

Grammatica ex nihilo?
Total reduplication and grammaticalisation

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Ever since Moravcsik's (1978) observation on the ubiquity of total reduplication in the languages of the world, many linguists have taken for granted – e.g. Raimy (2000) – that total reduplication (as opposed to partial reduplication) is a universal of human language. The examples below illustrate what is meant by total reduplication (the adjacency of two phonologically, morphologically and semantically identical syntactic words which together have a meaning/function which is [sometimes only slightly] different from the one associated with the “simplex”):

	Simplex	Total Reduplication
Maltese	bieb ‘door’	bieb bieb ‘from door to door’
Basque	handi ‘big’	handi handi ‘very big’
Italian	lì ‘(t)here’	lì lì ‘exactly here’

The universal distribution of total reduplication is largely corroborated by Rubino's (2005a) survey of reduplication patterns in crosslinguistic perspective as several of his small number of supposed reduplication-free areas on the globe have been shown to result from methodological shortcomings of typological approaches which rely entirely on the perusal of one descriptive grammar per language. This is especially true for the languages of Europe. There is compelling evidence that the occurrence of total reduplication in languages is unconstrained by genealogical and typological criteria whereas areal factors may influence issues such as frequency of use and employment for the expression of categories (Stolz 2004). The widely attested presence of total reduplication especially in Creole languages (Kouwenberg 2003) additionally suggests that total reduplication is a phenomenon which belongs to the basic equipment of human language(s).

In Stolz (2006), I have demonstrated that total reduplication qualifies for the status of construction in terms of construction grammar. Given that total reduplication is indeed a universal phenomenon, we are dealing with a phenomenon which is in disagreement with Croft's (2001) assumption according to which the expression side of constructions is always language-specific and thus does not lend itself to comparative-typological investigations. Simplifying, patterns of total reduplication resemble each other to such a degree that they can be compared to each other crosslinguistically (Stolz 2006). Since there are also clear indications that the functional domain of total reduplication is not a random combination of disparate categories (Rubino 2005b) but rather forms a conglomeration of conceptually related notions (Stolz 2006, 2007), the construction calls for a closer look by typologists and universals researchers.

Total reduplication also deserves the attention of students of grammaticalisation because if the construction type is universal in the strict sense of the term (spatio-temporally constantly available) the following problem arises. In many languages world-wide, total reduplication is employed as a means to express grammatical categories (such as distributive [plurals], prolative, iterative, frequentative, diminution, intensification, etc.) on a par to other morpho-syntactic strategies such as proper affixation or periphrasis. What this means is that total reduplication has grammatical functions similar to the ones expressed by techniques for which grammaticalisation paths can be reconstructed. However, in contrast to the latter, total reduplication ideally has been there all the time without prior grammaticalisation processes of the “classic” type described by Lehmann's parameters (Lehmann 1995).

In my talk, I address the issue of how to deal with the potential universality of total reduplication, its employment for properly grammatical functions and its apparent exemption from the usual grammaticalisation processes.

References

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