

Pluractional Reduplication in Southern Hill Nisenan

Introduction: Nisenan (nsz) is a Maiduan language that has been spoken historically in California’s Central Valley and the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Several Nisenan heritage communities are actively revitalizing the language, and efforts to revitalize the southern dialects specifically are ongoing at the Shingle Springs Rancheria. This work aims to support those efforts by describing morphological reduplication in the speech of Southern Hill Nisenan speaker William Joseph (a.k.a. Bill Joe). A respected storyteller, Bill Joe worked with linguist Hans J. Uldall in the early 1930s to record 71 oral narratives, each with parallel Nisenan and English versions. These stories were published in Uldall and Shipley (1966) but, despite the richness of the dataset, little linguistic research has focused on it. Here we describe reduplication in the verbal morphology of Bill Joe’s Nisenan, showing that he uses distinct reduplicative morphemes to encode event-internal versus event-external pluractionality. While these patterns of reduplication have been briefly and incompletely described in another variety of Nisenan (the Central Hill dialect, Eatough 1999), this is the first thorough description of the phenomenon in Southern Hill Nisenan.

Pluractionality: Languages differ in how they express plurality in the verbal domain, i.e. pluractionality. Consider the sentence *I chopped the carrot*; world knowledge will lead most readers to assume that the speaker actually chopped the carrot several times in quick succession, rather than chopping only once, i.e. that there was a temporally-contiguous plurality of chopping events. While pluractionality of this nature is not encoded morphologically in English, it is in many languages, e.g. Yurok (Garrett 2001) and Kaqchikel (Henderson 2012). Cross-linguistically, pluractionals can be event-internal or event-external. The former denote a large number of temporally or spatially contiguous repetitions of an event that all occur on the same occasion (such as chopping up a carrot). The latter denote a (potentially small) number of repetitions of an event, which need not be temporally or spatially contiguous (e.g. the intermittent explosion of fireworks over the course of a few hours during a holiday); event-external pluractionals can also have habitual or distributive readings (see Henderson 2012 for a more complete description of pluractionality). Next we demonstrate that Southern Hill Nisenan as spoken by Bill Joe uses different patterns of reduplication to encode event-internal versus event-external pluractionality.

The data: All data is drawn from Bill Joe’s oral narratives (Uldall & Shipley 1966). The majority of Nisenan verb stems are composed of two elements, e.g. /wə:kk’oj/ ‘go see’ < /wə:k/ ‘see’ + /k’oj/ ‘go’. Three patterns of reduplication surface in Bill Joe’s derived verb stems: Partial reduplication of the second element in which only the initial CV is copied, as in (1), full reduplication of the second element, as in (2), and full reduplication of the whole stem, as in (3). Bill Joe’s narratives contain numerous examples of all three patterns.

- (1) /wə:k-k’oj/ ‘go see’ → /wə:k-k’o-k’oj/
E.g. two friends who live far apart go see each other often throughout their lives.
- (2) /si-k’əl/ ‘cut (in two)’ → /si-k’əl-k’əl/
E.g. a man chops up deer meat to distribute to a group.
- (3) /ja-p’am/ ‘hit, slap’ → /jap’am-jap’am/
E.g. a man hits another man repeatedly with a rock.

Analysis: Consistent with event-external pluractionals cross-linguistically, the partial reduplication in (1) conveys occasional, non-contiguous repetitions of the event denoted by the verb ‘go see’. Also consistent with the cross-linguistic characteristics of this type of pluractionality, partial reduplication can convey distributive and habitual readings as well as non-contiguous repetition. For example, Bill Joe uses /ʔə-da-daw/ (from /ʔədaw/ ‘come, arrive’) with a third person plural subject to describe multiple groups of people coming to a location separately, potentially over multiple days. Bill Joe also uses /ʔə-da-daw/ with a third person singular subject to convey a more habitual reading, e.g. a man ‘keeps coming’ to another man’s home so regularly that the unwilling host fears the visitor is pursuing one of the women of the household.

Full reduplication of the second element of a derived stem as in (2), on the other hand, is consistent with event-internal pluractionals: It conveys many repetitions of the same event, all occurring on the same occasion and in rapid succession (here, chopping up deer meat). This reading is consistently associated with this pattern of reduplication in Bill Joe’s narratives: For example, /mə-təw-təw/ (< /mətəw/ ‘curse’) is translated as ‘curse all up and down’ (referring to quarrelers cursing at each other rapidly and repeatedly) and /si-tək-tək/ (< /sitək/ ‘poke’) as ‘keep on poking’ (a rattlesnake with a stick to make it angry).

Full reduplication of derived stems as in (3) also seems to encode event-internal pluractionality, though there are cases in which it may serve a more discursive function, conveying intensity as well as repetition. For example, Bill Joe uses /sik’əl-sik’əl/ (< /sik’əl/ ‘cut (in two)’) and even /sik’əl-sik’əl-sik’əl/ rather than /si-k’əl-k’əl/, as in (2), when narrating an occasion on which White men killed three Nisenan and cut up their bodies. Similarly, while Bill Joe uses /wi-jək-jək/ (< /wijək/ ‘jerk’) to describe a man tugging on a rope to signal his comrades to pull him out of a cave, he uses /wijək-wijək/ to describe a man jerking the reins of a horse in an attempt to knock off the rider.

Discussion: We have shown that Bill Joe systematically uses different reduplication patterns to encode event-external and event-internal pluractionality. This finding allows us to predict the form of unattested pluractional verbs in Southern Hill Nisenan for language teaching and revitalization purposes. Our results also highlight how speaker-specific differences may influence the outcomes of language documentation, particularly linguists’ ability to document specific morpho-semantic constructions in natural discourse. Henderson (2012:17) reports that pluractionals are rare in naturally occurring discourse in Kaqchikel and English. Similarly, we have found very few examples of reduplicative pluractionals in the Central Hill Nisenan oral narratives published in Eatough (1999). On the other hand, Bill Joe’s narratives contain numerous examples, reflecting how, as a storyteller, he used all the linguistic means at his disposal to tell vivid, engaging stories. Clearly, the choice of speaker can affect the range of linguistic constructions that one encounters in natural speech.

References

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