous languages spoken in the country, from which NP draws its lexical and post lexical resources.

=====

## References

- Agheyisi, R. N. (1971) *West African Pidgin English: Simplification and Simplicity*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Stanford. Ann Arbor: University of Microfilms.
- Ajaps, I. C. (2024) “Analysis of Cohesive Devices in Selected Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) Proverbs”. *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)*, Vol.7 No.3. 85 – 97.
- Elugbe, B. and A. Omamor (1991) *Nigerian Pidgin: Background and Prospects*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Evbuomwan, O. (2018) *Pitch Patterns in Warri Pidgin Sentence Modes*. Ph.D. Thesis., Department of Linguistics Studies, University of Benin, Nigeria.
- Eze, J. C. (2023) “Effects of Nigerian Pidgin on the Acquisition, Learning and mastery of Igbo/Other Nigerian and English Languages in Nigeria”. *International Journal of Innovative Language, Literature and Art Studies*, 11 (2). 23 – 38.
- Faraclas, N. (1996) *Nigerian Pidgin*. London: Routledge.
- Faraclas, N. (2021) “Naija: a language of the future”. In Akande, A. T. & Salami, O. (eds.) *Current Trends in Nigerian Pidgin English: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 9–38.
- Gani-Ikilama, O. T. (1990) “Use of Nigerian Pidgin in Education? Why Not?” In Emenanjo, N. E. (ed.) *Multilingualism, Minority Languages and Language Policy in Nigeria*. Agbor: Central Books Limited. 219 – 227.
- Holm, J. (2000) *An Introduction to Pidgin and Creoles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ifechelobi, N. J. & C. U. Ifechelobi (2015) “Beyond Barriers: The Changing Status of Nigerian Pidgin”. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, vol. 3 (1), 208 – 216.
- Ihemere, U. K. (2006) “A Basic Description and Analytic Treatment of Noun Clauses in Nigerian Pidgin.” *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 15 (3), 296 -313.
- Li, A. & Rawski, J. (2024) “Regular Reduplication Across Modalities”. *Proceedings of the Society for Computation in Linguistics (SCiL)*, June 27 – 29, 2024. Irvine, California, 370 – 373.
- Lin, P-J., Scholman, M., Saeed, M. & Demberg, V. (2024) “Modeling Orthographic Variation

- Improves NLP Performance for Nigerian Pidgin”. *LREC-COLING*. Language Resources Association. 11510 – 11522.
- Mensah, O. E. (2011) “Lexicalization in Nigerian Pidgin.” *Concentric: Studies in Linguistics*, 37 (2), 209 – 240.
- Mustafa, F. (2022). “Evidence of (in)applicability of Morphological Doubling Theory in Acehnese reduplication”. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature and Culture*, 7(2), 342. <https://doi.org/10.30659/e.7.2.342-355>
- Ofulue, I. C. (2015) “Towards the Standardization of Nigerian Pidgin: Vocabulary Expansion Process.” *Journal of Linguistics Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 36 – 59.
- Omamor, A. (1982) “Of Native Speakers” *Kiabara: Journal of the Humanities*, 5:1, University of Port Harcour,
- Omozuwa, V. E. (2003) “The Impact of Migration on the Edo Language and Culture: The Search for a Lingua Franca.” *Iroro: Journal of Arts*, 9, 246 – 257.
- Oreoluwa, A. S. (2016) “Language, Society and The Emergent Varieties of Students’ English in Nigeria.” *JOLAN (Sup. 2)*, 101 – 108.
- Ososanwo, A. (2012) “A Morphological Analysis of Nigerian Pidgin: The Example of Selected Advertisement Jingles”. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (JLAN)*.
- Reineke, J. E. (1964) “Trade Jargons and Creole Dialects as Marginal Languages.” In Hymes, D. (ed.) *Language and Society*. New York: Harper and Row, 534 – 546.
- Spencer, A. (1991) *Morphological Theories*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers
- Todd, L. (1974) *Pidgin and Creole*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Ugot, M. and A. Ogundipe (2011) “Reduplication in Nigerian Pidgin: a Versatile Communication Tool?” *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 8 (4), 227 – 233.
- Yakpo, K. (2024) “West African Pidgin: World Language Against the Grain”. *African Spectrum*. 180 – 203. DOI: 10.1177/00020397241263364
- =====