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REDUPLICATION IN ENGLISH RHYMING SLANG

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the typology of reduplication in English and to focus on rhyming slang as this is a domain of language where reduplication abounds. The paper centers on the two basic types of reduplication – exact and non-exact and also introduces the notion of implied reduplication, striving to present rhyming slang as a domain of language where it is conspicuous. It is also aimed at contrasting various definitions of slang. The paper views the research material from the sociolinguistic standpoint and stresses the social influence on language by providing socially relevant examples of regular patterns of variation [see Spolsky 1998: 3–5]. Another field of language study relevant to the research is derivational morphology concerned with the process of word formation including compounding or composition.

General Slang – Definitions

There are several equally authoritative definitions of slang, all of them stressing a different aspect of the phenomenon. Jonathon Green defines slang as:

a deviation from the mainstream socially accepted and educated language. Slang defies proper speech and asserts its rogue status; it excludes what is regarded as standard [Green 2006: vii].

The Oxford English Dictionary defines slang as:

the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low and disreputable character [...] Language of a low and vulgar type [...] Language of a highly colloquial type, considered

as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting of either new words or of old words employed in some special sense.

Cobuild Dictionary says that:

slang consists of words, expressions and meanings that are informal and are used by people who know each other well and who have the same job or the same interests. Slang is not considered suitable for formal social situations or serious writing.

John Camden Hotter defined slang as:

evanescent vulgar language, ever changing with fashion and taste, spoken by persons in every grade of life, rich and poor, honest and dishonest [...] Slang is indulged in from a desire to be familiar with life, gaiety, town humor and with the transient nicknames and street jokes of the day [...] Slang is as old as speech and congregating of people together in cities [Hotter 1895].

Robert Chapman in the preface to his *American Slang Dictionary* [1986] stated that slang is a specialized language of subcultures or “undercultures”, the criminal underworld being the most prolific contributor providing the highest number of unceremonious and irreverent expressions which enrich their “cant” or “argot”. By implication, it is bad language (sub, under, criminal, unceremonious, irreverent are all negatively charged). He enumerated several under or subcultures, social and ethnic groups which have contributed significantly the development of slang as primary users – soldiers, sailors, policeman, show business workers, students, drug addicts, to name but a few, as well as the prominent influx from Black American English and Yiddish. He goes on to say that when slang is used outside the group where it was created it becomes secondary slang.

The analysis of these definitions provides different angles of approach towards this language phenomenon. The mentioned definitions stress different aspects of slang discourse – rebelliousness, defiance of standards, group solidarity or hint at its rhetorical inferiority, changeability and mutability. They also pinpoint the social groups in which slang terms are generated before they gain wider recognition. Interestingly enough, the mid-19th century definition by J.C. Hotter is particularly authoritative as, similarly to modern theories, it views slang as a pan-class language phenomenon. It hints at intra-language code switching very well reflected in the work of William Labov [1966] and further analyzed by John B. Pride. Says Pride:

Much of one’s language behavior [...] is probably normative, in the sense of conforming to one’s own ideas of the norms of the group ones aspires to rather than the performance of the group one belongs to [Pride 1974: 30].

When involved in conversation acts taking place in diverse social situations people choose styles of discourse (codes) depending on the social identity or values they adhere to in a particular social context. Therefore, the use of slang discourse is interchangeable with standard language – the situation reminiscent of diglossia, where two languages are used interchangeably (a high and low variety).

The quoted definitions are reliable but display some nomenclatural inconsistencies. The use of the word “colloquialism” and “vulgar” in relation to slang call for a more in-depth look. Says Maciej Widawski:

Colloquialisms are informal expressions more common in conversation than in formal writing, and usually convey the feel of easygoing naturalness. All this can be said of slang, which is colloquial per se and belongs to the spoken part of language. Still not all colloquial expressions are slang [Widawski 2003: 29–30].

Slang, unlike colloquialism, owes its distinctive character to its deviation from the accepted standards. It bears clear stigmata of rebelliousness and social unacceptability. Colloquialisms may be equated with informal discourse which is not by nature divergent in tone from standard language. The term “vulgar” cannot be applied in relation to slang indiscriminately. The meticulous study of the slang lexicon [see Widawski 2003: 33–37] proves that much slang is vulgar. Vulgarity is an inherent element of slang. However, it is a mistake to think that all slang is vulgar and belongs to the domain of taboo expressions. The analysis of the slang corpus shows that slang, although improper in many social contexts, does not always violate social norms by conveying rudeness, offensiveness or obscenity. That is why slang is used in the media including popular TV shows and renowned global general and business magazines.

The most precise definition of slang has been suggested by Widawski in *The Anatomy of American Slang*. It goes as follows:

Slang is an ever-changing, highly expressive style of language. It consists of novel words or standard words used with new meanings that are considered informal and often vulgar. They are used primarily in spoken language in place of standard words, usually to convey some extra information, usually psychological, sociological or rhetorical in nature. The psychological (or behavioral) element includes such information as emotional states, humor, familiarity and secrecy. The sociological element includes solidarity or group identification, distancing, alienation and rebellion against the existing order. The rhetorical element includes informality, conciseness, deliberate vagueness and forcefulness of expression [Widawski 2003].

The strength of this definition lies in the fact that it says that slang discourse may be used instead of standard discourse, which is a matter of a conscious, individual stylistic choice determined by social situations the speaker confronts. This definition can be enriched by the addition of one more aspects which became conspicuous during my study of slang – about 10% of slang are rhyming slang expressions based on reduplication. Slang adds melody to everyday expressions through frequent application of rhyme and the usage of prosodic features. These are the tools which allow slang to build its forcefulness. Rhyme is usually linked with humor, wit, fun and vagueness, which are rhetorical constituents.

Rhyming Slang and Reduplication

Compounding involves putting together two or more lexical items so compounds are words consisting of elements which are words themselves. Reduplication, as part of compounding, is a morphological process by which the root or stem of a word is repeated. Reduplication may be viewed as a special case of compounding as Otto Jespersen [1965: 174] uses the term ‘reduplicative compounds’ with reference to lexical items consisting of two or three elements and displaying phonological similarity. There are many distinct varieties of compound formations and reduplicative compounds are one type of these varieties. Reduplication, alternatively called doubling or cloning, is a common phenomenon in standard English and is also conspicuous in slang. English rhyming slang is often based on exact and non-exact reduplication. The rhetorical effect is that rhyming slang expressions based on reduplication sound jocular, witty or even childlike. They add melody and rhythmic beat to linguistic expressions which are the markers of slang’s spoken, rap-like nature. They are more popular in American English where cryptic rhyming slang based on back-clipping (described later in the paper) has never had much appeal.

These citational corroborations illustrate the exact reduplication (the repetition of the entire word):

- Oh, the Prince has a boo-boo [a bump; childish, euphemistic]. He bumped his head and needs a band-aid. [Ziefert 2005]
- He tried to be buddy-buddy [a sexual partner but not a steady lover] but I wasn’t buying that either. [Partridge 2006]
- Anyone want din-din [dinner, any meal]? [James 1988]
- Any ha-ha [marijuana or hashish] for me? [James 1988]
- The matter is so hush-hush [secret, undercover] I can’t talk about it over the phone. [James 1988]

These examples illustrate non-exact reduplication (most commonly, the first letter of the second word or the medial vowel is changed):

- The prophets had a bit of an argy-bargy [an argument, a noisy dispute] up at the temple. [Ryken 2001]
- I’ll have to pay you what I owe you in dribs and drabs [in very small portions, bit by bit]. [James 1988]
- Give me an itzy-bitsy [tiny, insignificant] piece. I’m on a diet. [James 1988]
- Why is he June-Julying [tremble; express fear; South Africa] like that? [Thorne 2007]
- Critically acclaimed movies like “Welcome to the Dollhouse” and last summer’s “Kids” – which followed a “virgin-surgeon” [a predatory man interested in having sex with young girls usually disposing them of their virginity] on the prowl-show girls as prey. [C. Hall, S.Miller, *The Body Impolitic*, Newsweek 1997]

The third case of reduplication is triplication where three elements are exactly or non-exactly repeated:

- The plane crashed. Yadah-yadah-yadah [blah-blah-blah, gibberish, incessant chattering; onomatopoeic; it can be repeated many times]. [Broken Arrow, film, 2000]
- He's always so, well, la-di-da [affectedly fashionable or stylish]. [James 1988]
- That's interesting. What does that mean to you. Anger is a blocked wish. Boo-fucking-hoo-hoo [an expression of mockery and sarcasm]. [Analyze This, film, 1999]
- That's not a bad little rub-a-dub-dub [a pub] you've got there, mate. [James 1988]

Expressions such as American rusty-dusty, super-duper or dilly-dally or British argy-bargy, blah-blah-blah, easy-peasy, nana or claptrap add melody and rhythm to the spoken discourse.

Back-Clipping and Reduplication in Cockney Rhyming Slang

Compounding, back-clipping and implied reduplication are derivational processes behind the formation of Cockney rhyming slang expressions. Compounding is a common process in Cockney rhyming slang word formation: compounds, in are words consisting of elements that could function independently of each other as separate lexical items. Rhyming slang often uses proper names that are compounds or compounds and phrases referring to everyday human experiences. The next step in rhyming slang word formation is back-formation or back-clipping, which is a common process in general slang. It has been observed [see Widawski 2003: 145–150] that many slang words get clipped once enough syllables are given to make a slang word intelligible. The same process abounds in cryptic rhyming slang, where the second component of a compound is often dropped. The first component is enough to provide a metaphorical reference. This process may also be described as implied reduplication as a rhyming slang expression exists because it is associated with another one which rhymes with it. The following example illustrates the simple mechanism behind Cockney rhyming slang word formation and illustrates the notion of implied reduplication:

- 1) mate = friend
- 2) China gate rhymes with mate
- 3) China = friend

“Gate – mate” is here a reduplicative pair accounting for rhyming association.

The users rely on association and rhyme to communicate in Cockney rhyming slang. That is why reduplication in this type of slang functions at the implied level. The following citational examples include common Cockney rhyming slang expressions which date back the 19th and early 20th centuries. They belong to the core of the rhyming slang lexicon. Some of them may not be in popular use nowadays but are perfectly recognisable by native speakers of English. The word in parentheses is usually omitted :

- That Barnaby (Rudge) [judge; Barnaby Rudge was a character in Dickens's novel of the same title] ain't wearing no wig! [James 1988]
- Do something with your Barnet (Fair) [hair]. [Fletcher 2008]

- Why are you looking at me like that? Is there something wrong with me boat (race) [face]. [James 1988]
- He's totally Brahms (and Liszt) [drunk; Brahms and Liszt rhymes with pissed = drunk]. [Fletcher 2008]
- Okay, put up your dukes [the fists; Duke of York rhymes with fork, fork = finger = hand = fist; always in the plural]. [Fletcher 2008]
- Nice hampsteads [the teeth; Hampstead Heath rhymes with teeth]. [Fletcher 2008]
- That's using your loaf [the head, the brain; loaf of bread rhymes with head!]. [James 1988]
- Nice jimmies [shoes; Jimmy Choo rhymes with shoe; Jimmy Choo was a famous shoe designer], mate! [Fletcher 2008]
- If you've got to pen (and ink) [to stink; a full expression is used for clear reference] like a badger's backside, do so a long way from me. [James 1988]
- My plates (of meet) [feet] are killing me. [Fletcher 2008]
- Will your trouble (and strife) [one's wife] let you out to the pub tonight? [James 1988]
- Would you fancy some good Rosie (Lee) [tea]? [Fletcher 2008]
- The Sweeney (Todd) [a police flying squad, especially in London; Sweeney Todd was an early 19th century London barber convicted of murdering his clients; normally with "the"; Sweeney Todd rhymes with squad, squad = police] is London's top crime-busting unit. [James 1988]
- I would not say he's a raspberry [a cripple; strawberry ripple rhymes with cripple; raspberry ripple is a variety of ice-cream], but he has great difficulty with walking. [James 1988]
- You're going for a wedding, you need a new titfer [a hat; titfer rhymes with tit-for-tat which rhymes with hat; phonetic merging], a dicky (dirt) [shirt], a Peckham (Rye) [tie] and a whistle (and flute) [suit]. [Fletcher 2008]

In many instances, like in the expressions presented above, the first element of the compound is a sufficient signal indicating a word referred to. These are back-clipped compounds as the second component responsible for rhyme is omitted. Therefore the impression that a rhyming slang expression is totally unrelated to the concept or object it denotes. Although in most rhyming slang expressions there is a tendency for the second component of a compound to be dropped, there are many cases when both elements of the compound are retained. The following citational evidence is a further illustration of implied reduplication:

- She likes to watch the baked bean [the Queen] on the telly. [James 1988]
- Jack's round at his cuddle and kiss [a girl; cuddle and kiss rhymes with miss, miss = girl]. [James 1988]
- When does your God love her [mother] get home? [James 1988]
- All right, here's a big ben [ten pound sterling; phonetic merging – pronounced as 'bigen']. Don't spend it in one shop. [James 1988]
- I'll give you a quid for big ben [the numeral 10, ten of anything] of them. [Fletcher 2008]
- How many eggs? A country cousin [dozen], please. [James 1988]
- Surely, a cow and calf [a half] is enough. [James 1988]
- I'll take a deep-sea diver [a five pound note; deep-sea diver rhymes with fiver, fiver = five pound note] for my trouble, squire. [James 1988]
- A French loaf [four pounds sterling; rhyming slang that depends on backslang to make a connection; ruof or roaf is backslang for four. French loaf rhymes with roaf = four]? For that? [James 1988]

- Have you got a Lady Godiva [five pounds sterling, a five pound note; Lady Godiva rhymes with fiver, fiver = five pounds sterling] to spare? [Fletcher 2008]
- Is that all you can manage? One miserable saucepan lid [a one pound coin; saucepan lid rhymes with quid, quid = one pound]? [James 1988]
- That will cost you a Pavarotti [10 pounds; tenor (Luciano Pavarotti) rhymes with tenner, tenner = 10 pounds; also Aryton Senna and Tony Benner], you know. [Thorne 2007]
- That will cost you a Placido [10 pounds; tenor (Placido Domingo) rhymes with tenner, tenner = 10 pounds]. [Thorne 2007]

The clarity of reference may be the determining factor as far as back-clipping or the lack of it is concerned. There are many rhyming slang expressions which need to consist of both components of a compound to assert a straightforward connection with the implied word. Back clipping would impair the clarity of reference and the rhyming slang expression could be mistaken for another one, not necessarily rhyming. This is connected with slang's polysemy. Jonathon Green's Dictionary of Slang [2007] lists 21 expressions with the proper name George, many of them being rhyming slang. Similarly, there is more than a page of expressions with the proper name Tom, several of them being rhyming slang. We have rhyming expressions such as: tom and jerry = merry; tom and sam = jam; Tom Cruise = booze; Tom Finney = skinny; tom, harry and dick = sick; George and Ringo = bingo; George Bernard Shaw = door; George Blake = snake; George the Third = a piece of excrement (turd); George Bohee = tea. The rhyming slang compounds consisting of popular first names have the tendency to remain in full form as a way of avoiding referential confusion.

There are also rhyming slang expressions consisting of three-word prepositional phrases; some of them incorporate conjunctions or, in rare cases, constitute a short sentence with a personal pronoun and the inflected verb to be. In such cases back clipping is avoided as it would spoil the rhyming effect – prepositions, personal pronouns or articles are not enough to imply an object or idea referred to. The compounds also remain in their full form in case of rhyming slang incorporating well-known cultural motifs such as the proper names from nursery rhymes, well known figures from history or geographical locations. The following instances of rhyming slang in context support this point and are a further illustration of implied reduplication:

- Look at her easts and wests [female breasts; normally with “the” and in the plural], china. [Fletcher 2008]
- I have some sensations in my George Melly [belly; George Melly was a jazz singer; a full compound is kept for clear reference]. [James 1988]
- We need some Tom Cruise [alcoholic drinks; Tom Cruise rhymes with booze = alcohol] to-night. [Fletcher 2008]
- Any Johnny Cash [hashish; Johnny Cash rhymes with hash, hash = hashish or cannabis; Aust.] for me? [Thorne 2007]
- Half pound of Johnny Rutter [butter; a full compound is used for clear reference], please. [James 1988]

- There's a King Dicky [a bricklayer; King Dicky rhymes with brickie, brickie = bricklayer; a full compound is used for clear reference; builders' slang] here to see you. [James 1988]
- She came to the dance with a King Lear [a male homosexual; King Lear rhymes with queer, queer = homosexual; a full compound is used for clear reference]. [James 1988]
- That's a nasty Mars Bar [a scar; a full expression is used for clear reference], Jimmy. [James 1988]
- I'm fed up with you, you oily rag [a worthless person; oily rag rhymes with slag, slag = worthless person; used among friends]. [Fletcher 2008]
- They were both very Scotch mist [intoxicated due to drink; Scotch mist rhymes with pissed, pissed = intoxicated; a full expression is used for clear reference]. They could only lie there and snore. [James 1988]
- There's a castle on that Jack and Jill [a hill; a full expression is used as it originates from a nursery rhyme]. [James 1988]
- The Surrey Docks [venereal disease; Surrey docks rhymes with pox, pox = venereal disease; Tesco renamed the tube station next to its store to Surrey Quays but local people signed a petition to bring back the old name; a full compound is used as a proper name is adopted] is an unpleasant thing to get. [Fletcher 2008]
- My horse was first past the Holy Ghost [the post; a full compound is used as it is more expressive in full form] and that matters, innit? [James 1988]
- An I'm willing [five pence; I'm willing rhymes with shilling, shilling = five pence; five pence in modern currency is equivalent to one shilling in pre-1971 currency units; a full expression is used as we refer to money]? For that? [James 1988]
- He threatened to punch me right in the in and out [a nose; in and out rhymes with snout, snout = nose; a full compound is used for clear reference]! [James 1988]

This type of slang is a uniquely British phenomenon. This is one of the most frequently heard slang variants in Great Britain and countries which have been culturally influenced by Great Britain throughout history. Slang expressions coined in such a manner can be labelled "cryptic" as one concept is described in terms of the other. They rely on implied reduplication. The metaphors used in rhyming slang can be described, if we adopt the terminology proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson [1981: 26–29], as the ontological type of metaphor where actions or non-physical things may be viewed as entities. The enigmatic character of Cockney-type rhyming slang has never had much appeal in the United States where the reduplication-proper type of rhyming slang predominates [see Widawski 2003: 177]. In the United States there is a stronger tradition of straightforwardness of expression, whereas in British culture the enigmatic nature of slang expression may be correlated with the cultural phenomena of understatement and play on words.

Reduplication in Hobson-Jobsons

The next category of slang expressions incorporating rhyme and implied reduplication are hobson-jobsons. Ewart James [1987: ix] in the preface to his *Dictionary of Rhyming Slang and Colloquial Expressions* says that they are

foreign expressions substituted by familiar ones sounding similar but lacking semantic correlations with the original ones. This process is a result of historical contacts of the English language and with other peoples and cultures. The term “hobson-jobson” comes from the twisted anglicization of the Arabic slogan “Ya Hasan, ya Husayan” exclaimed by Muslim soldiers of the British Indian Army on parades in the 19th century [see James 1987: ix]. Prototypical hobson-jobsons are semantically twisted borrowings which reflect a common human desire to tame the unknown by means of adapting and domesticating it. Rhyme and implied reduplication function as a link between the original foreign expression and English slang expressions or colloquialisms deriving from them. The following mechanism illustrates how implied reduplication functions in hobson-jobsons:

Mercy buckets rhymes with the French *merci beaucoup*.

Merci beaucoup means ‘thank you very much’.

Mercy buckets = thank you very much.

Such a type of word formation, involving implied reduplication, became popular in the 19th century London, especially in the East End, which has always been a melting pot. The following examples from Ewart James’s dictionary illustrate this type of word formation:

- All right you lot! Halt, tomatoes, turds [a parody of a sentry’s command to halt at British military bases in Cyprus, where the English *halt*, Greek *stamata* and Turkish *dur* all have to be called out (hobson-johnson)]! [James 1988]
- The johndarm [a policeman; from French *gendarme* = policeman (hobson-jobson)] stopped at the door, tried the lock and moved on. [James 1988]
- It was a pleasant reception with kaliwater [a sparkling wine, especially champagne; Arabic *kali* means ‘alkali’ and is the root of that word (hobson-jobson)] and all that sort of thing. [James 1988]
- Mercy buckets [thank you very much; from the French *merci beaucoup* (hobson-jobson)]! That was great! [James 1988]
- Can we have that little parlivue [an informal discussion or chat; from the French *parlez-vous* meaning ‘you speak’ (hobson-jobson)] just now, please? [James 1988]

Through implied reduplication hobson-jobsons add wit and verbal playfulness to discourse. They have been coined by soldiers, sailors, explorers, tradesmen who are the most common general slang contributors. Some of them have been entering the aggregate of general slang gaining currency as traditional, recognisable vocabulary items. Many of them tend to be ephemeral and short-lived.

Conclusions

Reduplication is conspicuous in the presented types of rhyming slang. Rhyming slang based on reduplication contributes to the dynamism of the English language which manifests itself through the changeability and mutability of English slang expressions. Many slang expressions are short-lived and vanish as quickly as

they appear. The diachronic analysis rhyming slang allows us to conclude that expressions such as bling-bling meaning jewellery or David Mellor, Paul Weller, Uri Gellar and Nelson Mandela meaning lager beer (all these names rhyme with Stella Artois which is popular imported beer) as well as Britney Spears which also means beer(s) are rather ephemeral and will be quickly out of fashion. In case of Cockney-type rhyming slang, their existence in popular lexicon is determined by the popularity and recognisability of real-life figures used in figuration. They enjoyed the peak of their popularity in the 1990s and were primarily used among students for fun rather than secrecy. Nowadays students may find it rather odd to say "Let's go for a few Britneys" as this particular artist is past her heyday. By analogy, when Edward Heath was prime minister heath was rhyming slang for teeth. Implied reduplication in Cockney-type rhyming slang may be viewed as a productive mechanism as this type of slang expression is particularly prone to change.

Rhyming slang based on implied reduplication shares the characteristics of a dialect, sociolect and cryptolect. It is not a prototypical dialect as its speakers are capable of not using it (code switching). It used to be a sociolect and cryptolect in the 18th and 19th centuries as it was used by the working class of London for secrecy. In the second half of the 20th century it gained currency as a witty, ever-changing, jocular and playful way of expression transcending the boundaries of the social group it originated in. Its popularity has been further perpetuated by feature films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1988), *Ocean's 11* (2001), *Dr. Who* (new series, 2006), *Hooligans* (2005) to name but a few.*

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Summary

Reduplication in English Rhyming Slang

Reduplication as a word formation process is a relatively under-researched phenomenon in English. The aim of the paper, therefore, is to present different types of derivational reduplication ranging from the prototypical type based on exact repetition to the implied reduplication underlying the word formation process in cryptic rhyming slang. The article also strives to overview the typology of English rhyming slang as this is the domain of language where different types of reduplication abound. The article is written within the theoretical framework of sociolinguistics and morphology and offers ample citational evidence to substantiate theoretical assumptions.