Reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English: a semantic and cultural interpretation

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ABSTRACT: While the formal properties of reduplication in many languages have aroused the interest of many linguists and much appears to have been done in this area, the same cannot be said about its semantics. It seems that our understanding of the kinds of meaning associated with reduplication processes remains rather limited. This is regrettable, given that language meaning can shed a lot of light on the speech community’s ways of thinking and norms of interaction. In this paper, the object of study is a widely used reduplication process in Singapore English – the reduplication of nominal modifiers. I will endeavour to identify its meaning and articulate it in the form of a reductive paraphrase. I will also try to show that its use may be linked, via meaning, with a culture-specific norm of interaction that seems to be characteristic of Singapore English speakers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over 80 years ago, Sapir (1921: 79) wrote, “Nothing is more natural than the prevalence of reduplication.” Although this may be a bit of an overstatement, the fact remains that reduplication as a linguistic phenomenon has been widely attested in many languages, including pidgins and creoles. One can find many discussions on reduplication in linguistics literature, especially in the areas of phonology (e.g. Kenstowicz, 1994; Broselow, 1995; McCarthy and Prince, 1995) and morphology (e.g. Matthews, 1991; McCarthy and Prince, 1998; Spencer, 1991, 1998; Beard, 1998). Commenting on this interest in the formal properties of reduplication, Spencer writes (1991: 151):

Reduplication has excited a good deal of interest from generative phonologists and morphologists in recent years...This is because reduplication appears to be fundamentally nonconcatenative and hence it has important implications for auto-segmental theories of phonology and morphology. A further interest is in the interaction between reduplication and other rules of morphology and phonology. Reduplication processes are of peculiar interest to morphophonology because reduplication itself has a morphological and a phonological aspect. Teasing these apart is a significant challenge to current theories.

However, it appears to me that, despite this apparent interest and volume of literature one can find on reduplication, our understanding of the kinds of meaning which reduplication expresses remains rather limited. Arguably, this has to do with the fact that most writers on reduplication do not seem to focus on meaning and, at best, take only marginal interest in it. In most instances, linguists who describe the structures and functions of the reduplication processes they are investigating have not articulated their invariant meanings, even though, as Besemer and Wierzbicka (2003: 4) put it, “Meaning is what language is primarily all about.” Indeed, to quote another linguist, Greenberg (1977: 48), “the ultimate purpose of voice sounds and grammatical rules is the construction of meaningful utterances.” Given that language is a tool which people use to express...

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meaning, it would follow that one cannot claim to have a good understanding of a word without first understanding the meaning it expresses. Therefore, to truly understand what a reduplication process is all about, one will have to discover the meaning it represents.

Moreover, the study of meaning could also tell us a lot about the speech community’s ways of thinking, given that, in the words of Greenberg (1977: 84), language is also “fundamental” to “the expression of its culture.” Commenting on the relationship between language and culture, Wardhaugh (1998: 215) writes, “That there should be some kind of relationship between the sounds, words, and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it seems so obvious as to be a truism.” In fact, one linguist, Smith (1983: 10), even goes so far as to say that “language and culture may be inextricably tied together.” Indeed, studies (e.g. Wierzbicka, 1991, 1992, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, forthcoming; Wong, 2003, 2004, forthcoming a, b, c) have shown that a people’s ways of thinking – cultural values, social attitudes, world views, etc. – are all embodied in its language, expressed through its various components, including grammar, speech acts, and especially words. Therefore, when a linguist studies the meaning of an expression, especially a cultural keyword, it would be helpful if he or she could go one step further to discover the specific ways of thinking that are embodied in the word to advance our understanding of that culture.

In this study, I want to look at a widely used reduplication process in Singapore English – the reduplication of nominal modifiers. 1 The focus will not be on its formal properties, but on the meaning it expresses. I will study authentic examples of use and describe its meaning in the form of a paraphrase couched in simple English words. On the basis of this proposed meaning, I will try to show that the use of this word is associated with a norm of interaction that seems to be highly characteristic of the Singapore English speech community.

2. METHODOLOGY

Traditionally, there seem to be two favoured approaches used by researchers trying to describe meaning in studies of reduplication. One of them is the “functionalist” approach (cf. Wierzbicka, 1986: 523), which has to do with attempts to characterize the function of the reduplication under study. Many writers have characterized reduplication processes in terms of functions including continuance, plurality, intensification, augmentation, and attenuation (e.g. Sapir, 1921: 79; Langacker, 1973: 175; Holm, 1988: 88; Lim and Wee, 2001: 97). However, while statements on function may be helpful for categorization purposes, they fail in their ability to reveal the true meaning of the expression under study. This is because while function is obviously related to meaning, the two are very different notions altogether. Meaning is invariant across all instances of use, but function is not. Meaning is an inherent property of a word or expression, but function is variable and context-specific. To better understand a reduplication process (or any expression for that matter), one should move away from function and focus on meaning.

The functionalist approach not only obscures meaning, it leads some writers into equating function with meaning. To give a specific example, one could look at Katamba’s chapter on reduplication in his book Morphology (1993). In the first section of the chapter, Katamba states that the purpose of the section is to “summarise the common functions served by reduplication” (p. 180), but at the end of the same section, he notes, “We have seen the range of meanings conveyed by reduplication” (p. 182). He also writes, “Often
reduplication has an \textit{augmentative meaning}. It signals an increase in size, frequency or intensity” (p. 182, original emphasis). Similarly, Lim and Wee (2001: 93, 96–7) say that the “meaning” of reduplication of verbs in Singapore English is “that of attenuation” or “continuity” depending on the number of copies involved, but later refer to them as “reduplicative functions.” Clearly, writers like Katamba, Lim and Wee have confused function with meaning and equated them. Arguably, metalinguistic expressions on function like “increase in size” (Katamba, 1993: 182) or “attenuation” (Lim and Wee, 2001: 97) may tell us something about meaning, but they can hardly be said to represent meaning. A proposed meaning has to be substitutable for the expression in all instances of use (Wierzbicka, 1986; Goddard, 1998), but a statement about linguistic function simply cannot serve as an invariant semantic paraphrase for any reduplication.

Another commonly used method in interpreting the meaning of reduplication is what Wierzbicka (1986: 521) might call the “lexical equivalent” approach.\footnote{Another commonly used method in interpreting the meaning of reduplication is what Wierzbicka (1986: 521) might call the “lexical equivalent” approach. Using this approach, writers explain the meaning of a reduplication expression with what seems to be a lexical equivalent. Such an approach is in fact extremely commonplace and long-standing (e.g. Sapir, 1921; Apte, 1968; Langacker, 1973; Spencer, 1991, 1998; Katamba, 1993; Keenan and Polinsky, 1998; McCarthy and Prince, 1998; Lim and Wee, 2001). One of many examples comes from Mchombo (1998: 514) in his study of Chichewa reduplication. He presents his data as such:

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
\item mwamunâmuna ‘real or macho man’
\item mkâzîkazi ‘cute and cultured woman’
\item munthumînthu ‘a real (humane) person’
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

Although this approach has been widely used, it has two inherent shortcomings. Firstly, meaning is expressed using obscure metalinguistic words like \textit{macho} and \textit{cultured}. Such words are semantically complex, possibly more complex than the words they are describing. Given that one’s understanding of the meaning of an expression under study is contingent on one’s understanding of the metalanguage, if the metalanguage is semantically complex, how can one hope to make clear the meaning of the expression? To define an expression, one ought to rely on simpler, more intelligible metalinguistic words. To put it in Wierzbicka’s words (1996: 11), “Semantics is a search for understanding, and to understand anything we must reduce the unknown to the known, the obscure to the clear, the abstruse to the self-explanatory.” Similarly, Goddard (1998: 27) writes: “Any explanation of a word-meaning worth its salt must be framed in terms of simpler, more easily understood words.”

However, most writers on reduplication that I have come across rely on metalinguistic words that are unnecessarily complex, thus disregarding the many non-native English speaking readers who may not fully understand the meanings of such words. Such definitions may be called “obscure definitions” (Goddard, 1998: 28). An obscure definition fails “in its task of making the meaning explicit and intelligible” (Goddard, 1998: 28). To make meaning clear, one would have to avoid obscure expressions and rely solely or mainly on simple words.

The other problem with this approach has to do with the fact that, in most instances, the metalinguistic expressions are not semantic equivalents of the words described. The truth of the matter is that, as Wierzbicka (1999: 35) puts it, “Most words in any language are specific to this particular language or to a group of languages, and are not universal.” Most words do not have true synonyms in other languages. Using such words as metalinguistic will give
readers an inaccurate representation of meaning. In cross-cultural studies, this could lead to ethnocentrism; when a writer uses language-specific words from language A to describe language B, he or she imposes the semantic system of language A on language B and gives an ethnocentric interpretation of the latter. Commenting on the use of ethnocentric metalanguage, Goddard (2002: 8) writes: “It is a truism of linguistics – and rightly so – that languages should be described in their own terms, and that one should avoid projecting or imposing the categories of one’s native language upon other languages.”

To describe meaning, one would need to, as far as possible, avoid obscure and ethnocentric metalanguage by using a metalanguage that is inherently simple and culturally neutral. In my opinion, such a metalanguage can be found in natural semantic metalanguage (NSM), which Anna Wierzbicka and associates have developed in the last 30 years (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002b). NSM comprises a set of simple, indefinable words, or semantic primes, which can be represented in the form of the following list (cf. Goddard 2002: 14):

Substantives: I, you, someone/person, people, something/thing, body
Determiners: this, the same, other
Quantifiers: one, two, some, all, much/many
Evaluators and descriptors: good, bad, big, small
Mental predicates: think, know, want, feel, see, hear
Speech: say, words, true
Actions, events and movement: do, happen, move
Existence and possession: there is, have
Life and death: live, die
Time: when/time, now, before, after, a long time, a short time, for some time
Space: where/place, here, above, below, far, near, side, inside
Logical concepts: not, maybe, can, because, if
Intensifier and augmentor: very, more
Taxonomy and partonomy: kind of, part of
Similarity: like/how

Governed by a simple grammar of combinability (cf. Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002a), NSM can be used to describe meaning in the form of a reductive paraphrase. Because NSM uses simple, indefinable words, it has the advantage of clarity and accessibility. The meaning of an NSM expression is simple and clear to all. As an example, consider this sentence written in NSM: “I want to do this” (Wierzbicka, 1996: 20). This expression is inherently simple. It cannot be expressed in simpler terms. No paraphrase, no abstract explanation, no technical label can make this sentence clearer than it already is. To explain this sentence to an outsider, the best way is to translate it into the outsider’s own language.

Another important property of NSM is cultural neutrality. Studies (e.g. Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002b) have suggested that NSM primes are in fact universals, in that one can expect to find a semantic match for each of these primes in any natural language. For example, one can expect to find semantic matches for the primal first and second personal singular pronouns I and you in every other language (cf. Finegan and Besnier, 1989: 252); one would not expect to find a language which does not have words that mean the same as I and you (singular) in English. Governed by a universal grammar of combination, an NSM expression can be translated into any other language without any change of meaning. This has an important consequence. Given that NSM can be expressed in any
language, it follows that its semantic system is compatible with every language. Consequently, it is free of ethnocentrism and can be used to describe any meaning from an insider’s perspective in the form of a paraphrase that can be made intelligible to any cultural outsider by directly translating it into a language he or she is familiar with.3

3. REDUPLICATION OF NOMINAL MODIFIERS IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH

In this section, I will first discuss critically an earlier interpretation of this reduplication. After that, I will study examples which I have noted from authentic exchanges, discern common semantic denominators, and, using NSM, describe the meaning of the expression in the form of a reductive paraphrase.4 In section 4, I will, on the basis of this proposed meaning, discuss how the use of this expression is associated with a culture-specific norm of interaction characteristic of Singapore English speakers.

3.1 Earlier interpretation by Lim and Wee (2001)

Lim and Wee (2001: 91), in their study of reduplication in Singapore English, state that “adjectival reduplication in [colloquial Singapore English] results in an intensification of the meaning of the base adjective.” Here are two of their (2001: 91) examples:

Don’t always eat sweet-sweet (= very sweet) things.
Why the veggie [i.e. vegetables] got bitter-bitter (= very bitter) taste?

At this point, it is worth noting that many writers rely on the concept of intensification to describe reduplication in world languages. Consider the following statements (in chronological order; my emphasis):

The process is generally employed, with self-evident symbolism, to indicate such concepts as distribution, plurality, repetition, customary activity, increase in size, added intensity, continuance. (Sapir, 1921: 79)

Such repetition is used for producing various effects and conveying concepts such as emphasis, intensity, continuation, etc. (Apte, 1968: 11, on reduplication in Marathi)

Reduplication is a common phonological process in which part or all of a lexical item is duplicated, usually to express some notion such as plurality, repetition, duration, or intensity. (Langacker, 1973: 175)

SSESM [Sub-standard English of Singapore and Malaysia] speakers often indicate intensification of adjectives by the grammatical device of reduplication… (Tongue, 1974: 117)

Reduplicated adjectives intensify the meaning denoted by corresponding single adjectives… An adverb can be reduplicated to denote lesser degree of intensity than the intensity denoted by the original single adverb. (Bhaskararao, 1977: 4, on reduplication in Telugu)

For example, the Yoruba word ńlá ‘big’ can be reduplicated to intensify its meaning, i.e. ńlá-ńlá ‘huge’; the same process can be seen not only in Kongo mîpâtìpatì, also literally ‘big-big’, but also in [creole English] big-big. (Holm, 1988: 88)

Italian grammars usually characterise the function of reduplication… as ‘intensification’. (Wierzbicka, 1991: 257)

The areal nature of the Reduplicated Structures is manifested in aspects like ‘simultaneity’, ‘continuity’, ‘iterativeness’, and ‘non-precipitativeness’ – all pregnant in the duplication of verbs; in semantic concepts such as ‘accentuation’, ‘intensification’ as well as ‘distributiveness’ exhibited by duplication of adjectives and nouns. (Abbi, 1992: 157)
We observed that reduplication is typically – but not exclusively – used to signal diminutive, augmentative, intensification, attenuative, plural or frequentative meanings. (Katamba, 1993: 200)

The use of the metalinguistic word *intensification* is not unproblematic. The word has been repeatedly used to describe reduplication processes in different languages but, to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever seriously attempted to define this word. Furthermore, the question arises as to whether reduplications that are said to intensify something have the same meaning. Obviously, this question cannot be satisfactorily answered without the benefit of a genuine semantic analysis.

Typically, reduplications of this kind are “translated into English by the ‘intensifier’ very” (Wierzbicka, 1991: 256), like Lim and Wee (2001) have done. However, as Wierzbicka (1991: 256) exemplifies with Italian reduplication, the possible range of use of a reduplication that is said to intensify something may not coincide with the range of use of the English word *very*. Something similar may be said of the reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English. The range of use of this reduplication process is different from the range of use of the word *very*. On the one hand, some modifiers which can be reduplicated cannot be used with the primitive *very*:

Speaker notices some black particles in his soup:
How come got black black/*very black* one?

Speaker refers to some oil remains on an aromatic oil dish:
How come yellow yellow/*very yellow* one?

Speaker refers to a path lined with a lot of circular slabs:
You know, the circle circle/*very circle* path?

Speaker doesn’t like sliced pork (but likes it minced):
I don’t like one piece one piece/*very one piece*.

On the other hand, some modifiers which can be used with *very* cannot be reduplicated:

It’s *very kind*/kind kind of you to do this.

He was *very happy*/happy happy to see you.

*good good, *bad bad, *surprised surprised

Clearly, the meaning of this reduplication cannot be described in terms of the word *very*; the two expressions are not interchangeable in all instances. Moreover, the primitive *very* is a common term used in Singapore English and, presumably, Singapore English speakers need not resort to reduplication to express the same meaning. In fact, as we shall see later, the meaning of this reduplication is much more complex than the meaning of the word *very*. Therefore, the idea that the reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English can be described as an intensifier or as *very* has to be rejected.

### 3.2 The meaning of reduplication of nominal modifiers

The reduplication of nominal modifiers, which include words subsumed under the grammatical category adjective, is a grammatical construction that is common in the Chinese languages spoken in Singapore. Through a transfer process, this reduplication is now also prevalent in Singapore English and examples are not hard to find. Let me begin with several:
A and B are talking about the *yusheng* which they have recently savoured in a hotel café. This is a fish salad that is only served during the Chinese New Year period. A likes one of its ingredients.

A: I like the brown thing.
B: The crispy crispy one.

Speaker speaks of his dislike for or phobia of dark places:

I don’t like dark dark.

Speaker does not like to be overweight:

I can’t stand big big like that.

Referring to some dark ingredients on a pizza, speaker asks addressee:

What is this black black thing?

Speaker describes rashes on a baby’s legs as “red red one.”

B offers to buy a soapbox for A. A specifies his requirements:

I don’t want cheena cheena one. I want nice nice one.

Positing a semantic explication to describe this reduplication process poses a major challenge. Not only does the explication need to account for all these varied instances of use, it also has to explain why some nominal modifiers (e.g. good, bad) cannot be reduplicated. Let us take one step at a time. In many of the examples I have come across, the modifiers speak of visually striking or identifiable properties, including colour and size:

Speaker approaches dessert trays filled with green jelly and exclaims:

Green green one!

Speaker asks addressee why there are red patches of wax on a white candle:

How come got red red one?

Speaker looks out of the window just before they decide to go out for lunch:

Shall we bring an umbrella? It’s just grey grey sky.

Speaker comments on the addressee’s jeans (with mock sarcasm):

Someone wear Giordano jeans, shiny shiny one.

Speaker describes someone’s looks as “the blur blur look.”

A guesses the meaning of keg:

The keg is the big big thing with a tap?

Someone chooses a frame for a photograph but speaker finds the frame too big:

This one go in will be like small small in the centre.

Modifiers relating to qualities that appeal to other human senses can also be reduplicated:

Speaker comments on the quality of voice of the Vienna Boys Choir:

Bright bright one.

A: Do you like wasabe?
B: Don’t like.
A: I also don’t like. Hot hot one.
Speaker is giving addressee a back massage with his hands:

How come your back one side soft soft one side hard hard?

In the following examples, the speaker makes reference to properties that are to him or her cognitively striking in one way or another:

Speaker asks about the identity of someone’s romantic interest:

Is it the quiet quiet one?

Referring to a character from a local sitcom, speaker remarks:

I like this kind of aunty aunty character.

Speaker holds a stereotypical view of Australian men:

Got a lot of cute cute guys over there.

Speaker comments on the things someone has said, things which seem odd to him:

He said a lot of funny funny things.

Speaker comments on someone’s thrifty behaviour:

She doesn’t like this type of expensive expensive things.

Speaker refers to a skirt which she will wear for her wedding banquet as “the pòng pòng skirt”.

As evidenced in the examples I have presented so far, modifiers that can be reduplicated seem to be associated with properties that are striking or noticeable to the speaker. To describe such a property, the following semantic components are posited:

1. I’m thinking about something now
2. I think about it like this
3. I can’t think about it in another way

The first component tells us that the speaker has formed an impression about the referent. The next component, which points to the modifier, tells us what it is. This property has come spontaneously to mind when the speaker thinks about the referent. The third component relates to the striking nature of the property. Because this property is so striking to the speaker at the time of speaking, it has become the only way he or she thinks of the referent at that time; all other ways seem to be excluded. This is evidenced in the fact that the reduplication of nominal modifiers is usually restricted to one property and, on rare occasions, two; I have not come across any reduplication that involves three or more modifiers:

Speaker wants a favour from a friend whom he considers short and fat:

If you don’t give me what I want, I will lay a curse on you so you forever short short fat fat.

The interlocutors visit a nature reserve for bird-watching. Speaker A says it is difficult to spot the birds, which are small, brown, and blend with the environment, without a pair of binoculars.

A: Without binoculars, you can’t see [the birds] well.
B: Ya, small small.
A: Small small brown brown.

?I like that boy, short short fat fat cute cute.

It must be stressed that the primitive now in the first component is crucial to the meaning because we are talking about what is striking to the speaker at the time of speaking. The
referent may possess other striking properties but they do not surface at that time. For example, while someone can describe wasabe as hot hot because of its taste, another person in another context may refer to it as green green (e.g. I like the green green stuff).

Because the property is something striking, it allows the referent to be identified by the addressee; the speaker can expect the addressee to be able to conceive of the referent in the same way. As a result, this reduplication can often be used for identification purposes:

A parent asks her child to identify his teacher to her. The child answers: The fat fat one.

Over the telephone, A asks B where specifically they can meet later:
A: Where should we meet?
B: The place where we met the last time – the garden garden place.

A asks B for some sweets:
Can I have some sweets? The sour sour one.

Speaker describes the tiles used in a game, on which numerals are represented by the number of circular indentations (like dominoes). Her objective is to make known to the addressee what game she is talking about. She refers to the tiles as “the circle circle one.”

The speaker in each of these instances reduplicates a modifier to identify the referent to the addressee. In doing so, the speaker highlights a property that is conceptually salient and expects the addressee to be able to conceive of it in the same way and therefore know what he or she is talking about. I would therefore argue that this property has to be something so distinctive that people can objectively recognise, and which does not require further elaboration. If this interpretation is correct, one would be able to see why modifiers like fat or tall can be reduplicated, while subjective or judgemental qualities like kind or stingy cannot be reduplicated.

Modifiers that can be reduplicated seem to represent properties which Singapore English speakers see as distinctive, definitive, absolute and tangible. These are properties that can be expected to be objectively evaluated. Common examples include modifiers associated with size (e.g. fat, big, small), taste (e.g. sweet, sour, hot), and colour (e.g. red, yellow, black, dark) etc. On the other hand, modifiers that cannot be reduplicated appear to be associated with properties which speakers do not see as distinctive, definitive or which can only be subjectively evaluated. Examples of evaluative modifiers that cannot be reduplicated include good, bad, kind, unkind etc.; one can expect a person to be kind to one person but unkind to another at the same time, whereas one is less likely to perceive a person to be fat and skinny, or, big and small, at the same time.

To describe such a tangible, “objective” quality, I propose this partial explication:

I think anyone can know why I think about it like this
I think anyone can think about it in the same way

At this point, I hasten to add that while this reduplication only applies to distinctive properties that allow the referent to be identified, the kind of identification function exemplified in the examples above is not invariant across all instances of use. In each of the following examples, the speaker is not trying to identify the referent to the addressee because the referent seems to be common knowledge:

Speaker thinks the drinking water in his cup looks dark instead of clear:
How come dark dark one?
Speaker is surprised to see toiletry items like combs and toothbrushes in a shop that deals mainly with gambling products and services:

They sell this kind of funny funny things.

A person tries in vain to find words to describe a teacup. Speaker suggests:

Dainty dainty là.⁹

B asks A to check out a street market but A does not like the things that are on sale:

B: Go down and see whether you can buy anything.
A: Don’t want là, all the LC LC [acronym for ‘low class’] things.

Speaker comments on someone’s facial expression when the person was approached for a favour:

I ask her to do something, her face black black.

It is also noted that, in many examples, the speaker seems to be experiencing some kind of feeling regarding the referent, which can be semantically represented as “I feel something.” This emotional aspect is variable and could be something good or something bad depending on whether the speaker is talking about something he likes or dislikes. He could be expressing various kinds of emotion, akin to, for example, pleasure, apprehension, disapproval, or even contempt:

Speaker comments on a toddler he sees at a public place:

I like the boy, cute cute.
(I feel something good towards this boy.)

Speaker teases someone’s waistline:

I like your tummy big big.
(I feel something good about your tummy.)

Speaker tells addressee where a flight of stairs leads to:

You go down here is one end of the building. Dark dark one.
(I feel something bad about this place.)

Speaker dislikes a gimmicky promotional snippet on television:

I don’t like this kind of stupid stupid…. (Sentence is discontinued for the want of a suitable word).
(I feel something bad towards this advertising gimmick.)

Speaker says that he does not like to join tour groups because he thinks many of the participants are common:

Got a lot of LC LC people.
(I feel something bad towards these kind of people.)

However, as with the function of identification, this element of “feel,” although prevalent, is not invariant across all examples. Here are some instances where the speaker does not seem to be particularly emotional:

B is describing a kind of Japanese candy to A. A guesses what it is:

Soft soft one, is it?

A comments that some insects like dark places:

Sometimes they like the dark dark place.

Speaker asks the addressee if he needs a big pencil case:

You need big big one or not?
Speaker advises the addressee to make payments to an organisation by cheque if a big amount is involved and by cash if the amount is small:

It’s only for big big amount. Small small amount, use cash.

Now that we have considered the various aspects of the meaning, we can put them together and consider them jointly. On the basis of the large set of examples considered in context and the components that have been posited, I propose the following paraphrase to describe the meaning of the reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English:

I’m thinking about something now
I think about it like this
I can’t think about it in another way now
I think anyone can know why I think about it like this
I think anyone can think about it in the same way

Let us now test the explication against several examples of use, with variable or contextual components included:

cute cute (referent: a boy) =

I’m thinking about this boy now
I think about this boy like this: this boy is cute
I can’t think about this boy in another way now
I think anyone can know why I think about this boy like this
I think anyone can think about this boy in the same way

circle circle (referent: a path; see appendix) =

I’m thinking about this path now
I think about this path like this: there are many circles on it
I can’t think about this path in another way now
I think anyone can know why I think about this path like this
I think anyone can think about this path in the same way

short short fat fat (referent: addressee) =

I’m thinking about this person now
I think about this person like this: this person is short, this person is fat
I can’t think about this person in another way now
I think anyone can know why I think about this person like this
I think anyone can think about this person in the same way

Looking at this proposed explication, we again see that the meaning of this reduplication cannot be simply described as an intensifier, since nothing seems to have been intensified. In fact, its meaning has more to do with how the speaker views a property of the referent in question rather than the property itself. In this respect, one might say that the meaning is attitudinal in nature. Obviously, such attitudinal meaning cannot be adequately described with an abstract label. It can only be made clear via a paraphrase couched in simple words and sentences.
The use of reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English suggests a discourse pattern that is not typical of culturally Anglo varieties of English such as American English and British English. Anglo English speakers seem to display “preference for a hedged expression of opinions and evaluations” (Wierzbicka, 1991: 43; cf. Wierzbicka, forthcoming) and have at their disposal a wide range of linguistic devices like a bit, slightly, rather, and kind/sort of, among many others to hedge their propositions. Because of this, propositions made in Anglo English tend to sound more “toned down,” more tentative, and less definitive. Here are a few authentic examples (my italics) of hedging in British English:

A: Did you sleep well? 
B: Reasonably well.

B slipped on a wet road. 
A: What happened? 
B: Slipped a bit. It’s a bit slippery.

The interlocutors decide to visit an art gallery: 
Let’s have a little look.

A (Singapore English speaker): Cold! 
B (British English speaker): It is a bit chilly. 
I’m also a bit of an expert on the old chicken curry, seeing as I eat it at least five times a week … (Humphreys, 2001: 62–3)

The girlfriend then told my friend that her mother was a little upset because he was not making an effort [to eat the dinner the mother cooked]. (Humphreys, 2001: 67)

The use of reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English seems to suggest a different discourse pattern. It suggests that, at least from an Anglo perspective, its speakers have a tendency to speak definitively rather than tentatively and overstate rather than understate, as evidenced in many of the examples I have provided above. I would argue that this tendency comes from the following components in the proposed explication:

I can’t think about it in another way
I think anyone can know why I think about it like this
I think anyone can think about it in the same way

Taken together, these components betray the speaker’s belief that his or her way of looking at the object is the one and only way, and that he or she expects that other people will be able to see it in the same way too. Because this reduplication carries such an attitudinal meaning, the resulting proposition would inevitably sound definitive and/or overstated (cf. Wong, forthcoming c).

To further contrast the aforementioned Anglo English and Singapore English speech norms, let me draw on the following hypothetical example:

A: Which one is your teacher? 
B: The fat fat one.

In this example, Singapore English speaker B describes his teacher as someone who is fat. However, not only does he say that the teacher is fat, an adjective that seems to be rarely
used by Anglo English speakers for describing people, he additionally gives prominence to or “plays up” this property through reduplication. In a hypothetical situation like this, the Anglo English speaker would normally avoid the word *fat* and prefer euphemisms like *chubby* and *podgy*. Additionally, he or she would also rely on adverbs like *a bit* or *slightly* to further “tone down” his or her remark. One could well imagine the exchange to look something like this in Anglo English:

A: Which one is your teacher?
B: The slightly chubby/podgy one.

Singapore English speakers’ tendency to overstate and speak definitively is also evidenced in the fact that hedges like *a bit, rather, reasonably, slightly, and somewhat* etc., are very infrequently attested in their speech. Furthermore, one can also easily find many other Singapore English expressions that reflect this norm of interaction, such as those given in the following examples, which are taken from the novel *Mammon Inc.* by Hwee Hwee Tan (2002, my emphasis):

You need to make a *lot* of money to give us, so Buddha will see that you are *very* filial. When you die, you don’t need to go to Hell, but can just walk across the gold bridge to Heaven. (p. 37)

‘Yah, *whenever* I watch those Western movies on TV – they’re only two hours long, but the men there *always* have sex at least three times in those two hours,’ my mother said. (p. 223)

‘But I *always* read in the newspaper,’ Pa Pa said, ‘those Western tourists, they go to Bangkok. Have sex with child prostitutes, and don’t use condom. Then they *always* have to stop over in Singapore on the way back to Europe. Then they pass the Aids on to some naïve Singaporean woman.’ (p. 223)

‘My name is Tua Pwei Chek,’ the man said. ‘You can guess why, right?’ He rubbed his stomach. Steve looked blank.

‘You don’t understand dialect?’ the woman said. ‘Tua Pwei Chek is Uncle *Very Fat.*’ She rubbed the man’s pot belly. (p. 258)

…why you *everything* also don’t know how to do? (p. 262)

These examples illustrate the various linguistic devices other than the reduplication of nominal modifiers that Singapore English speakers can use to overstate and speak definitively. It is noted that hedges, which are characteristic of Anglo English, are absent in these examples. Therefore, this tendency to overstate and speak definitively could arguably be seen as one of the set of features that sets Singapore English apart from Anglo varieties of English.

5. CONCLUSION

Abstract labels are inadequate for the purpose of describing the meaning of reduplication. I propose that the best way to make clear the meaning of a reduplication process is to paraphrase it in a metalanguage that is easy to understand and free of ethnocentrism, such as NSM. In this study, I use NSM to describe the meaning of reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English in the form of a paraphrase. The proposed meaning shows that this reduplication has to do with how the speaker views a property of a referent; it
tells us that the speaker sees the property as the one and only way of perceiving the referent. The complexity of the meaning of this reduplication shows that it cannot be adequately described by an abstract label and can only be made clear via a reductive paraphrase.

On the basis of the proposed meaning, I additionally argue that the use of this reduplication reflects a Singapore English speech pattern that is atypical of Anglo varieties of English. Its use, along with other functionally similar linguistic devices, provides evidence that Singapore English speakers have a tendency to overstate and speak definitively when making propositions. This further shows that while Singapore English may be considered a variety of English, the norms of interaction and ways of thinking it embodies can be drastically different from those represented in the more traditional, Anglo varieties of English such as British English, American English and Australian English.

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NOTES

1. Lim and Wee (2001: 91, emphasis added) use the terms “reduplication of adjectives” and “adjectival reduplication.” However, I prefer not to rely on the grammatical notion adjective because many expressions that can be reduplicated by the same semantic process do not fall neatly into the class of adjectives. These include words like garden, circle, one piece. Therefore, I find it more helpful to refer to this group of words as nominal modifiers, rather than adjectives.
2. Although Wierzbicka is referring to studies on particles here, what she says could apply to studies on reduplication as well.
3. In this section, I have provided but a brief outline of the NSM approach, which I shall use for the purpose of describing the meaning of a Singapore English expression. For more comprehensive discussions and numerous examples on how the NSM is used to describe language meaning, I refer the reader to Goddard (e.g. 1998) and Wierzbicka (e.g. 1988, 1991, 1992, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2001, forthcoming) and works by other authors (e.g. in Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002b).
4. Admittedly, to avoid a lengthy paraphrase, I sometimes find it more convenient to use a few non-NSM words. Nevertheless, these non-NSM words have to be carefully chosen and the criterion remains that they have to be simple, non-technical, everyday words.
5. The Singapore English word cheena is derogatory, and is used to describe any thing or behaviour that is seen by the speaker as “excessively Chinese in an old-fashioned way” (Wierzbicka, 2003: 356).
6. The Singapore English word blur roughly means clueless.
7. The tonal expression pong is Hokkien and, very roughly, it describes something that looks inflated.
8. In formulating NSM explications, punctuation marks are avoided as much as possible. This is because NSM explications attempt to represent the insider’s perspective and, presumably, people don’t think in terms of punctuation marks.
11. Admittedly, this reduplication may also be available in some varieties of Anglo English, as exemplified in Robert Burns’ poem “My love is like a red, red rose,” but the fact remains that the frequency of use in Anglo English is very much lower than in Singapore English.
APPENDIX

Reduplication of nominal modifiers in Singapore English

The circle circle path at the Australian National University (June 2002)

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