Poetic morpho-phonology: rhyme, alliteration, emergence of the unmarked, and
identity avoidance revealed in Sui adjective reduplication

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An intricate system of adjective intensification permeates Sui, a Tai-Kadai language of
Guizhou, China. Sui adjective intensifiers suggest partial reduplication involving a complex
interplay of morpho-phonological processes: TETU (The Emergence of The Unmarked: coronal
onsets in reduplicants), identity avoidance (base-reduplicant), alliteration and rhyme. The
intensifiers thus formed represent a system of patterned variety, a poeticized lexicon. This Sui
phenomenon has never been reported to the wider linguistic community and can therefore
provide valuable theoretical insight into reduplication and related morpho-phonological
processes, as well as illustrate the presence of extensive poetic effects within a core grammar.

Examples of the Rhyming Class:
1. (a) ʄa:t⁶ ‘agile’ → ʄa:t⁶ tʄa:t⁸ ‘very agile’
   (b) ūmej⁵ ‘selfish’ → ūmej⁵ tēj¹ ‘very selfish (often referring to a child)’
   (c) fū:ŋ³ ‘wide’ → fū:ŋ³ ˦a:ŋ² ‘very wide’
   (d) tôm¹ ‘dull’ → tôm¹ ūnom¹ ‘very dull’
   (e) ʷbu³ ‘bulging’ → ʷbu³ ʷtʰu⁵ ‘very bulging’

Examples of the Alliterative Class:
2. (a) ʄa:t⁶ ‘agile’ → ʄa:t⁶ ʷmow¹ ‘very agile’
   (b) ūmej⁵ ‘selfish’ → ūmej⁵ ūmût⁷ ‘very selfish (general usage)’
   (c) tçaŋ³ ‘skinny’ → tçaŋ³ tçop⁷ ‘very skinny’
   (d) çu¹ ‘green’ → çu¹ çiŋ⁵ ‘very green’
   (e) za³ ‘light’ → za³ zu¹ ‘very light(attitude)’ or za³ zeŋ³ ‘very light(weight)’

The intensifiers are word-specific, bound morphemes which are pervasive in the adjective
lexicon but non-productive. Full base-reduplicant identity is disallowed, yet the intensifier
usually echoes the adjective, invoking a range of options reminiscent of poetic devices, including
rhyme and alliteration. Moreover, some adjectives have multiple intensifier options, e.g. (1a-2a),
(1b-2b) and (2e) above, which can give rise to subtle semantic and pragmatic distinctions. This
variety is not dependent on sociolinguistic factors but instead exists within a single grammar (a
lexicon of about 400 intensifiers has been collected from one speaker). Along with rhyme and
alliteration, other morpho-phonological processes are interwoven into a system of patterned
variety, as shown below.

First of all, in rhyming intensifiers, coronal onsets are favored in the intensifier, strongly
suggesting the presence of reduplication with TETU effects. In the tableau below, a positional
markedness subhierarchy favoring coronal onsets is ranked between Faith-IO (Input-Output
Faithfulness) and Faith-BR (Base-Reduplicant), cf. Prince and Smolensky’s Place Markedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INPUT: /mow + RED/</th>
<th>Faith-IO</th>
<th>*Pl/Lab[onset], *Pl/Dor[onset]</th>
<th>*Pl/Cor [onset]</th>
<th>Faith-BR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mow mow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʷmow low</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low low</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mow liw</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1
Secondly, in addition to TETU effects, Sui intensifiers also respond to a force of identity avoidance, such as *Repeat (Yip 1995), “Output must not contain two identical elements” (instantiated below as a faithfulness/anti-faithfulness pair, *Repeat-BR/Repeat-BR). Such identity avoidance becomes visible when the base itself has a coronal onset (e.g. $lɤɨ$). For such bases, the TETU ranking above would yield $lɤɨ lɤɨ$, yet such B-R identity is normally disallowed in Sui intensifiers. Instead, the actual expression is $lɤɨ tɤɨ$, which is notably unlike Chaoyang: $lɨo? lɨo?$ (Yip 2000). This tension between TETU and identity avoidance is especially striking in three-syllable rhyming expressions:

$\text{mow} \; \text{‘rash’} \rightarrow \text{mow low} \; \text{‘very rash’} \rightarrow \text{mow low sow} \; \text{‘extremely rash’} \; (\text{*mow low low})$

That is, TETU can explain the coronal onset in the initial reduplicant syllable, low, but in the following reduplicant syllable, sow, identity avoidance requires a shift to a coronal obstruent onset. Such three-syllable rhyming expressions may be described with the ranking below, an interplay of TETU and identity avoidance which is revealed when the base has a coronal onset:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INPUT: /low + RED/</th>
<th>Faith-IO</th>
<th>*Repeat-BR</th>
<th>*Pl/Lab [onset], *Pl/Dor [onset]</th>
<th>*Pl/Cor [onset]</th>
<th>Repeat-BR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low low</td>
<td></td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low kow</td>
<td></td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Rightarrow$ low sow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tow low</td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speakers can also choose the synonym $\text{mow low tow}$, which conforms to the above hierarchy as well. Furthermore, expressions of this type pattern in such a way as to suggest the possibility of a stronger identity avoidance effect which can force other changes such as disparity in sonority/voicing (*mow low now).

Finally, note that the ranking above is consistent with the cases described earlier where the base onset is not a coronal, as shown in the example below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INPUT: /$k^h$ɨn + RED/</th>
<th>Faith-IO</th>
<th>*Repeat-BR</th>
<th>*Pl/Lab [onset], *Pl/Dor [onset]</th>
<th>*Pl/Cor [onset]</th>
<th>Repeat-BR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$k^h$ɨn $k^h$ɨn</td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Rightarrow$ $k^h$ɨn tɨn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tɨn tɨn</td>
<td>!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k^h$ɨn pɨn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus Sui adjective intensifiers display several morpho-phonological processes woven into a system of patterned variety, a system used in everyday language and effortlessly inherited by each new generation, yet all the while bearing an elegant complexity. Such patterned variety suggests a poeticized lexicon or lexicalized poetry, and the even more variegated class of alliterative intensifiers (e.g. (2) above) provides additional support for this notion of poetic effects deeply embedded within a grammar. In short, the Sui intensifier system adds further insight to Yip’s observation that “humans have both an aptitude and a taste for creating repetitive sequences, and they may use this skill in a variety of ways that are more or less part of the core grammar of the language” (1999).