

Reduplicated Adjective Forms in the Yongdeng Dialect of Lanzhou

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Abstract. Reduplication, as one of the morphological construction methods in Modern Chinese, serves as a crucial grammatical device. The Yongdeng dialect, part of the Lanzhou sub-group of the Central Plains Mandarin (Lanyin Mandarin), exhibits a rich array of reduplicated adjective forms. This paper investigates the reduplication of adjectives in the Yongdeng dialect from three perspectives: structural patterns, grammatical meanings, and pragmatic functions. Based on whether the reduplication is complete or partial, six main types are identified and discussed: “AA,” “AABB,” “ABAB,” “ABB,” “AACD,” and “ABCC.” The study analyzes their grammatical roles in expressing degree and state, and explores how these reduplicated forms enhance vividness and imagery in pragmatic usage.

Keywords: Yongdeng Dialect, Adjective Reduplication, Grammatical Meaning, Pragmatic Function

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and significance

As a morphological and word-formation strategy, reduplication has long been a focal point in the field of Chinese grammar studies. As a native speaker of the Yongdeng dialect, the author has observed through field investigation that this dialect exhibits a rich array of adjective reduplication patterns, characterized by notable flexibility and diversity. This paper takes the Yongdeng dialect of Lanzhou City as its primary research corpus and, with reference to *A Dictionary of the Lanzhou Dialect* by Zhang Wenxuan and Mo Chao, conducts a systematic examination and classification of reduplicated adjective forms in the dialect. The aim is to contribute to the grammatical study of the Lanzhou dialect by enriching the understanding of its morpho-syntactic features.

Existing scholarly research on the Yongdeng dialect of Lanzhou has primarily focused on its phonological and grammatical aspects. However, studies that specifically address grammatical devices—particularly reduplication—remain relatively scarce. This paper offers a comprehensive account of linguistic phenomena and investigates the grammatical meanings and pragmatic functions of reduplicated adjective forms in the Yongdeng dialect. It seeks to foster local appreciation and transmission of the dialect, while capturing the unique linguistic charm of Yongdeng speech. The significance of this study lies in the following three aspects:

First, it contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the forms and specific features of adjective reduplication in the Yongdeng dialect;

Second, it enhances our comprehension of the functional roles played by reduplication within the dialect;

Third, it facilitates the further classification and generalization of the pragmatic functions of reduplicated adjectives in Yongdeng, thereby offering practical guidance for everyday communication.

1.2. Current state of research

Scholarly research specifically dedicated to the Yongdeng dialect remains limited, with most published works concentrated within the past ten to twenty years. For instance, in *Phonological Features of Yongdeng Speech*, Zhang Wenxuan analyzes the dialect from four aspects—initials, finals, tones, and syllabic pronunciation—while also examining the phonological similarities and differences between Yongdeng dialect and Standard Mandarin. This work laid a solid foundation for phonetic studies of Yongdeng speech. In *Linguistic Phenomena of Ethnic Minority Languages in the Yongdeng Dialect of Gansu*, Tuo Ao investigates and analyzes phonological and grammatical features associated with ethnic minority languages within the local Chinese dialect, thereby expanding the scope of research on the Yongdeng dialect. In recent years, there have been few new studies specifically focused on the dialect. One of the most recent is Gan Ting's *Syllabic Structure and Syllable Count in the Yongdeng Dialect*, which identifies and classifies the syllabic patterns found in Yongdeng speech.

1.3. Overview of the human geography of Yongdeng County

Yongdeng County is under the jurisdiction of Lanzhou City, Gansu Province, and is located in central Gansu. It borders Gaolan County and Jingtai County to the east, Minhe County in Qinghai Province to the west, Xigu District and Honggu District of Lanzhou to the south, and Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County to the north. Historically, Yongdeng served as a strategic gateway on the ancient Silk Road, occupying a pivotal position on the Eurasian continent. In ancient times, it belonged to the region of Yongzhou and was part of the territory of the Western Rong peoples. In the 17th year of the Republic of China (1928), the area was officially named Yongdeng County and came under the direct administration of the Gansu Provincial Government. The Lanzhou dialect belongs to Northwestern Mandarin—specifically, the Lanyin Mandarin branch. Within this classification, the Yongdeng dialect is part of the Jincheng subgroup of Lanyin Mandarin. Due to historical factors, the development of the Yongdeng dialect has been influenced by the languages of local ethnic minorities such as the Tibetans, Manchus, Hui, and Tu peoples. The interaction and intermingling of these minority languages with the local Han speech have endowed the Yongdeng dialect with distinctive linguistic characteristics and a unique local flavor [1].

2. Structural forms

Reduplication has long been a focal point in grammatical studies. As a typologically isolating language, Chinese typically does not rely on morphological changes to express grammatical meaning. However, reduplication—one of the most distinctive word-formation and morphological strategies in Modern Chinese—greatly enhances the language's expressive capacity. This paper situates the adjective reduplication patterns of the Yongdeng dialect of Lanzhou within a synchronic

framework, presenting a wide range of linguistic examples to examine their grammatical and semantic functions.

In Modern Chinese, adjectives can be categorized into stative adjectives, qualitative adjectives, and non-predicative adjectives (also known as distinguishing adjectives). Among these, non-predicative adjectives do not undergo reduplication, while other types of adjectives may, in certain cases, be subject to reduplication as a means of word formation or morphological transformation. As noted by Huang Borong and Liao Xudong in Modern Chinese, some qualitative adjectives can be reduplicated to express either an intensification or moderation of degree through morphological variation [2]. Additionally, certain monosyllabic qualitative adjectives may take reduplicative affixes or other suffixes. However, stative adjectives, which inherently indicate a specific state or degree—especially one that is already intensified—typically do not require reduplication; examples include terms such as qīhēi (“pitch-black”) and xuèhóng (“blood-red”) [2]. Thus, the occurrence of adjective reduplication is conditional, depending on factors such as the gradability of the adjective and the descriptive nature of its meaning.

In the Yongdeng dialect, adjective reduplication exhibits strong analogical productivity, which is closely related to the distinctive communicative habits of people in Northwestern China—marked by straightforwardness and boldness, humor and wit, vividness and expressiveness. Among the various patterns, the ABB structure is particularly representative. This study approaches the topic by distinguishing between full and partial reduplication, aiming to highlight the pronounced colloquial character embedded in these forms.

2.1. Complete reduplication

2.1.1. AA pattern

Table 1. Examples of AA-reduplicated adjectives in the Yongdeng Dialect

Yongdeng Dialect	Standard Mandarin Equivalent	Yongdeng Dialect	Standard Mandarin Equivalent
nènnèn de	Fresh and tender, especially for meat	guāguā de (hānghāng de)	Silly or simple-minded in appearance
léngléng de	Distinctly layered in appearance	lànglàng de	Wasted effort; in vain
pípí de	Describes a mischievous child	shāshā de	Often used to describe fully ripened melons

2.1.2. AABB pattern

Table 2. Examples of AABB-reduplicated adjectives in the Yongdeng Dialect

Yongdeng Dialect	Standard Mandarin Equivalent	Yongdeng Dialect	Standard Mandarin Equivalent
teiu ³¹ teiu ³ wa ³¹ wa ³	Describes someone who acts awkwardly or lacks composure	mímí dèngdèng	Drowsy; appearing not fully awake
kēngkēng wāwā	Describes a bumpy, uneven road; also kēngkēng tie ³¹ wa	zhóuzhóu bābā	Describes someone pretentious or affected in manner
ānān shēngshēng	Describes a well-behaved, obedient child	chǔchǔ jiùjiù [3]	Timid and reserved; afraid to speak up or show oneself
mómó chíchí	Describes someone inefficient or slow in handling things	yángyáng hūnhūn [3]	Confused; muddled

2.1.3. ABAB pattern

The ABAB reduplication pattern is relatively distinctive in the Yongdeng dialect. It involves partial reduplication of a disyllabic base form (AB), which remains adjectival in nature after reduplication. The syntactic function and lexical meaning of the word are largely preserved, but a process of “modulation” occurs—intensifying the degree of the quality expressed and imbuing the expression with stronger emotional coloring. Examples such as *yì léng yì léng* (“distinctly layered”) and *bái pàng bái pàng* (“fair and plump”) retain their descriptive and imagistic nature.

However, in some cases, reduplication of the AB base results in a semantic shift. The reduplicated form takes on a more stative or declarative meaning and often functions as the predicate in a sentence. For instance:

hónghuǒ — *hónghuǒ hónghuǒ*
qīngshēn — *qīngshēn qīngshēn*

Table 3. Examples of ABAB-reduplicated adjectives in the Yongdeng Dialect

Yongdeng Dialect	Standard Mandarin Equivalent
<i>yì léng yì léng</i>	<i>yī xià yī xià de</i> (“in repeated intervals”)
<i>bái pàng bái pàng</i>	<i>bái bái pàng pàng de</i> (“fair and chubby”)
<i>dī xī dī xī</i>	A little bit, slowly; often used to describe fluid flow
<i>xī liū xī liū</i>	Describes a spicy or burning sensation
<i>wō lóu wō lóu</i>	Describes someone eating heartily and with great relish

2.2. Partial reduplication

2.2.1. ABB pattern

In the ABB pattern, A is usually a monosyllabic base, most often an adjective; BB is an added element that signals a state or manner rather than carrying an independent lexical meaning. (A small subset does contain descriptive force—for instance, *biē gǔgǔ de*, where *gǔgǔ* vividly depicts a swollen, bulging appearance.) Because BB lacks full lexical status, it cannot normally be used on its own. Reduplication intensifies the evaluative tone of the adjective and renders the description more vivid and expressive. The ABB pattern is extremely productive in the Yongdeng dialect and constitutes the largest subgroup of adjectival reduplication forms. Unlike Standard Mandarin, in which the base A is almost always an adjective, A in Yongdeng may be a noun, adjective, or even a verb, reflecting the dialect’s greater flexibility in forming reduplicated adjectives.

Mr. Lü Shuxiang, in *Eight Hundred Words in Modern Chinese*, points out that the combination of a monosyllabic adjective A with the reduplicated suffix BB is largely conventional, varying across dialects and even among individual speakers. For rhetorical purposes, such combinations can also be created spontaneously on occasion [4]. This observation underscores the inherent flexibility of the ABB pattern, which allows for creative adaptation according to different communicative contexts. Ultimately, its function lies in enhancing expressive clarity and emotional resonance in everyday language use.

Table 4. Examples of ABB-reduplicated adjectives expressing states in the Yongdeng Dialect

bā xīxī	bǐ qiàqià
fǎ tāta (fǎ xìngxìng)	hóng diūdiū
bái jījī (bái shēngshēng)	míng jiūjiū
mù léngléng	zhǎn bēngbēng
zǐ gēnggēng	hēi dōngdōng (hēi chǔchǔ)
hēi jiūjiū	bái zhāzhā
qīng chǔchǔ	bái sēnsēn
huī chǔchǔ	huáng léngléng
cháng suōsuō (xiáxiá)	duǎn jiéjié (qiàqià)
gǎ jījī	zhǎi liūliū

Table 5. Examples of ABB-type adjective reduplication expressing qualities in Yongdeng Dialect

bīng jiūjiū (bīng shènshèn)	dà chīchī (dà g ^{hua} 33 g ^{hua} 33, dà huǎnghuǎng)
shā lǔlǔ	jiǎ xìngxìng
luàn zhāzhā (luàn māmá, luàn zāozāo)	má lālā
náng xìngxìng	nú jījī
qì chuōchuō	qiáo bābā
qīn zhāzhā	ròu nāngnāng
xì zīzī	yá fū33 fū33
zhā wāwā	zhā lālā
xuán hūhū (luólúo)	zì nàinài
zhǒu gēnggēng	hāng xìngxìng
guài zhāzhā	shòu jījī
cui shēngshēng	qīng piēpiē
là sūsū	má sūsū

2.2.2. AACD and ABCC-type adjective reduplication

Table 6. Examples of AACD and ABCC-type adjective reduplication in the Yongdeng Dialect

Yongdeng Dialect	Standard Mandarin Equivalent
kēngkēng diēwō (wā) de	Describes an uneven or bumpy road
zhǒuzhǒu (chǔchǔ) bāniē de	Describes a wrinkled or unfolded object
luàn gǔdūndūn de [3]	Describes something messy and disorganized, or inner turmoil
qì gǔdūdū de [3]	Describes someone holding in anger or sulking

3. Grammatical meaning

"Quantity" is an important cognitive category. When this cognitive category is expressed through linguistic forms, it becomes a grammatical category [5]. Most scholars in the field of grammar believe that the transformation of a word from its base form to a reduplicated form is essentially a process of modulating the degree of "quantity." Adverbial and complement positions tend to involve a higher "quantitative level," while predicate and attributive positions generally reflect a lower one [6]. This clearly demonstrates the significance of "quantification" in reduplicated forms. Among

various types of reduplication, adjectival reduplication is especially expressive and serves a prominent emphatic function. This is closely related to the adjective's inherent descriptive capacity for depicting qualities and states — including shape, color, and sound. In the Yongdeng dialect, the ABB-type reduplication is particularly prominent and widely used in everyday communication. It is employed not only to convey strong personal emotions, often with commendatory or derogatory connotations, but also to subtly adjust the degree of quantity within a sentence, thereby enhancing the precision of information transmission.

3.1. Expressing degree

The modulation of “quantity” in adjectival reduplication is primarily reflected in the expression of degree. Adjectives typically serve to modify or qualify other elements within a sentence, describing properties or states of objects, and thus inherently carry a sense of degree. The modulation of degree, as expressed through reduplication, captures the nuances and gradations between these varying levels of intensity.

3.1.1. Intensification of degree

Reduplicative forms positioned as adverbials or complements exhibit an intensified sense of degree. This is because both adverbials and complements serve to modify, constrain, explain, or supplement the elements they describe, inherently aiming to amplify the scope of measurement. When reduplicated, these forms become more descriptive and expressive. For example:

As a complement: Nǐ zhè yīfu ràng nǐ chuān de de chǔ chǔ bā niē de tǐ³. ("You've worn this piece of clothing into such achǔ chǔ bā niē state.") Originally, this phrase described clothing as being messy and wrinkled. Through reduplication, the speaker intensifies the description of the clothing's condition, thereby enhancing the degree meaning. It conveys stronger emotional overtones, vividly expressing the speaker's dissatisfaction and incomprehension toward the interlocutor, and implicitly urging them to either change into a different outfit or iron the current one.

As an adverbial: Tā bǎ wǎn yī liào, jí hǒu hǒu de pǎo dào xuéxiào lǐ qù le. ("He put the bowl down and ran off to school in a jí hǒu hǒu manner.") Jí hǒu hǒu vividly describes an extremely anxious state. Compared to the general term zhāoji ("anxious"), this reduplicated form more vividly captures his flustered and hurried manner. The element hǒu hǒu adds the nuance of heavy breathing or gasping, further enhancing the expressive intensity of his urgency.

It is important to note that the intensification of degree remains within a reasonable and appropriate range; that is, speakers apply a controlled and justified exaggeration of the adjective based on the object being described.

3.1.2. Degree mitigation

Adjectival reduplication that conveys a weakening of degree is relatively rare in the Yongdeng dialect and is mostly found in the AA pattern. Reduplicated forms that express degree mitigation typically derive from base adjectives that inherently carry a diminutive quality or can convey smallness. For example:

Meimei shuizhao le, denghui kuǎn kuǎn de kāimén a!
("My younger sister fell asleep. Later, open the door gently.")
Zhè yǔ dī xī dī xī xià le yì tiān le.
("It has been raining lightly and sparsely all day.")

Both *kuǎn kuǎn* (gently) and *dī xī dī xī* (lightly dripping) inherently convey a sense of smallness. *Kuǎn kuǎn* suggests a gentle brushing motion, vividly depicting the subtlety of the door-opening action; *dī xī dī xī* evokes a light drizzle, lighter in degree than the more common *xī xī lì lì* (drizzling), tending more toward a soft tapping sound. Therefore, in these examples, the grammatical meaning expresses a weakening of degree.

3.2. Expressing state

Liu Danqing argues that various reduplicated forms of stative adjectives primarily serve to reproduce the state of things, providing a subjective portrayal of the objects [7]. This function is specifically manifested in three aspects: variability, vividness, and subjectivity [7]. Building on Liu Danqing's perspective, this paper elaborates on the function of "expressing state" within the grammatical meaning of adjectival reduplication in the Yongdeng dialect.

3.2.1. Variability

Due to the descriptive nature of stative adjectives, their reduplicated forms are mostly used to present a particular state of an object, reflecting the speaker's subjective feelings. Therefore, they exhibit a certain degree of variability. For example:

Zhè dà báicài yīnggāi shì jiāng (gāng) chǎn xià xa³¹ de, nèn shǎn shǎn de.

("This Chinese cabbage was probably just freshly dug up; it's tender and shiny.")

Diànhú lǐ de shuǐ wēn chū chū de, tsua²¹ (a contracted form meaning 'how') pào chá ne.

("The water in the kettle is just at the right temperature, perfect for brewing tea.")

The reduplicated form *nèn shǎn shǎn* carries the meaning of "fresh and tender," usually describing the freshness and tenderness of meat. However, in this example, it describes the freshness of vegetables. Using only the single adjective *nèn* (tender) would not vividly convey the image of cabbage freshly dug up; the reduplication emphasizes its descriptive quality. Similarly, *wēn chū chū* (initially warm) describes water that is not very hot. While originally a neutral term, in this context it carries a negative implication—that the water is too cold—implying a request to boil more hot water. The reduplication enhances the speaker's expression of dissatisfaction.

3.2.2. Vividness

Reduplicated forms carry a distinct vividness, directly appealing to the listener's imaginative cognition and evoking sensory impressions related to sight, hearing, taste, and touch—thus enabling "reproduction" of experience [7]. Regardless of reduplication, adjectives inherently possess vivid imagery that facilitates clearer emotional expression and effective communication. However, reduplication enhances this vividness, making the imagery more three-dimensional and lively, actively engaging various sensory faculties in the communicative process. For example:

Hóng tángtáng de xǐbào tiē dào dànmén shàng le.

("The bright red congratulatory notice was posted on the main gate.")

Hóngsè de xǐbào tiē dào dànmén shàng le.

("The red congratulatory notice was posted on the main gate.")

Compared to the second example, *hóng tángtáng* vividly depicts a large, bright red area of congratulatory notices shining brilliantly, better reflecting the inner joy and delight of those involved. Both syllables of *tángtáng* are pronounced with a high-level tone (*yīn píng*), with the

second táng lengthened and featuring the érhuà (r-coloring) ending, which further enhances its vividness and expressiveness.

Additionally, there are other examples such as:

Liǎn dòng de qīng gōu gōu de, kuài dào lúzi gēnqián kǎo yīxià xa³¹ qù tē^{h1}³¹.

("The face is frozen so that it's bluish and hollow-looking; quickly go warm it by the stove.")

Compared to the phrase "a bluish face," qīng gōu gōu vividly captures the color and condition of the face, evoking a strong visual impression and indirectly emphasizing the coldness of the weather outside.

3.2.3. Subjectivity

Reduplicated forms reduce the specificity of reference to objects and increase their descriptive quality [4]. Sometimes, for rhetorical purposes, new forms can even be coined. Therefore, speakers tend to favor subjective portrayal when using reduplication, conveying information based on their own attitudes and emotional tones. In such cases, the emotional meaning expressed by the language outweighs its explanatory meaning. For example:

Jiāng teiāng⁵⁵ (gānggāng) cóng dì lǐ huílái, fá hēng hēng de, xiǎng tǎng yī zhèn.

("Just came back from the field, feeling tired and sluggish, wanting to lie down for a while.")

Xiā chuō chuō de wǎng rén shēn shàng zhuàng lì!

("Carelessly bumping into people!")

4. Pragmatic functions

4.1. Emotional coloring

4.1.1. Pejorative meaning

Through organizing and analyzing the adjective reduplication forms found in The Dictionary of Lanzhou Dialect, the author observes that a significant proportion of these reduplicative adjectives carry pejorative connotations. The same is true in Yongdeng dialect. In daily communication, speakers often employ reduplicative forms to express hidden feelings of dissatisfaction, disdain, and similar sentiments. For example:

Zhè gǎ wá yì tiān huài xìng xìng de, jiù zhīdào chōuyān dǎjià.

("That little rascal's bad-tempered all day—just smokes and gets into fights!")

Shuō huà zhí chuō chuō de, lián ge miànzi dōu bù gěi.

("Talks so blunt-blunt, not giving anyone any face at all!")

4.1.2. Positive connotation

As adjectives undergo a process of "modulating intensity" from their base form to the reduplicated form, the dimensional scope of their intensity is generally reduced. If the base adjective itself carries a positive meaning, this modulation indicates that the speaker is expressing affection, appreciation, or praise. Such usage often conveys a sense of endearment or diminutive affection.

Gǎwá de shǒushǒuzi dōu miándūndūn de.

("The little child's hands are all soft and tender.")

Zhè wá gǎjī de, xīnténg zhe!

("This little one is so tiny—makes your heart ache with tenderness!")

4.1.3. Neutral

This indicates that the speaker is neither praising nor criticizing, but merely giving an objective description of a state or quality. For example:

Diànhú lǐ de shuǐ wēn chūchū de, zài dā shàng xiē.

("The water in the electric kettle is just lukewarm—better heat it up a bit more.")

Wǒ zuóge mǎi le gè yuánduōduō de mòhézi.

("Yesterday I bought a very round ink cartridge.")

4.2. Additional expressive functions

4.2.1. Colloquial expressive function

Over time and through historical changes, the Yongdeng dialect has long blended with certain minority dialects, forming its own distinctive colloquial character. Adjective reduplication is generally used in daily communication and carries a colloquial flavor, reflecting the straightforwardness, warmth, and simplicity typical of Northwest China. When combined with intensified and lengthened intonation, it further highlights vividness and imagery.

4.2.2. Descriptive expressive function

Adjective reduplication often carries rhetorical color and expresses exaggeration, allowing for a direct and vivid portrayal of the qualities or states of people or objects. For example:

Tā de zuògōng xì fā, zá (fèng) xià de yīfu zhǎn yě yě de.

("His workmanship is meticulous; the clothes he sewed lie very flat and smooth.")

Zhǎn yě yě: describes something very flat and smooth.

Píngzi lǐ de kělè pū chì chì de mào chū lái le.

("The cola in the bottle is fizzing and bubbling out.")

Pū chì chì: imitates the sound of liquid spurting or bubbling.

Duān shàng lái le yì pánzi dà lū lū de pútáo.

("A plate of big, round, and beautiful grapes was brought over.")

Dà lū lū: describes large, round, and attractive granular objects.

5. Conclusion

Reduplication, as one of the word-formation methods in Modern Chinese compound words, is an important grammatical device and a focal point of research in Chinese linguistics. Through investigating adjective reduplication in the Yongdeng dialect of Lanzhou, the author systematically categorized numerous linguistic phenomena, compared the similarities and differences between base forms and reduplicated forms, and discussed the grammatical meanings and pragmatic functions of adjective reduplication in Yongdeng dialect. This study reveals the unique communicative habits of people in Northwest China, characterized by simplicity, warmth, and straightforwardness. On this basis, the paper further analyzes the grammatical significance of adjective reduplication in Yongdeng dialect, aiming to provide valuable data for the study of Chinese dialects.

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