

REDUPLICATION IN NAIJÀ: SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS IN NIGERIAN PIDGIN

Okeke Anita Nkiruka
Department of English
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus
Anitaokeke20@Gmail.Com
+2349076692312

Abstract

Reduplication is one of the defining features of Nijà, popularly known as Nigerian Pidgin. It plays an important role in shaping meaning, going beyond mere word repetition. In Nijà, reduplication can intensify, extend, or modify meaning, conveying emphasis, gradual action, habituality, plurality, and even sarcasm. Unlike English, where reduplication is rare and often considered childish (e.g., bye-bye), Nijà speakers use reduplication systematically and creatively. This paper examines the semantic content of reduplication in Nijà, drawing examples from everyday speech, market transactions, street slang, and media expressions. Data were collected through introspection, elicitation, and the observer's paradox. A semantic-pragmatic framework was applied, supported by Odumuh (1981), Nijà Langwey Akademi (2009), and syntactic insights from Ofoegbu (2012). The findings show that reduplication in Nijà is not arbitrary; it is an organized meaning-making tool deeply tied to the cultural and social life of Nigerians. Specifically, reduplication functions as a systematic strategy for intensification, iteration, politeness, and meaning extension. It also mirrors social attitudes, humor, and identity in Nigerian communication. The study concludes that reduplication in Nijà is neither random nor merely playful but a creative and culturally grounded tool essential to the language's expressive power.

Keywords: Reduplication, Semantics, Meaning content, Nijà, Nigerian Pidgin

1. Introduction

Language has been defined by many scholars as the most vital tool of human communication. Ofoegbu (2012), building on his earlier works, defines language as "the human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate." He further emphasizes that "language is man and man is language. Ofoegbu and Usar (2018) repeat and expand this definition, stressing that language is not only a system of communication but also a fundamental tool for expressing human experiences. The emphasis here remains on the exclusivity of language to humans and its indispensability in social life.

Crystal (2008) describes language as a system of conventional spoken or written symbols used by human beings for communication within a community. Similarly, Holmes (2013) views language as a social phenomenon that expresses cultural identity, conveying not only information but also emotion and social relationships. According to Ofoegbu (2024) "language is man and man is language". Life has no meaning without language. Language is a means of interaction among people of the same community. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) reaffirm earlier views, calling language "the human system of communication ... man and man is language ... man uses language for his everyday interaction."

According to Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), language functions as a system of human behavior that reflects the social structure of a community. Ofoegbu (2021) posits that the human language is very unique because it has its own structure and its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. This simply means that there are rules governing the organization of sentences in a language.

From these perspectives, language is more than a collection of words - it is an instrument of culture and thought. It enables individuals to interpret experiences, transmit knowledge, and sustain traditions (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). In this sense, language shapes not only communication but also human identity, serving as the foundation for all social interaction.

The concept of pidgin also attracts scholarly attention. Ofoegbu (2021) posits that pidgins are languages that operate between members of different language communities who do not have a common mother tongue and not native to any of its speakers. A pidgin, according to Holm (2000), is a simplified form of language that develops as a means of communication between speakers of different native tongues. Todd (1990) explains that pidgins emerge out of necessity in multilingual settings, often in trade, colonization, or labor contact situations. Hall (1962) adds that pidgins are initially no one's native language but can evolve into creoles when they become stable and passed to new generations. In Nigeria, this process occurred as English interacted with local languages during colonial and postcolonial periods. Bamgbose (1995) affirms that the Nigerian linguistic environment is characterized by language contact, resulting in hybrid varieties like Nigerian Pidgin. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) agree that such contact situations naturally generate simplified yet expressive languages that meet social communication needs.

Nigerian Pidgin, also known as Naijá, has therefore evolved from a contact language into a vibrant lingua franca. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) define Nigerian Pidgin as an English-based creole that draws lexical items from English and structural features from indigenous Nigerian languages. According to Faraclas (2013), Naijá has undergone extensive nativization, acquiring its own grammar and sociolinguistic norms. It functions as a unifying language across ethnic, regional, and social boundaries. Ogu (1992) observes that Nigerian Pidgin now operates as a medium of everyday communication in homes, schools, markets, media, and popular culture. Mafeni (1971) emphasizes that Naijá has become a symbol of national identity, expressing the creativity, humor, and resilience of Nigerian people.

Ofoegbu (2022) defines Semantics as the study and analysis of meaning and the meaning of a word is the idea a word conveys in the heart or mind of the speaker or hearer. The term “semantics” was first introduced by the French philologist Michel Bréal in 1883 to describe the study of meaning in language and how it changes (Mori, 2008; Wang, 2010; R, 2025).

Defining reduplication requires an understanding of its linguistic universality. Crystal (2008) defines reduplication as the process of repeating a linguistic element to express grammatical or semantic variation. Ndimele (2008) elaborates that reduplication is a morphological strategy used to convey emphasis, intensity, or plurality in many African languages. According to Inkelas and Zoll (2005), reduplication is both phonological and morphological, producing new meanings through repetition. More recent studies, such as Ofoegbu (2018) on euphemistic expressions in Igbo, show how speakers avoid taboo or sensitive topics (e.g., sex, drugs, insults) through metaphor, substitution, or playful re-encoding and reduplication. In Naijá, reduplication plays an essential role in communication - intensifying, modifying, or even changing meaning entirely. For example, *E chop* means 'he ate,' while *E dey chop-chop* may imply greed or corruption. As Odumo (1980) notes, Nigerian speech varieties often assign new contextual meanings to familiar forms, showing how reduplication reflects local thought patterns. Thus, language, pidgin, and reduplication are deeply interconnected in Naijá. The use of reduplication demonstrates how speakers adapt language to express cultural identity, emotion, and social relationships. The study of reduplication in Naijá is significant because it reveals not only linguistic creativity but also the cultural logic underlying Nigerian communication.

2. Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine how reduplication functions in Naijá as a meaning-making device. Specifically, it seeks to identify and analyze the semantic and pragmatic roles of reduplication, its frequency and function in natural discourse, and its relevance to Nigerian culture and communication. The objectives include:

1. To identify the common types and patterns of reduplication in Naijá.
2. To analyze their semantic and pragmatic functions.
3. To explain how reduplication reflects Nigerian social and cultural attitudes.
4. To apply relevant linguistic theories to the understanding of reduplication in Naijá.

3. Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on language and meaning have long emphasized the importance of context in understanding linguistic behavior. According to Halliday (1978), meaning is shaped by the relationship between language and the social environment. This perspective aligns with Odumo's (1980) analysis of Nigerian English, which demonstrates how contextual realities influence semantic structure. He argues that Nigerian speech communities develop unique systems of meaning, distinct from those of Standard English, because communication in Nigeria is grounded in shared cultural experiences. Similarly, Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) explain that sociolinguistic variation arises from the interaction between linguistic form and social function. In the case of Naijá, meaning cannot be separated from the cultural and pragmatic contexts in which it is used.

The phenomenon of reduplication has been widely studied across languages. According to Ndimele (2008), reduplication is a morphological process that involves repeating a word or part of a word to indicate intensity, frequency, or other semantic nuances. Inkelas and Zoll (2005) provide a theoretical model explaining that reduplication can be full or partial, depending on whether the entire word or a segment is repeated. Moravcsik (1978) notes that reduplication occurs universally but serves different functions across linguistic systems. In African languages, it is often used for emphasis, repetition, or distributive meaning. Bybee (1985) adds that reduplication also functions as a cognitive tool that mirrors how speakers categorize repeated or intensified experiences.

In Nigeria, studies by Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and Ofoegbu (2012) confirm that reduplication is highly productive in Naijá. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) observe that reduplication contributes to the expressive richness of Nigerian Pidgin, while Ofoegbu (2012) highlights its syntactic flexibility. According to the Naijá Langweij

Akademi (2009), reduplication is not arbitrary; it performs core grammatical and semantic roles, allowing speakers to communicate emotion and emphasis effectively. Faraclas (2013) supports this claim, arguing that reduplication enhances the rhythm and musicality of Naijā speech, making it distinct from Standard English. Furthermore, scholars such as Holmes (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) note that language contact environments encourage semantic innovation. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, linguistic creativity flourishes as speakers mix and adapt elements from different languages. This contact-induced change explains why Naijā reduplication incorporates patterns from Yoruba (*pele-pele*), Igbo (*ngwa-ngwa*), and Hausa (*sannu-sannu*), producing forms such as *small small* and *sharp sharp*. Odumo (1980) emphasizes that such adaptations reflect the sociocultural conditions of language use rather than deviation from standard norms.

From a semantic-pragmatic perspective, reduplication in Naijā can be analyzed in terms of meaning and use. Leech (1983) proposes that meaning includes both conceptual and associative components - while the former concerns dictionary meaning, the latter involves social and cultural interpretation. Therefore, reduplications such as *chop-chop* (corruption) or *waka-waka* (promiscuity) carry associative meanings rooted in Nigerian social discourse. Ofoegbu (2012) explains that these meanings are not arbitrary but arise from consistent pragmatic conventions. In this sense, reduplication reflects both linguistic structure and social attitude.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature shows that Naijā reduplication serves as a bridge between language structure and cultural meaning. It reflects what Halliday (1978) calls 'language as social semiotic,' where linguistic forms are symbols of shared social experience. Through the integration of multiple scholarly views - from Crystal (2008) and Holmes (2013) to Odumo (1980) and Ndimele (2008) - it becomes evident that reduplication in Naijā represents not merely repetition but an encoded cultural logic that organizes Nigerian expression.

4. Methodology

The examples here are drawn from three sources.

As a competent user of Naijā, the researcher relied on their own linguistic intuition to generate examples that are natural and widely understood. **Introspection** is a recognized tool in linguistic research because native or fluent speakers can test the acceptability of structures by reflecting on how they would naturally speak (Chomsky, 1965; Schütze, 1996). For instance, the researcher's intuition tells her that "*E dey learn small small*" is a perfectly natural sentence, while "*E dey learn learn*" would sound odd or forced.

To strengthen this method, the researcher compared their examples with those found in Nigerian music lyrics, comedy skits, and Nollywood dialogue. This triangulation helps to show that the examples are not just the researcher's personal usage but part of a wider speech community (Labov, 1972). When Burna Boy sings "Gbona gbona," the repetition functions just like hot hot in Naijā. Similarly, in Nollywood comedies, characters often exaggerate with reduplications like beg-beg or talk-talk (Faraclas, 1996; Elugbe & Omamor, 1991). These align with the researcher's intuition and confirm the data's authenticity.

The researcher also engaged with other speakers in informal contexts, asking them to provide examples of reduplication. In a market in Onitsha, for example, a trader described how she would tell her apprentice: "*Carry the load small small make e no tear.*" Here, the reduplication small small clearly conveys caution and gradual effort. In a bus park in Awka, a driver shouted "*Enter enter!*" to hurry passengers, using reduplication to add urgency.

During **elicitation**, the researcher noticed that speakers often laughed or smiled when producing reduplicated forms. This shows that reduplication not only conveys meaning but also creates solidarity between speaker and listener (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). It makes language feel lighter, more familiar, and more playful.

Finally, the researcher observed natural speech in public places without interfering. This method, known as the **observer's paradox**, captures people speaking freely (Labov, 1972). On Igbariam campus, the researcher overheard a student complain: "*Na only shout shout she dey shout for class.*" In a family setting, a parent told a child: "*You too like play play.*" Such spontaneous expressions reflect the genuine role of reduplication in everyday communication.

To avoid misinterpretation, the researcher wrote down the contexts of these utterances. For instance, when someone says, "*You dey laugh-laugh too much,*" it can mean different things depending on tone. It may be affectionate teasing or a subtle criticism. This proves that the pragmatic force of reduplication must be studied alongside its semantic content (Mufwene, 2001; Akande, 2008).

By combining these three methods, the data reflects actual usage. It is broad enough to capture speech from different regions, yet detailed enough to show subtle shifts in meaning

5. Data Analysis: Reduplication and Meaning Content in Naija

Data analysis for this study is based on qualitative interpretation of naturally occurring Naijā speech collected through introspection, elicitation, and observation. According to Labov (1972), authentic data must reflect real-life communication rather than artificial responses, and this principle guided the methodology. The researcher analyzed examples of reduplication from marketplaces, music lyrics, social interactions, and media broadcasts to identify semantic and pragmatic patterns.

The first major observation concerns intensification. Expressions such as *well well*, *sharp sharp*, and *hot hot* strengthen meaning by amplifying the action or quality described. Odumo (1980) explains that this kind of intensification reflects the Nigerian tendency to use expressive redundancy for emphasis. Similarly, Ndimele (2008) observes that reduplication across African languages performs emphatic and emotional functions. In Naijā, *She fine well well* means 'She is very beautiful,' while *Do am sharp sharp* means 'Do it immediately.' These constructions substitute for adverbs like 'very' or 'quickly' in Standard English but achieve greater expressiveness. The second pattern is gradual or gentle action, represented by reduplications such as *small small* and *soft soft*. These convey patience, care, or politeness, aligning with Nigerian social norms that favor indirectness in instruction (Holmes, 2013). Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) note that politeness strategies in language often involve mitigation, and reduplication achieves this in Naijā by softening imperatives. For example, *Take am small small* conveys caution and respect, showing how reduplication contributes to pragmatic meaning beyond grammar.

A third type of reduplication signals repetition or habitual action. Examples include *knock knock*, *ask ask*, and *beg beg*. These indicate actions that occur repeatedly or habitually, aligning with Ofoegbu's (2012) observation that reduplication in Naijā exhibits syntactic productivity. According to Moravcsik (1978), similar structures in other languages represent iterative aspect, confirming that Naijā follows a universal morphological principle adapted to local context.

Another pattern involves meaning shift or lexicalization. Certain reduplicated forms develop new meanings unrelated to their base forms, as seen in *chop-chop* (corruption), *waka-waka* (aimless roaming), and *play-play* (lack of seriousness). Naijā Langwej Akademi (2009) and Elugbe and Omamor (1991) classify these as semantic innovations that become fixed in vocabulary. The evolution of such forms supports Bybee's (1985) argument that repeated structures can undergo lexicalization over time, acquiring idiomatic meanings. This demonstrates that Naijā reduplication contributes not only to grammar but also to vocabulary expansion.

Furthermore, reduplication in Naijā carries evaluative and affective meaning. Expressions like *talk-talk person* and *fight-fight house* assign judgmental qualities to behavior or situations. Leech's (1983) theory of associative meaning helps explain this: reduplication conveys emotion and attitude in addition to description. Thus, labeling someone as a *talk-talk person* implies disapproval of excessive talk, while describing a home as a *fight-fight house* implies chaos and conflict.

Finally, the analysis reveals that reduplication in Naijā operates as a cultural and communicative strategy. Halliday's (1978) notion of language as a social semiotic is evident here: repetition reflects shared cultural logic, humor, and rhythm. Odumo (1980) underscores that Nigerian linguistic expression is characterized by context-dependent meaning, and reduplication exemplifies this perfectly. It enables speakers to encode social relations, emotional stance, and cultural knowledge in simple yet powerful linguistic forms.

6. Discussion on Findings

The findings confirm that reduplication in Naijā is not a random or ornamental feature but a structured and multifunctional process that reflects Nigerian sociocultural realities. The data reveal five major functions: intensification, graduality, iteration, lexicalization, and evaluation. These findings support earlier works by Odumo (1980), Ndimele (2008), and Ofoegbu (2012), who argue that African and Nigerian Pidgin reduplications are rule-governed and context-driven.

The use of *small small*, *sharp sharp*, and *well well* confirms the role of reduplication as a marker of degree and emphasis, aligning with Ndimele's (2008) claim that reduplication serves emphatic and distributive purposes. Likewise, Odumo (1980) identifies intensification and emotion as key semantic features in Nigerian speech, a view reflected in the data where reduplication conveys both emotional tone and pragmatic force.

Gradual reduplications such as *soft soft* or *carry am small small* show a polite, indirect way of giving instructions. This supports Holmes' (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller's (2015) theories on politeness strategies and mitigation in sociolinguistic communication. Similarly, the use of *knock knock* and *ask ask* echoes Moravcsik's (1978) and Bybee's (1985) universal observations on iterative reduplication as a marker of habituality or repetition across languages.

The lexicalized forms like chop-chop and waka-waka demonstrate the creative evolution of meaning in Naijã, consistent with the Naijã Langwej Akademi's (2009) and Elugbe and Omamor's (1991) documentation of fixed idiomatic reduplications. These findings reinforce Bybee's (1985) view that frequent repetition can lead to semantic shift and lexicalization over time.

Comparatively, the results complement Halliday's (1978) model of "language as social semiotic" by showing that reduplication encodes not only grammatical information but also shared cultural values. In this way, Naijã reduplication mirrors what Holmes (2013) describes as "language as identity," where social bonds and emotions are expressed through familiar linguistic forms. Hence, this study aligns with prior works that see reduplication as an expressive, meaning-bearing tool but expands on them by showing its pragmatic and cultural dimensions in modern Naijã speech.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that reduplication in Naijã is a systematic linguistic and cultural feature that performs multiple semantic and pragmatic roles. It functions as an instrument of expressiveness and identity, shaping how Nigerians convey emphasis, politeness, repetition, and evaluation. Reduplication in Naijã thus embodies what Halliday (1978) describes as the "social meaning" of language, where words are not merely communicative tools but carriers of shared experience and emotion.

By linking contemporary data with earlier theories (Odumuh, 1980; Ndimele, 2008; Holmes, 2013; Ofoegbu, 2012), the study demonstrates that reduplication in Naijã reflects both universal linguistic tendencies and culturally specific meanings. It serves as a lens for understanding how Nigerian speakers employ creativity and repetition to encode attitude, solidarity, and humor.

The research recommends further comparative studies between Naijã and indigenous Nigerian languages to explore deeper typological connections. Future work could also apply corpus-based or computational methods to measure the frequency and distribution of reduplication in both online and spoken contexts. Overall, reduplication remains one of the most dynamic features of Naijã, bridging grammar, culture, and identity.

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