

Speakers Move Unconsciously but Meaningfully: A Multimodal Constructional Analysis of Twin Forms in English

Masaru Kanetani¹

¹University of Tsukuba, kanetani.masaru.gb@u.tsukuba.ac.jp

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Based on their different internal structures, twin forms in English (Marchand 1969) may be classified into three categories: (i) exact reduplicatives (e.g., *blahblah*), (ii) ablaut reduplicatives (e.g., *bibble-babble*), and (iii) rhyming reduplicatives (e.g., *claptrap*) (Mattiello 2013). Haiman (2018: 69) considers twin forms to be “outlier examples” of ideophones—marked words that depict sensory imagery (Dingemans 2012). Haiman says *outlier* because unlike other types of ideophones, twin forms normally do not occur with accompanying gestures (cf. Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001). However, careful observation of twin forms reveals that certain subtle but meaningful co-speech gestures occur with ablaut reduplicatives. It should be noted that even if the metaphoric gestures are tied to ablaut reduplicatives, they are not always explicitly expressed, as Haiman points out. This study thus addresses the following research questions: (i) what gestures accompany ablaut reduplicatives, (ii) what do they represent, and (iii) why do they not always explicitly appear?

To answer RQs (i) and (ii), this study claims that the hand and head gestures accompanying ablaut reduplicatives are metaphoric gestures (Cienki 2008), reflecting their linguistic forms, namely, vowel alternations (e.g., /ɪ~/~/æ/ in *chitchat*). The TV News Archive (archive.org/details/tv) is used to observe expressive features accompanying these words and to compare them with the other reduplicative subtypes. From Mattiello’s (2013: 310–320) list of 338 twin forms, the ablaut reduplicatives (except proper nouns) are manually extracted, as listed in (1). Of the 87 words extracted, the 11 words printed in boldface convey the “idle talk” sense. Among the meanings of ablaut reduplicatives, the present study limits the scope of analysis to the words in this sense, because other senses like alternative movement (e.g., *flip-flop*), alternating sounds (e.g., *tick-tock*), and indecision (e.g., *shilly-shally*) may be related somewhat straightforwardly to the vowel alternations. Of the 11 boldfaced items in (1), the 5 underlined words attested in the TV News Archive are investigated.

- (1) bibble-babble, bibbity-bob, bim-bom, **blish-blash**, brittle-brattle, cherry-churry, chip-chop, chitchat, chitter-chatter, click-clack, clickety-clack, clinkety-clank, clip-clop, clippety-clop, clitter-clatter, creepy-clawly, crick-crack, criss-cross, diddle-daddle, dilly-dally, dimber-damber, dingle-dangle, dingly-dangly, drip-drop, drizzle-drazzle, feery-fary, fiddle-faddle, flicflac, flimflam, flip-flap, flip-flop, flippy-floppy, gew-gaw, **gibble-gabble**, hee-haw, hip-hop, ickle-ockle, jim-jams, kit-cat, knick-knack, liglag, mingle-mangle, mish-mash, nick-nack, nig-nog, pid-pad, pinpong, pinkle-pankle, pipple-papple, plit-plat, prid-prad, rickety-rackety, rick-rack, riff-raff, riprap, say-so, see-saw, shuffle-shuffle, shilly-shally, skimble-skamble, **slipslop**, smick-scmak, snip-snap, strim-stram, strium-strum, swing-swang, teeny-tiny, tick-tock, tick-tack-toe, ticky-tacky, tip-top, tittle-tattle, titty-totty, trick-track, trit-trot, **twiddle-twaddle**, twing(le)-twang(le), **twittle-twattle**, twit-twat, whim-wham, **whittie-whattie**, wibble-wobble, wigwag, wish-wash, wishy-washy, yolp-yalop, zig-zag
(based on Mattiello 2013: 310–320)

The speakers of ablaut reduplicatives, when gestures are observed, move their hands or heads from one side to the other or to and fro, which symbolizes the vowel alternation. However, such patterns are not observed when the exact and rhyming reduplicative in similar meanings, *blahblah* and *claptrap*, are uttered. Thus, even if their meanings are superficially similar, they should be distinguished among the subtypes of twin forms. Therefore, as with the iconic and symbolic meanings of ablaut reduplicatives (Mattiello 2013: 151), bodily movements accompanying them metaphorically represent the vowel alternations.

Regarding RQ (iii), this study ascribes the lack of gestures to “deideophonization” (a trade-off between expressiveness and morphosyntactic integration of ideophones (Dingemans 2017)), since most twin forms in English are integrated with the rest of the sentence structures as nouns and verbs. Even if gestural features do not explicitly appear, however, given the speakers’ spontaneous use of them, they are considered to be part of the knowledge of ablative reduplicatives. This is similar to Kanetani’s (2021) treatment of psychomimes in Japanese (a subclass of ideophones) as multimodal constructions with co-speech gestures constituting part of linguistic knowledge yet not always being expressed.

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