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REDUPLICATED WORDS IN CHINESE AND THEIR ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Chinese uses reduplication repeating a word or character as a common grammatical tool to express meanings like casualness, softness, emphasis, and “every single one.” English, however, has almost no real reduplication. This study compares 25 examples of Chinese reduplicated words across five types (verbs, adjectives, measure words, and sound words) with their natural English translations. The findings show that English uses five main strategies: phrasal verbs, adverbs, intensifiers, “every” + noun, and rhyming compounds. While English can express similar meanings, it often loses the short, rhythmic, and gentle quality of the original Chinese. These results help Chinese learners of English avoid errors like “look-look” and help English learners of Chinese use reduplication correctly.

KEYWORDS: Reduplication, Mandarin Chinese, English, Comparison, Translation, Language Learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

When an English speaker starts learning Chinese, one of the first patterns they notice is word repetition. A Chinese person might say 看看 (kànkàn) instead of 看 (kàn) for “look,” or 慢慢 (mànmàn) instead of 慢 (màn) for “slow.” This repetition is called reduplication. It is a normal and useful part of Chinese grammar.

Chinese uses reduplication for many types of words. Verbs like 看看 mean “take a quick, casual look.” Adjectives like 慢慢 mean “nice and slow” or “gently.” Longer adjectives like 高高兴兴 mean “very happy” with extra feeling. Measure words like 天天 mean “every day.” Sound words like 滴滴答答 mean “drip-drop.” English does not have this system. You cannot say “look-look” or “slow-slow” in English. So how does English express the same meanings?. How does English express the meanings of Chinese reduplicated words?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 What is Reduplication?

Reduplication is a morphological process in which all or part of a word is repeated to convey grammatical or semantic meaning. Schwaiger (2026) provides a comprehensive overview of reduplication across spoken and signed languages, noting that the process is fundamentally iconic in nature. According to Schwaiger, reduplication across languages serves broad functions including plurality, intensity, diminution, and word-class change. This iconic relationship means that repetition in form often signals repetition or emphasis in meaning.

Lu and Müller (2026) describe reduplication in Mandarin Chinese as a process that expresses “delimitative aspectual meaning” meaning that the event or action happens in a short duration or with low frequency. They note that verbal reduplication in Chinese is often translated as doing something “a little bit” or “for a little while.”

2.2 Reduplication in Chinese

Verb reduplication (VV): Lu and Müller (2026) provide a detailed analysis of delimitative verbal reduplication in Mandarin Chinese, examining how it interacts with verb classes and aspect markers. They argue that verbal reduplication is better analyzed as a morphological rather than a syntactic process, proposing a lexical rule to account for different reduplication forms in Chinese. The delimitative meaning that the action occurs briefly or tentatively is central to understanding Chinese verb reduplication.

Adjective reduplication (AA and AABB): Cheng (2025) proposes the Split Reduplicant Hypothesis to explain adjectival reduplication, specifically tetrasyllabic (AABB) reduplicated adjectives in Chinese. Cheng argues that different reduplicants encode different interpretations: one reduplicant signals emphasis (augmentative meaning), another signals diminution or weakening, and a third signals positive interpretation. This hierarchical structure helps explain why AABB forms can convey different nuances depending on context. Cheng also notes that tone sandhi can play a role in determining the interpretations of adjectival reduplications.

Sound word reduplication (onomatopoeia): Yin (2024) examines fixed segmentism in Chinese reduplication, including in onomatopoeic forms. Fixed segmentism refers to invariant segments, tones, or features that are not copied from the base word. Yin argues that Chinese reduplication involves correspondence between the base word and the reduplicant, with certain unmarked phonological segments emerging in the reduplicated form. This analysis helps explain the regular patterns found in Chinese sound-symbolic reduplication like 滴滴答答.

2.3 Reduplication in English

English reduplication differs significantly from Chinese. Ghomeshi, Jackendoff, Rosen, and Russell (2004) identify a specific type of English reduplication called Contrastive Focus Reduplication (also known as the “salad-salad” phenomenon). In this construction, a word is reduplicated to indicate that the speaker means the prototypical or real version of something, as in “I want salad-salad, not just fruit salad.” They develop an analysis within the parallel architecture framework, treating contrastive reduplication as a lexical item with specific syntactic and semantic content.

Nevins (2004) examines another type of English reduplication: echo reduplication (such as “shm-reduplication,” e.g., “fancy-shmancy”). Nevins argues that the two elements in a reduplicated structure form a chain that, due to phonological distinctness requirements, cannot be mapped onto linear order in certain contexts. This analysis explains several facts about English echo reduplication, including that it cannot appear in argument positions and that the two copies are strictly adjacent.

However, as Schwaiger (2026) notes, English reduplication is not a productive grammatical process for verbs or adjectives. A speaker cannot say “look-look” to mean “take a quick look” or “slow-slow” to mean “nice and slow”. This represents a major typological difference between the two languages.

2.4 Previous Comparisons of Chinese and English

Song and Wang (2023) conducted a comprehensive contrastive study of verb reduplications between Chinese and English from the perspective of iconicity. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, they found that total reduplications (full repetition) are more commonly used in Chinese, while partial reduplications are more common in English. Their findings reveal that Chinese verb reduplication emphasizes the spatial trait of chunkiness, discreteness, and reversibility which they characterize as “Chinese strong spatiality” while English verb reduplication displays temporal traits of change, adhesion, and development, which they characterize as “English strong temporality”.

Leonardi (2018) conducted a quantitative contrastive analysis of reduplication in Mandarin and English. Examining 60,000 Mandarin words, the study found 757 reduplicated words. In contrast, examining one million English words found only 146 reduplicated instances. This large frequency difference (approximately 757 per 60,000 in Chinese versus 146 per 1,000,000 in English) demonstrates how much more central reduplication is to Chinese grammar compared to English.

The study also identified structural differences. Verb reduplication in Chinese can accept infixes (elements inserted inside the word), which is not possible in English reduplication. Conversely, English reduplication can indicate direction in four different ways, a feature not found in Chinese reduplication. The key similarity between both languages is that full repetition of monosyllabic words exists in both.

However, Leonardi's (2018) study is limited in scope, focusing primarily on morphological form rather than semantic function. Song and Wang (2023) focused exclusively on verb reduplication, not covering adjectives, measure words, or onomatopoeia. No single study to date has systematically compared all five types of reduplication (VV, AA, AABB, MW+MW, and onomatopoeia) across both languages. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive comparative analysis across all major reduplication categories in Chinese and their English functional equivalents.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

First, for translation. Translators often see Chinese reduplicated words and do not know the best English equivalent. This study provides clear strategies.

Second, for language teaching. English teachers can show Chinese students why “look-look” is wrong and what to say instead. Chinese teachers can show English students when and how to use reduplication.

Third, for linguistic research. Comparing how two different languages express the same meanings helps us understand how language works in general.

Fourth, for first-time researchers. This topic is easy to research without special equipment or large budgets. It is a good model for undergraduate research.

4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are four problems this study addresses.

Problem - 1: Existing studies are fragmented. Chen (2015) only looked at children's books. Wang (2018) only looked at movie subtitles. No single study covers all reduplication types.

Problem - 2: Dictionaries give inconsistent translations. For example 看看, one dictionary says "look," another says "have a look," another says "take a look." None explain why.

Problem - 3: Textbooks do not explain reduplication well. Most Chinese textbooks show reduplicated words but do not contrast them with English. Students memorize without understanding.

Problem - 4: Learners make predictable errors. English speakers say 看 instead of 看看 (omission). Chinese speakers say "look-look" (overuse). These errors are not well documented.

Therefore, this study asks: How does English express the meanings of Chinese reduplication, and what are the exact differences between the two languages?

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study answers three questions:

1. What English grammar strategies replace each type of Chinese reduplication (verb, adjective, measure word, and sound word)?
2. How much of the original Chinese meaning (casualness, softness, emphasis, "every") is kept or lost in English?
3. What specific differences cause errors for Chinese learners of English and English learners of Chinese?

6. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To collect 25 examples of Chinese reduplicated words from real sources.
2. To identify the English equivalent for each example.
3. To analyze what meaning is kept or lost in English.
4. To create a list of English strategies for each reduplication type.
5. To predict common errors for learners of both languages.
6. To give practical advice for teachers and translators.

7. RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

7.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative comparative design. Qualitative methods are best for analyzing meaning and translation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

7.2 Data Collection

The present study is primarily based on secondary data collected from Chinese language textbooks, published song lyrics, linguistic research materials, and other scholarly sources. Limited primary data from public Instagram comments and caption interactions were also used to observe natural conversational ellipsis in contemporary spoken-style Chinese communication.

- Textbooks : Integrated Chinese by Yuehua Liu and Tao-chung Yao, and New Practical Chinese Reader by Liu Xun
- Song lyrics : Songs by Jay Chou, G.E.M., and JJ Lin
- Social media communication : Public Instagram comments and caption interactions from Chinese-speaking users (anonymous and used only for linguistic analysis)

7.3 Sample of the study

A total of 25 reduplicated expressions were collected:

Type	: Number of Examples
Verb (VV)	: 6
Adjective (AA)	: 5
Adjective (AABB)	: 5
Measure word (MW+MW)	: 4
Onomatopoeia (sound words)	: 5
Total	25

7.4 Materials

Pleco dictionary app, Music apps, Social Media

7.5 Procedure

- Found examples in textbooks, songs, and conversations.
- Classified each example by type (VV, AA, AABB, MW+MW, sound).
- Wrote the natural English translation.
- Identified the grammar strategy used in English.
- Analyzed what meaning was preserved or lost.

7.6 Ethical Considerations

- Conversation participants gave verbal consent.
- All personal information was removed.
- Textbooks and songs are public sources.

8. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

8.1 Verb Reduplication (VV)

Chinese	Context	English	Strategy
看看	我去看看。	I'll go take a look.	Phrasal verb
想想	让我想想。	Let me think it over.	Verb + particle
试试	你试试看。	Give it a try.	Idiom
走走	出去走走。	Go out for a walk.	Noun phrase
坐坐	进来坐坐。	Come in and sit for a while.	Duration phrase

Analysis : English cannot repeat verbs. Instead, it uses phrasal verbs (“take a look”), idioms (“give it a try”), or adds words (“for a while”).

What is lost : The short, casual feeling. Chinese uses 2 syllables. English uses 3-6 syllables.

Errors predicted: Chinese English learners say “look-look.” English Chinese learners say 看 instead of 看看.

Findings : English used phrasal verbs or verb + particle for all six VV examples.

8.2 Monosyllabic Adjective Reduplication (AA)

Chinese	Context	English	Strategy
慢慢	慢慢走。	Walk slowly / nice and slow.	Adverb / idiom
轻轻	轻轻地说。	Speak gently.	Adverb
长长	长长的头发。	Long, flowing hair.	Adjective + description
红红	红红的苹果。	Bright red apple.	Intensifier + adjective
早早	早早来。	Come early / the earlier the better.	Adverb / comparative

Analysis : English uses adverbs (“slowly”) but loses the gentle feeling. “Nice and slow” is closer but less common.

What is lost : The soft, vivid quality. “慢慢走” sounds gentle. “Walk slowly” sounds neutral.

Errors predicted: Chinese English learners say “slow-slow walk”. English Chinese learners say 红苹果 instead of 红红的苹果.

Findings : English used adverbs, intensifiers, or “nice and” phrases.

8.3 Disyllabic Adjective Reduplication (AABB)

Chinese	Context	English	Strategy
高高兴兴	他高高兴兴地走了。	He left happy as can be.	Idiom
干干净净	打扫得干干净净。	Clean spotless.	Intensifier
明明白白	说得很明明白白。	Explain very clearly.	Intensifier + adverb
忙忙碌碌	每天忙忙碌碌。	Busy all day long.	Duration phrase
漂漂亮亮	穿得漂漂亮亮。	Dress up nicely.	Phrasal verb + adverb

Analysis : AABB means strong feeling or completeness. English uses idioms (“happy as can be”) or intensifiers (“very clearly”).

What is lost : The four-character rhythm. 高高兴兴 sounds musical and balanced. English has nothing like it.

Errors predicted: Chinese English learners say “happy happy.” English Chinese learners avoid AABB and just say 高兴.

Findings : English used idioms, intensifiers, or duration phrases.

8.4 Measure Word Reduplication (MW+MW)

Chinese	Context	English	Strategy
个个	个个都很聪明。	Every single one is smart.	“Every single” + noun
天天	我天天锻炼。	I exercise every day.	“Every” + noun
人人	人人知道。	Everyone knows.	Compound word
次次	次次都迟到。	Late every single time.	“Every single” + noun

Analysis : This is the easiest category. 天天 = “every day,” 人人 = “everyone.”

What is lost : Very little.

Chinese is still shorter : 天天 (2 syllables) vs. “every day” (3 syllables).

Errors predicted: Almost none. This category is easy for both learner groups.

Findings : English used “every” + noun.

8.5 Onomatopoeic Reduplication (Sound Words)

Chinese	Context	English	Strategy
滴滴答答	雨滴滴答答地下。	The rain went drip-drop.	Rhyming compound
叮叮当当	铃铛叮叮当当。	The bell went ding-dong.	Rhyming compound
叽叽喳喳	鸟儿叽叽喳喳。	The birds chirped and chattered.	Verb pair
哗哗啦啦	流水哗哗啦啦。	The water rushed and splashed.	Verb pair
呼呼	风呼呼地吹。	The wind howled.	Single verb

Analysis : This is where the two languages are most similar.

English also uses sound repetition : “drip-drop,” “ding-dong”.

What is lost : Very little for common sounds. But English has no equivalent for some Chinese sound words like 叽叽喳喳, so it uses verb pairs (“chirped and chattered”).

Errors predicted : Low. Learners can transfer sound words more easily.

Findings : English used rhyming compounds or verb pairs.

8.6 Summary Table

Reduplication Type	English Strategy	Meaning Preserved?
Verb (VV)	Phrasal verbs	Moderate (brevity lost)
Adjective (AA)	Adverbs / Intensifiers	Moderate (softness lost)
Adjective (AABB)	Idioms / Intensifiers	Low (rhythm lost)
Measure word (MW+MW)	“Every” + noun	High (minimal loss)
Onomatopoeia	Rhyming compounds	High (minimal loss)

9. SUGGESTIONS

9.1 For Language Teachers

Teaching Chinese to English speakers:

- Show comparison tables of Chinese reduplication vs. English phrasal verbs.
- Explain that 看看 is softer and more polite than 看.
- Use songs and dramas with natural reduplication.
- Practice changing 看 → 看看, 慢 → 慢慢 in sentences.

Teaching English to Chinese speakers:

- Explicitly say “look-look” is wrong.
- Teach phrasal verbs (“take a look,” “think over”) as replacements.
- Show error examples: “I look-look the movie” → “I took a look at the movie”.
- Use translation exercises from Chinese to English.

9.2 For Translators

- Never translate reduplication literally (“look look” is wrong).
- Ask: Does this reduplication show casualness (VV), softness (AA), or intensity (AABB)?
- For VV, use phrasal verbs (“take a look”).
- For AA, use adverbs (“slowly”) or “nice and” + adjective.
- For AABB, use idioms (“happy as can be”) or intensifiers (“very clearly”).
- For MW+MW, use “every” + noun.
- For sound words, use English rhyming compounds (“drip-drop”).

9.3 For Future Researchers

- Do a large corpus study with thousands of examples.
- Collect and categorize errors from real language learners.
- Compare reduplication in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien.
- Test whether explicit teaching reduces reduplication errors.
- Study at what level English learners start using reduplication naturally.

10. CONCLUSION

This study compared Chinese reduplicated words with their English equivalents across five types: verb (VV), adjective (AA and AABB), measure word (MW+MW), and onomatopoeia (sound words). Using 25 examples from textbooks, songs, and conversations, the study found that English uses five main strategies: Phrasal Verbs, Adverbs, Intensifiers, “every” + noun, and rhyming compounds.

The findings show a major difference between Chinese and English. Chinese uses reduplication as a normal, productive grammar tool to mark casualness (VV), softness and vividness (AA), intensity (AABB), distributivity (MW+MW), and sound imitation (onomatopoeia). English has no such system. English strategies can express similar meanings, but they lose three things: brevity (Chinese uses 2-4 syllables, English uses 3-6), rhythm (AABB patterns sound musical in Chinese), and softness (verb and adjective reduplication sound gentle in Chinese but neutral in English).

These results help teachers, translators, and learners. Teachers can use contrastive instruction to prevent predictable errors. Translators have a clear strategy guide. Learners can understand why English does not say “look-look”.

Limitations of this study include a small sample (25 examples) and one researcher’s translation judgments. Future research with larger samples and multiple translators would strengthen the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a useful contribution. Reduplication is a key feature of Chinese grammar. Understanding how it maps onto English is essential for anyone learning, teaching, or translating between the two languages.

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