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The Employment of Reduplicative Expressions in American Presidential Debates

A B S T R A C T

Reduplication is an extra-grammatical morphological process, and this study looks at how it is used in American election debates held in 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024. Political discourse has attracted considerable attention from rhetorical and communicative perspectives, but reduplication within this particular register has received comparatively little. The study sets out to examine how reduplication works in political debates to convey contextual and evaluative meaning, with three specific aims: (1) to determine the frequency and structural distribution of reduplicative expressions in American Presidential Debates, (2) to identify the rhetorical functions these expressions perform, and (3) to assess what a combined qualitative and quantitative approach adds to this kind of analysis. Merlini Barbaresi's (2005) model is adopted as the analytical framework. The corpus comprises 1,457,701 words drawn from American presidential debate transcripts spanning 2012 to 2024, and the study is carried out using a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology. Taken together, the results point to phonological form, semantic coding, pragmatic context, and discourse setting all working in tandem to constrain lexical choice in formal political discourse. The implications reach beyond reduplication itself, feeding into a broader understanding of how vocabulary operates in specialized, high-stakes communication.

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توظيف مصطلحات الازدواج الصرفي في مناظرات الانتخابات الرئاسية الأمريكية

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة استخدام مصطلحات الازدواج الصرفي، كظاهرة صرفية خارجة عن القواعد النحوية، في مناظرات الانتخابات الأمريكية خلال الأعوام ٢٠١٢، ٢٠١٦، ٢٠٢٠، و٢٠٢٤. ورغم أن الخطاب السياسي قد حظي بدراسة مستفيضة من منظورات التواصل والبلاغة، إلا أن تناول مصطلحات الازدواج الصرفي في هذا السياق السياسي لا يزال محدودًا. لذا، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى بحث كيفية توظيف الازدواج الصرفي في المناظرات السياسية لنقل المعاني السياقية والتقييمية. وتهدف إلى تقييم استخدام مصطلحات الازدواج الصرفي في الخطاب السياسي، ودراسة كيفية تطبيق هذه التعبيرات في مناظرات الانتخابات الأمريكية، وتقييم دور المنهجين النوعي والكمي في تحليل الازدواج الصرفي. ولتحقيق هذه الأهداف، تم اعتماد نموذج ميرليني باربارِيسي (٢٠٠٨) كمنهج تحليلي. يحلل الباحث مدونة تضم ١,٤٥٧,٧٠١ كلمة من نصوص المناظرات الرئاسية الأمريكية التي تغطي الفترة من ٢٠١٢ إلى ٢٠٢٤. ويستخدم في ذلك منهجًا مختلطًا يجمع بين المنهج الكمي والنوعي. تُظهر الدراسة كيف تتضافر البنية الصوتية، والترميز الدلالي، والسياق التداولي، وإطار الخطاب للحد من اختيار المفردات في الخطاب السياسي الرسمي. ولهذا الأمر آثار تتجاوز مجرد التكرار، إذ تُسهم في فهم أعمق لكيفية استخدام المفردات في مواقف التواصل المتخصصة ذات الأهمية البالغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الازدواج الصرفي، الإبدال الصوتي، الازدواج الصرفي بالتقافي ، الخطاب السياسي.

1. Introduction

Reduplication, broadly defined as the repetition of all or part of a word, sits at the intersection of phonology, morphology, and semantics, which is part of why it continues to attract linguistic interest. It occurs across many languages, but English treats it with a certain playfulness, and the result is a class of words prized for their creative, iconic feel. This paper looks at reduplicative expressions in American Presidential Debates, taking Merlini Barbaresi (2005) as its main point of reference for classifying reduplication types. Politicians use these expressions, among other reasons, because they help a point stick in listeners' minds (Sayyora & Abdukarimovich, 2022). With that in view, the study asks how reduplicative expressions carry both literal and contextual meaning in the language of political debate.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reduplication

Reduplication, in linguistic terms, is a morphological process in which the stem or root of a word, part of it, or the whole word is repeated exactly or with slight alteration. Sapir's early account of its semantics is still worth quoting: reduplication is generally used with self-evident symbolism, marking notions such as distribution, plurality, repetition, customary

activity, increased size, greater intensity, and continuance (1921:76). Quirk et al. (1985:1579), for their part, define it simply as "compounds with two or more constituents which are either identical or only slightly different." The process feeds both lexical derivation, where it coins new words, and inflection, where it can mark functions like intensification or plurality. It tends to be iconic, though not invariably so, and speakers reach for it when a more expressive or figurative register suits the moment (Sapir, 1921:76). English differs from many other languages here in treating reduplication as a lexical rather than a grammatical resource: it yields novel words or emotive variants, not markers of tense or case. Bloch and Trager (1942) go further, noting that reduplication plays no role at all in inflection and only a marginal one in derivation.

2.2 Reduplication Types

Jespersen (1909) sorts reduplicated compounds, on the basis of their word-formation, into three groups: those in which the kernel is repeated unchanged (sometimes with one element lengthened), those repeated with a vowel change, and those repeated with a consonant change. Quack-quack and chirp-chirp belong to the first group. Hee-haw, with its shifted vowel, illustrates the second, and bow-wow, with its altered consonant, the third.

Most linguists today prefer the labels complete (or total) and incomplete (or partial) reduplication. Quack-quack is complete, since the whole stem recurs, while hee-haw and bow-wow are incomplete, since only part of the stem does. Both patterns turn up in particular English word classes, and Sapir's broader point still holds: words like sing-song, wishy-washy, and roly-poly show traits that recur across languages, which suggests English is not doing anything unusual with reduplication so much as doing something rather ordinary, if unusually productively (Okamura, 1996).

Thun (1963) organizes English reduplicatives into three types by phonological structure, each carrying its own semantic and pragmatic flavor: exact reduplication, where the base morpheme repeats unchanged, as in bye-bye; rhyming reduplication, where the second element rhymes with the first but starts with a different consonant, as in super-duper; and ablaut reduplication, where the internal vowel shifts systematically between the two elements, as in flip-flop. Kołłątaj (2016) adds a further layer, separating exact from non-exact reduplication and flagging rarer patterns such as triplication and quadruplication.

2.3 Merlini Barbaresi's Model

Merlini Barbaresi builds on the notion of extra-grammatical morphology, developed earlier by Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994) and by Zwicky and Pullum (1987), which holds that some word-formation processes simply fall outside the rule-governed core of morphology. Reduplicatives are treated as one such case: their formation cannot be traced back to recognized morphological rules. On the author's account, reduplicatives break with canonical morphology in three ways:

- their meaning is non-componential, vague, and often etymologically opaque (jiggery-pokery is a case in point);
- unlike ordinary derivation, they yield connoted variants rather than genuinely new words (dinner becomes din-din, not a new lexeme);
- their bases are often nonexistent or unrecognizable as independent morphemes (riff-raff, zig-zag).

And yet reduplicatives are not lawless: they inflect, they support derivation, and they are phonotactically well-behaved, following the same combinatorial rules as the rest of the vocabulary.

Merlini Barbaresi also distinguishes several modes of iconicity at work in these forms: automorphic iconicity (an internal resemblance between the two halves of the pair), onomatopoeia (direct sound-imitation), phonaesthesia (looser, synaesthetic links between sound and meaning), and kinaesthetic iconicity (vowel-articulation tied to physical sensation). Four structural patterns emerge from this analysis:

Type	Mechanism	Examples
Ablaut (Apophonic)	Systematic vowel alternation (high front → low back)	chit-chat, flip-flop, zig-zag
Rhyming Reduplicatives	Only one meaningful base	hurly-burly, itsy-bitsy, super-duper
Rhyming Compounds	Both bases meaningful; rhyming form	willy-nilly, walkie-talkie, artsy-craftsy
Copy Reduplicatives	Exact repetition of the base	bye-bye, ha-ha, gaga

This taxonomy owes a good deal to Jespersen (1942), Dienhart (1999), and Minkova (2002), though Merlini Barbaresi makes one notable change of her own: she splits Jespersen's single rhyming category into two, separating rhyming reduplicatives from rhyming compounds on the grounds that only the latter have two independently meaningful bases. It is a defensible split, even if, as she readily admits, the line between categories can blur — willy-nilly and sci-fi, for example, sit somewhere between reduplicative and ordinary compound.

Semantically, the model maps reduplicative meaning onto seven recurring areas:

- pretentiousness (hoity-toity, artsy-fartsy)
- smallness (itty-bitty, teeny-weeny)
- indecision (dilly-dally, shilly-shally)
- disorder or confusion (higgledy-piggledy, helter-skelter)
- trickery or secrecy (hocus-pocus, hugger-mugger)
- foolishness or inferiority (nitwit, riff-raff)
- fussiness (fuddy-duddy)

Even here, though, the author concedes that many items "could be listed elsewhere," which points to a real limitation: these categories overlap and lack sharp boundaries. She puts this down to the inherent vagueness of reduplicatives themselves, a fair enough explanation, though one that does leave the taxonomy somewhat less precise than it might first appear. What reduplicatives mainly do, on this view, is connote rather than denote: they signal the speaker's mood or a non-serious stance rather than pin down a stable referent (Merlini Barbaresi, 2008:235).

Turning to ablaut forms specifically, the author argues that certain vowel sequences carry meaning almost by convention. The shift from /ɪ/ to /æ/, for instance, is phonosymbolically loaded: /ɪ/ tends to suggest smallness, brightness, and constriction, while /æ/ suggests largeness, heaviness, and openness. This idea traces back to Jespersen and finds partial support in Sapir (1929).

2.4 Political Discourse

Fairclough (2001) describes political discourse as the language governments, politicians, institutions, and the media use to shape how people think, feel, and act. One of its defining traits is strategic intent: language here is meant to persuade, to legitimize authority, and, in a sense, to construct social reality rather than simply describe it. It also leans heavily on Rhetoric, reduplication and metaphor among the devices that make a message stick, and it plays a central democratic role through speeches, campaign slogans, debates, and digital communication, framing issues and steering how the public reads political events (Charteris-Black, 2014). Hernández-Guerra (2014) makes a related point: rhetorical frameworks matter in persuasive writing because they help audiences follow and respond to an argument in the first place.

Much of what political language does is comparative: it lets a speaker paint an opponent unfavorably while presenting themselves in a better light, which calls for careful word choice, deliberate use of evaluative language, and a strategic emphasis on some events over others. Language, in this sense, becomes a tool for legitimizing authority and moving public opinion, it shapes reality rather than simply reflecting it, highlighting some perspectives and quietly sidelining others (van Dijk, 2006). None of this happens in a vacuum, either: political discourse is bound up with its cultural and social setting, so it cannot really be studied apart from the institutional, social, and historical context surrounding it. Cultural norms and audience expectations do much of the work of legitimizing political messages (Wodak, 2009), which is why politicians so often lean on shared memory and common knowledge to make their arguments land (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

3. Method of Analysis

This paper analyzes reduplicative expressions occurring across 57 American presidential debates from the 2012–2024 election cycles, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Token extraction happened in two stages. The first involved searching the full set of transcripts, 1,457,701 words in all, against a comprehensive list of English reduplicative forms drawn from dictionaries and earlier studies (Thun, 1963; Merlini Barbaresi, 2005;

Kołłątaj, 2016), supplemented by additional candidates, any X-Y pair sharing full or partial phonological identity, turned up through close reading of the transcripts themselves. Every candidate instance was pulled together with enough surrounding co-text to allow its context to be checked properly.

The second stage screened each candidate against explicit criteria meant to separate genuine extra-grammatical reduplication from ordinary syntactic repetition. A form was only counted as a reduplicative token if it met all four conditions: a fixed number of repetitions (win-win, for instance, is always two elements, never three or four, unlike freely variable emphatic repetition such as very very very); independent attestation as an established lexical or idiomatic unit, rather than an ad hoc string coined on the spot; a fixed internal order and a meaning that is at least partly non-compositional or opaque, so the sequence cannot simply be reordered or modified without losing its conventional sense; and genuine use by the speaker, evaluatively, rather than a quotation of someone else's words. Anything meeting all four criteria was coded as an extra-grammatical reduplicative and classified under one of Merlini Barbaresi's (2005) four structural types. Anything that failed, variable-count strings such as blah blah blah blah, for example, was coded instead as syntactic repetition, excluded from the reduplicative count proper, though still counted toward the syntactic-to-lexicalized ratio reported in Section 4.

Two items on the list, backtrack and low blow, do not fit the canonical two-constituent ablaut or rhyme pattern seen in flip-flop or willy-nilly, so they deserve a word of explanation. Both meet the four criteria above, and both sit within the boundary zone that Merlini Barbaresi (2005) herself acknowledges in her taxonomy, she flags willy-nilly and sci-fi, for instance, as intermediate cases between reduplicative and ordinary compound. Backtrack is kept under Type 1 (ablaut-related) because it shares the same semantic territory, indecision or reversal, and the same rhetorical role as flip-flop and dilly-dally, extending the same underlying logic, movement away from a course and then back against it, to a compound reversative verb. Low blow, meanwhile, is classified as a Type 3 rhyming compound: its two constituents, low and blow, are each independently meaningful and share a rhyming vowel, which is exactly what Merlini Barbaresi's own definition of a rhyming compound requires, on the model of willy-nilly or walkie-talkie. Both items, then, are boundary cases within her model rather than exceptions to it, and they are flagged as such wherever they come up in the analysis.

Combining the two methods lets the study present its findings in some depth. The qualitative side carries the descriptive and interpretive work, explaining how and why particular forms end up doing particular rhetorical jobs. The quantitative side handles the statistics, tallying how often each reduplicative expression occurs (Creswell, 2012, p.13) and setting the results out as percentages and raw counts in tables, followed by discussion of what those numbers mean. Since the qualitative analysis fills in contextual detail that the statistics alone cannot supply, the two together give a fuller picture than either would on its own (Creswell, 2012, p.16).

4. Data Analysis

The corpus runs to 1,457,701 words, drawn from American presidential debates held across four election cycles: 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2023–24. This works out to roughly 57 debate events in total, spanning Republican and Democratic primaries as well as general election debates, and giving fairly broad coverage of recent presidential debate discourse. Merlini Barbaresi's (2005) framework for extra-grammatical morphology was applied throughout to pick out and classify the reduplicative expressions used in this register.
The corpus breaks down across the four cycles as follows:

Cycle	Word Count	Tokens	Frequency/1,000	Percentage
2012	**429,878**	**8**	**0.0186**	**40.0%**
2016	**588,752**	**7**	**0.0119**	**35.0%**
2020	**361,722**	**3**	**0.0083**	**15.0%**
2023-24	**77,349**	**2**	**0.0259**	**10.0%**
TOTAL	**1,457,701**	**20**	**0.0137**	**100.0%**

In total, the study turned up 20 genuine reduplicative tokens across 11 distinct expression types, an average of 0.0137 tokens per 1,000 words, roughly 1.4 occurrences per 100,000 words, which confirms just how rare reduplication is in formal political speech. Alongside these 20 instances of extra-grammatical morphology, the corpus contains something like 950 instances of syntactic repetition, the productive, on-the-fly kind used for emphasis. Separating the two yields a ratio of about 50 to 1.

Frequency shifts noticeably across cycles. 2012 has the highest density (0.0186 per 1,000 words), and, tellingly, all eight tokens from that year occur in Republican primary debates rather than the general election. 2020 sits at the other end, with the lowest frequency (0.0083 per 1,000 words), which may simply reflect a smaller field of candidates, or perhaps a shift in how candidates were talking by that point. 2023–24 ticks back up slightly (0.0259 per 1,000 words), largely on the strength of Trump's one-off coinage run-Spot-run. Broken down by debate type, primary debates account for 18 tokens (90%) against only 2 (10%) in general election debates, a gap that suggests intra-party competition brings out more of this kind of language.

4.2 Reduplicatives Distribution

Across Merlini Barbaresi's structural taxonomy, the 20 tokens sort into a fairly clear hierarchy:

Reduplication Type	Tokens	Percentage	Debate Instances
Type 1 (Ablaut)	9	45%	flip-flop, dilly-dally, ping-pong, backtrack
Type 4 (Copy)	5	25%	win-win, Win-Win-Win, win-wins
Type 2 (Rhyming)	4	20%	willy-nilly, pell-mell
Type 3 (Compounds)	1	5%	low blow
Hybrid/Nonce	1	5%	run-Spot-run

Ablaut forms (Type 1) come out on top at 45% of the total, which is not entirely surprising given how phonologically salient and functionally flexible vowel-alternation patterns tend to be. Six of those nine tokens belong to the flip-flop family alone (30% of the whole corpus), spread across three election cycles 2012, 2016, and 2020, which says something about how firmly flip-flop has settled into political vocabulary. Copy reduplication (Type 4) makes up 25% and does its work mostly in rapport-building and campaign branding. Rhyming reduplication (Type 2) accounts for 20%, turning up in both older, more literary forms (pell-mell) and more current ones (willy-nilly). Rhyming compounds (Type 3), by contrast, are almost entirely missing, just 5%, a single token out of 1.5 million words, and this gap is worth unpacking through the idea of compositional transparency, taken up below. The hybrid/nonce category (also 5%) covers Trump's one-off run-Spot-run, a reminder that even though extra-grammatical morphology draws from a fairly fixed inventory, new coinages can still emerge under the right speaker and context.

4.3 Frequency Distribution

The flip-flop family (flip-flop, flip-flopped, flip-flopping) leads the pack: six tokens, 30% of the corpus, spread across multiple cycles and used by speakers from both parties. The win-win family (win-win, Win-Win-Win, win-wins) is close behind at five tokens (25%), concentrated mostly in 2012 and 2016. Pell-mell and willy-nilly each show up twice (10% between them), and everything else appears only once. In other words, political reduplicative use clusters heavily around two families, flip-flop and win-win, which together account for 55% of all tokens, while the rest of the inventory surfaces sporadically or just once across the whole four-cycle span.

4.1 Results and Discussion

4.1.1 Type-Function Correlation Patterns

A clear pattern emerges when structural type is set against rhetorical function:

Type	Attack	Rapport	Defense	Descriptive	Total
Type 1	**8 (89%)**	**0**	**1 (11%)**	**1**	**9**
Type 2	**3 (75%)**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**4**
Type 3	**0**	**0**	**1 (100%)**	**0**	**1**
Type 4	**0**	**5 (100%)**	**0**	**0**	**5**
Hybrid	**1 (100%)**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**

Types 1 and 2 together serve attack functions in 85% of cases (11 of 13 tokens), while Type 4 goes entirely the other way, serving rapport or branding functions 100% of the time and never attack. That kind of clean split is hard to put down to chance: forms built for attack simply do not build rapport, and vice versa. The one Type 3 token in the corpus, meanwhile, is doing something differentmissin, a defensive counter-accusation rather than an offensive attack — and it occupies that niche on its own. Underlying all this is a matter of phonological iconicity. Types 1 and 2 both carry a built-in negative charge simply through how they sound. Take the vowel shift in flip-flop (/ɪ/→/ɒ/): it works almost like a phonological symbol of instability,

the changing vowel standing in for a changing political position under criticism. This is automorphic iconicity at work, form echoing meaning, and it produces a negative reading almost automatically, without any argument being made explicit. Speakers seem to know this instinctively, reaching for ablaut forms precisely in attack contexts, where the phonological unsteadiness reinforces whatever semantic criticism of inconsistency or reversal is already being made.

Type 4 copy reduplication runs on a different mechanism altogether. Win-win, for example, simply repeats a meaningful, positive base exactly, generating emphasis through sheer repetition rather than any change in sound. Because the repeated base carries a positive meaning (win, as in succeed or achieve victory), the resulting frame reads as inherently collaborative, which leaves no real room for an attack function. That is presumably why the split is so clean: none of the Type 4 tokens serve attack, because exact repetition simply lacks the distortion that carries negative evaluation in Types 1 and 2. By the same token, the 100% rapport rate follows almost mechanically, a speaker cannot really use win-win as an attack without contradicting the form's own positive, undistorted structure.

Type 3 sits somewhere in between. Where Types 1 and 2 rely on phonological opacity for their negative charge, Type 3 forms are transparent: both halves carry independent meaning (low blow: low plus blow amounts to an unfair attack). That transparency seems to work against the automatic pejorative charge useful for attack, while opening the door to explicit fairness claims better suited to defense. Sanders's use of low blow is a good illustration: it works meta-rhetorically, targeting Clinton's tactics rather than her substantive claims, and shifting the exchange from a question of substance to one of procedural fairness. This single defensive case, 5% of the corpus, confirms that Type 3 stays out of offensive contexts altogether (0% attack) while carving out its own small defensive niche, one that seems to follow directly from its compositional transparency.

4.1.2 Attack Dominance and Functional Distribution

Looking at all 20 tokens by function, attack dominates outright: 15 tokens (75%) are attacks, 3 (15%) build rapport or branding, and only 2 (10%) serve a defensive role. Reduplicatives in presidential debates, in other words, function mainly as rhetorical weapons rather than as tools for cooperation, self-expression, or self-defense. Within the attack category, four tactical patterns stand out. Policy-inconsistency attacks (6 tokens, 30% of the corpus) run through the flip-flop family, crossing party lines and multiple cycles: Republican speakers use it (Paul, Santorum), so do Democrats (O'Malley, Castro), and so do moderators pressing candidates (Salinas). Santorum's own meta-comment "you guys complain about Romney flip-flopping" treats flip-flop less as a description and more as an established category of accusation, one the audience is simply assumed to recognize as damaging. That kind of self-aware reference only really appears with forms this conventionalized, which fits with flip-flop's unusually high frequency (6 tokens) and its staying power across cycles.

Policy weakness and delay attacks (2 tokens, 10%) paint opponents as unable to commit or as reversing course without good reason. Santorum's dilly-dallying, aimed at Obama's Cuba policy, and King's moderator challenge you backtracked both draw on Merlini Barbaresi's

semantic area (c), indecision and weakness, through phonological iconicity: the repeating sound pattern itself seems to mimic the hesitation or reversal being criticized. Disorder and recklessness attacks (3 tokens, 15%) work through semantic area (d), confusion and disorder, as in Klobuchar's double use of pell-mell against Trump's pardons and his Iran policy, or Ramaswamy's willy-nilly aimed at establishment foreign aid. And infantilization attack (1 token, 5%) appears just once, in Trump's run-Spot-run, which leans on cultural intertextual iconicity, likening Harris's economic plan to the elementary reading primers of Dick and Jane.

The minority rapport and branding function (15%, 3 tokens) belongs entirely to Type 4. Bachmann's Win-Win-Win, for instance, is really a branding move: the capitalized, proper-noun form and its structural echo of Cain's 9-9-9 plan both point to deliberate political messaging rather than ordinary description. Kasich's repeated use of win-win to frame police-community collaboration positions him as a moderate problem-solver, riding on the form's naturally cooperative meaning. Defense (10%, 2 tokens) demands more rhetorical craft. Sanders's low blow runs through a fairly classic defensive sequence: delegitimize the attack through meta-accusation, defend the substance (in this case, Obama's record), then counter-attack by defending the basic right to disagree. The reduplicative itself buys time and, in the same breath, signals to the audience that something unfair has just happened, priming a more sympathetic hearing for what follows.

4.1.3 Speaker Positioning and Identity Performance

No single party dominates the corpus (Republican candidates account for 55%, Democrats 30%, moderators 10%), but a clearer pattern appears once speakers are grouped by political profile rather than party. Establishment figures Santorum, Klobuchar, and, as targets, Clinton, Romney, and Kasich stick to forms that are highly conventionalized and have fully migrated into mainstream register: flip-flop (6 tokens), pell-mell (2), win-win (5). Since these expressions are dictionary-attested and widely known, the register risk of using them is low. Santorum's use of three flip-flop variants in a single debate makes the point well: because the form is so thoroughly conventionalized, it lands reliably as an attack, understood instantly and without seeming either too casual or somehow untrustworthy.

Outsider and populist speakers Trump, Ramaswamy, Carson, Paul, Sanders, all of whom position themselves against the party mainstream in one way or another tend to reach for marked forms instead, ones that signal distance from the establishment. Trump's run-Spot-run is the most marked of all: it requires a specific cultural reference (the Dick and Jane primers of mid-twentieth-century American schooling), it breaks with formal register, and it deploys deliberately childish language as a kind of norm violation. That extremeness is arguably the point it brands Trump as someone willing to break linguistic convention along with political convention. Ramaswamy's rather old-fashioned willy-nilly and Sanders's defensive low blow work in a smaller way toward the same end, pulling away from establishment usage. What this correlation between speaker profile and conventionalization level suggests is that choosing a reduplicative is never purely about attack or defense; it is also about performing a political identity.

Moderators complicate the picture somewhat, since their evaluative use of these forms blurs the line between neutral questioner and rhetorical participant. King's you backtracked to Gingrich, and Salinas's are you flip-flopping? to Clinton, both embed an accusation inside a question, provoking the same kind of defensive response a candidate's attack would. That is quite different from a moderator merely quoting someone else's language without endorsing it, and the distinction matters methodologically: evaluative use by a moderator functions rhetorically just like a candidate's attack and belongs in the functional count, while quotation does not, since it is reported rather than deployed speech.

4.1.4 Semantic Areas and Contextual Functional Variability

Half the corpus (10 tokens, 50%) falls under Merlini Barbaresi's semantic area (c), indecision and weakness: flip-flop (×6), dilly-dally, backtrack, and willy-nilly (×2). Area (d), confusion and disorder, accounts for another 10% (pell-mell, ×2). Type 4 forms sit outside these pejorative categories altogether, in neutral or positive territory (5 tokens, 25%), while cultural-reference forms work through metaphor and intertextuality (ping-pong, run-Spot-run, 2 tokens, 10%). The single Type 3 token, low blow, does not fit comfortably into any of the seven areas Merlini Barbaresi proposes, since its boxing metaphor, an illegal punch below the belt, invokes a breach of fairness rather than any cognitive failing, character flaw, or behavioral disorder. This is really what motivates adding an eighth area to the model: moral violation or unfairness, covering expressions that mark rule-breaking or ethical impropriety in competitive settings.

One finding pushes back against a purely deterministic reading of semantic area, though. Willy-nilly appears twice in the corpus, both times under semantic area (c), carelessness or haphazardness, yet the two uses do quite different rhetorical work. Carson deploys it descriptively, floating a hypothetical: “just willy-nilly going out and quarantining a bunch of people because they've been to Brazil, I don't believe that that's going to work.” His medical background lets this read as technical caution rather than political attack. Ramaswamy uses the same word accusatorially, aimed squarely at establishment foreign-aid policy as haphazard and unprincipled. Both speakers are drawing on the same pre-coded negative charge, but context and authorization decide whether that charge surfaces as attack, caution, or plain description.

What this suggests is that a semantic area encodes potential rather than fixing outcome: the negative charge is there to be used, but speakers still choose how, or whether, to use it. The relevant differences here, medical authority versus populist challenge, hypothetical scenario versus live policy attack, technical recommendation versus political accusation, are not visible from structural type or semantic coding alone. They depend on reading who is speaking, to whom, and in what frame. Merlini Barbaresi's semantic areas, then, predict a general evaluative leaning well enough, but they cannot on their own predict how a given speaker will put that leaning to use.

4.1.5 Phonological Iconicity and Meaning Generation

Much of the meaning reduplicatives carry in political speech comes from sound rather than sense alone. Automorphic iconicity shows up whenever the phonological shape of a

form seems to act out the political behavior it names. The flip-flop vowel shift (/ɪ/→/ɒ/), for instance, produces a kind of built-in instability that mirrors the shifting position under attack, the vowel itself seems to move, much as the criticized position has moved. That back-and-forth sound pattern plays out the back-and-forth of policy reversal, and it does so below the level of conscious argument: speakers rarely need to spell out why flip-flopping is bad, since the sound of the word already carries that judgment.

Phonaesthetic iconicity works through vowel quality itself, in line with Jespersen's (1922) older observations about sound symbolism. The high front /ɪ/ in flip suggests something quick, light, and active, while the low back /ɒ/ in flop suggests something heavier, more settled, more final, together sketching a quick change of mind followed by a firm commitment to the opposite position, which is more or less exactly the behavior being criticized. Much the same happens with dilly-dally, where the /ɪ/-to-/æ/ shift moves from something frivolous-sounding to something more serious, enacting the time-wasting it names. Pell-mell works a little differently, its /p/-to-/m/ consonant shift moving from a plosive to a nasal sound in a way that suggests scattering and disorder, reinforcing the sense of reckless haste the word is meant to convey.

These sound-symbolic mechanisms go some way toward explaining why Types 1 and 2 dominate attack functions (85% of the time): the phonological distortion itself carries a negative charge, quite apart from anything the speaker argues explicitly. Speakers appear to select forms whose sound matches their intended effect, more or less instinctively, and the resulting correlation between type and function, distortion for attack, exact repetition for rapport, looks less like coincidence and more like a systematic exploitation of how these sounds are already perceived.

Trump's run-Spot-run does not fit any of these three modes and points instead to a fourth kind of iconicity worth naming alongside Merlini Barbaresi's automorphic, phonaesthetic, and onomatopoeic categories. Nothing in its sound carries meaning on its own; the phrase means what it means only through cultural memory, specifically, recognition of the Dick and Jane primers used in American schools from the 1930s through the 1970s, where “Run, Spot, run!” stood for about as simple a sentence as a beginning reader would encounter. The logic runs fairly directly from there: primers connote childlike simplicity, so comparing an economic plan to a primer implies the plan is childishly simple too. Call this cultural intertextual iconicity, it differs from the phonological modes precisely because it depends on shared cultural and generational memory rather than universal features of sound. A younger voter with no memory of Dick and Jane will likely miss the joke altogether, which is presumably why this kind of coinage stays rare: it appears just once in the corpus (1 of 20 tokens, 5%), and it seems to be the kind of risk only an outsider candidate, for whom norm violation is already part of the brand, can really afford to take.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine reduplicative expressions across American Presidential Debates from 2012 to 2024, using Merlini Barbaresi's (2005) framework of extra-grammatical morphology to analyze 1,457,701 words of political discourse. Taken together, the findings speak to the three aims laid out at the start, and they suggest three broad conclusions.

First, reduplication is genuinely rare in formal political debate: just 20 tokens across 1.5 million words, or 0.0137 per 1,000 words. That rarity is not incidental. It reflects a set of filters, formality, functional usefulness, and degree of conventionalization, that together rule out most of the reduplicative inventory English otherwise makes available, and it lines up with Merlini Barbaresi's distinction between lexicalized extra-grammatical morphology and ordinary productive repetition, borne out here in an approximate 50-to-1 ratio. Structurally, ablaut reduplication (Type 1) leads at 45%, driven mainly by the well-established flip-flop family (30% of all tokens across three cycles), while rhyming compounds (Type 3) are nearly absent (5%). Functionally, attack dominates (75%), spread across four recurring tactics, inconsistency, weakness or delay, disorder or recklessness, and infantilization, while rapport and defense occupy much smaller, more structurally specific niches: Type 4 handles rapport exclusively, and the lone Type 3 case handles defense. The heavier concentration of these forms in primary debates rather than general elections (90% versus 10%) fits with the more intense rhetorical competition that intra-party contests tend to produce.

Second, the study extends Merlini Barbaresi's model in three ways: it proposes cultural intertextual iconicity as a fourth mode, illustrated by run-Spot-run, which draws its meaning from shared cultural reference rather than sound symbolism; it proposes moral violation or unfairness as an eighth semantic area, needed to accommodate meta-rhetorical, fairness-based uses like Sanders's low blow; and it traces a fairly systematic link between structural type and rhetorical function, Types 1 and 2 mostly attack, Type 4 exclusively rapport, Type 3 defense, suggesting that a form's phonological shape places real limits on what it can plausibly be used to do.

Third, and more broadly, these patterns say something about lexical choice in formal political discourse generally. Phonological form, semantic coding, pragmatic context, and discourse setting all seem to work together in constraining vocabulary in high-stakes registers, and speakers appear to exploit these constraints deliberately, matching a form's sound to its intended rhetorical effect and using its degree of conventionalization to signal establishment or outsider identity. Whether these patterns hold beyond American presidential debate, in other political genres or other languages, is a question future research could usefully take up.

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