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perspectives on
repetition

edited by

Barbara Johnstone

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An introduction

BARBARA JOHNSTONE

Abstract

This essay attempts to set the papers which follow it in context, by providing an overview of previous literature on discourse repetition and by suggesting a unified way of understanding repetition. I begin by describing four general approaches to discourse repetition exemplified in the work of scholars in linguistics, literary theory, anthropology, and communications. As a beginning step to understanding the overarching importance of repetition, I then discuss two sorts of speech situations in which repetition is especially salient: highly formal (often ritual) speech events, and speech by and to children. I claim that repetition is the means by which interlocutors make it clear what the underlying paradigmatic structure of their language is as they speak; repetition is thus seen to be most noticeable in situations in which speakers are least likely to share a linguistic variety. I then note ways in which all speech situations are similar to these, in the sense that interlocutors must always negotiate a joint code as they speak: language always emerges in the process of discourse, and repetition, as the primary locus for this negotiation, is thus always crucial.

Introduction

If an ethnographer of speech from a non-Western culture were to do a study of the sociolinguistics of repetition in white, middle-class American society, he or she would uncover some odd discrepancies. A foreign ethnographer might choose to start, in the tradition of Stross (1974) and others, by looking at what Americans say about repetition; our 'native metalinguistics', to use
Stross's term. He or she would find evidence both in our everyday talk and in our canonical texts about how discourse should be constructed, and would discover that repetition is disfavored, sometimes quite strongly so. Mainstream Americans, and other Westerners, disparage or mock the style of others by saying that they are 'redundant', that they 'repeat themselves', or that they 'just keep saying the same thing over and over'. A conversationalist can be quickly silenced with the words 'You already said that'. If two children say the same thing at the same time, it means bad luck. For adults, catching oneself repeating the word or phrase of another or making use of unintentional alliteration is occasion for embarrassment. In our rhetorics and in writer's handbooks, repetition is treated as an optional stylistic device, to be used sparingly for ornamenting an already-constructed speech or essay. Composition teachers use the notations 'REP' or 'RED' to indicate places in student writing where repetition or redundancy intrude.

Our foreign anthropologist would be forced to conclude that mainstream Americans do not like repetition very much, and that they try hard to avoid it, except in certain specialized forms of discourse like poetry or song lyrics. Even the key religious text of many Americans, the Bible, recently received an editing by the Reader's Digest which attempted to eliminate its redundancy.

In proceeding with research, the anthropologist would discover something strange: despite our negative attitudes about repetition, we repeat constantly, in every conversation, in every speech or essay, with our children and with our peers. Repetition structures our discourse to an extent that the prescriptivists among us would find shameful, if they were aware of it. Because of people's tendency to think that they actually do what they say they do, Western linguists and anthropologists have devoted far more attention to the uses and functions of repetition in non-Western societies than in our own. Even so insightful a scholar as Roman Jakobson claimed that Russian folk poetry was 'the only living oral tradition in the Indo-European world which uses grammatical parallelism as its basic mode of concatenating successive verses' (Jakobson, 1966: 405), despite readily available evidence to the contrary in such instances as girls' skipping-rope rhymes and even in ordinary everyday talk (see, for example, the papers by Tannen and Norrick in this issue).

It is understandable, especially given our generally negative folk attitudes on the subject, that repetition should strike us as more salient in the discourse of other peoples than in our own. But it is clear that repetition is a ubiquitous
phenomenon, and the omnipresence of repetition suggests that it may be a necessary phenomenon. In this essay, I would like to provide a sketch, of necessity a summary one, of the ways in which literary theorists, linguists, speech communication specialists, and anthropologists have approached the description and analysis of repetition in discourse. I will follow my discussion of differences – different approaches to different aspects of repetition in different languages and cultures – with a suggestion about how these various manifestations and functions of repetition might be understood in a unitary way, as contributions to the structuring of language as it emerges in discourse.

**Approaches to repetition**

While it is difficult to classify all the studies of discourse repetition in the literature, most fit at least roughly into one or more of four categories, each corresponding to a different focus of research interest. The first category consists of studies which examine repetition as a discourse-cohesive device. Repetition seems to be one of the first learned (by children) and last lost (in schizophrenia and aphasia) of cohesive devices, ways to keep conversation and monologue glued together. In their study of cohesion in English, Halliday and Hasan (1976) show that there is a cline of types of cohesive ‘reiteration’, ranging from exact repetition of words or phrases, to the use of cataphoric and anaphoric pronouns. Comparing cohesion in spontaneous, unplanned discourse and in planned discourse, Ochs (1979) shows that repetitions of lexical items, phonological echoing, and syntactic parallelism are all more common in unplanned talk. Tannen’s study of repetition in conversation (Tannen, in press) suggests that because repeating is easy and automatic, new information is hung on a familiar structure of repetitions. Repetition thus creates a shared universe of discourse. Labov’s (1972) study of spontaneous oral narrative shows that repetition is one of a number of kinds of ‘evaluative’ devices which highlight the point of a story and its relevance to the preceding discourse. The papers in this issue by Tannen, on repetition as the source of emergent formulaicity in conversation, and by Norrick, on types and functions of conversational repetition, both contribute to the study of repetition as a crucial cohesive device in talk.

A second approach to the study of repetition has involved the analysis of repetition as a rhetorical device. Traditional lists of rhetorical figures (assonance, alliteration, epanalepsis, etc.) exemplify this approach, though they say
little about how repetitive schemes and tropes actually work, beyond that they make discourse sound elegant (see Frédéric, 1985). In some of my work on repetition in Arabic persuasive prose (Koch, 1983a; Johnstone, in press), I have attempted to show how repetition serves to create rhetorical presence, the linguistic foregrounding of an idea which can serve to make it persuasive even without logical support. Presentation, be it through metaphorical uses of deictic words like here, now, or this; through the use of historical present tenses to describe past events; or through repetition, makes things believable by forcing them into the affective field of the hearer and keeping them there. While this style of persuasion is not highly valued in Western societies, it is nonetheless frequently used; Ronald Reagan’s communicative skill could, for example, be characterized as largely presentational.

A number of studies by marketing specialists (summarized in Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, Inc., 1967) have examined the rhetorical effects of repetition in a related way, looking at how often, and at what intervals, advertisements have to be repeated in order to be maximally effective. Anthropologists have pointed out that, in some cultures, repetition is seen as rhetorically powerful because words and thoughts, per se, have creative or controlling power. For the Navajo, for example, repeating a wish four times brings about the wished-for action (Witherspoon, 1977). Kuna (Panama) curing chants involve long repetitive descriptions of plants or animals associated with evil spirits: describing something completely is thought to be a way of controlling it (Sherzer, 1983). Among studies which discuss the rhetorical effects of linguistic repetition in literature are those of Nechas (1979) on repetition in the speech of Ishmael in Moby Dick, and of W. B. Stanford (1967) on phonetic repetition in Homer.

A third category of studies consists of work on the semantic effects of repetition, or how repeated items affect one another. Studies of the semantics of lexical couplets like aid and abet fall into this category. Shakespeare’s use of couplets, for example, has been examined by Nash (1958) and Valesio (1980). I have written about lexical couplets in Arabic (Koch, 1983b), which are widely used, and, unlike most English couplets, still newly created. In the newest Arabic couplets, one term almost always modifies the other; in the oldest ones, the terms are inseparable and completely synonymous. I claim that repeated juxtaposition is precisely what creates synonymy over time.

Studies of the semantic effects of syntactic parallelism begin with Lowth (1794), the inventor of the term. Lowth’s work on Canaanite and Old Testament verse has given rise to studies of parallelistic discourse in other Semitic
languages; in Finno-Ugric, Turkic, and Mongolian oral poetry; in Chinese verse and poetic prose; in Russian folk poetry; and in formal speech genres in traditional cultures in Central America and Indonesia (see Fox, 1977, for a summary of this work). Lowth claimed that the semantic relationship between two terms in identical slots in parallel phrases could be one of synonymy, antithesis, or synthesis; later researchers have further refined these categories. Jakobson's (1960; 1966; 1968) work on patterns of parallelism in Russian folk verse and on the 'grammar of poetry' is among the most frequently cited. Especially intriguing is Jakobson's often quoted observation that 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination' (1960: 358). In poetry, items from the same paradigmatic class (in the broad Saussurean sense of paradigmatic classes as multidimensional associative sets) appear in identical positions in parallel settings. While Jakobson's observations are limited to certain genres of poetry, it is clear that parallelism is found in many kinds of discourse (Sherzer, 1977), and it should be noted that however the relationship between different items in parallel frames is described, the fact that two or more terms are found in structurally identical settings seems to create a semantic relationship between the terms as well as reflect one. Mannheim's study of Quechua couplets in this issue is in this semantic tradition of scholarship on repetition.

The fourth category of studies of repetition consists of studies which bear upon the importance of repetition in language learning, linguistic socialization, and language teaching. From the recitals of paradigms of conjugation and declension of the most traditional language-teaching methodologies, to the substitution drills of the Audio-Lingual Method, to contemporary approaches in which teachers whisper phrases in students' ears for them to use, repetition has had a central role in foreign-language teaching. This reflects the importance of repetition in first-language learning: children are exposed to and make use of repetition as they learn the structure of their language and how and when to use it. Studies of 'caretaker speech', the special register which adults adopt when talking to young children (Snow, 1972, 1977; Ferguson, 1977), have shown that adults repeat what children say, 'expanding' children's utterances by filling in missing structure and paraphrasing what they interpret the child to have meant to say. While such simplified 'baby talk' is not universal, as it was at first assumed to be (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984), there are other ways in which repetition can enter into first language acquisition. A number of ethnographic studies of language socialization in
various cultural settings have described interactional routines between children and caretakers in which children are told to repeat what adults say, routines in which children are instructed to 'say X', 'tell Y X', and so on (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, in press; Schieffelin, 1979; Briggs, 1984). Heath (1983) shows how children in a working-class black community in the U.S. work their way into adult conversations first by repeating the ends of utterances they hear, then by repeating and varying, and only later by means of original contributions. The study by Peters in this issue deals with how a blind child acquiring English uses imitation to form syntactic hypotheses.

Towards a unifying focus

As the preceding summary has shown, repetition is a very widespread phenomenon. Repetition is characteristic of poetry and prose literature, of adults' everyday talk and of children's talk and talk to children; it is a powerful persuasive strategy and an essential cohesive strategy. Let me now make a few observations that I think constitute a start towards understanding why discourse repetition is as ubiquitous as it is.

To begin with, let us consider two linguistic situations in which repetition seems to be especially salient: highly formal or formalized discourse, and talk to and by children learning language. Discourse that is formal is so precisely because it is different from everyday talk. Often, if not always, formal discourse takes shape in a register which only an elite can really control: the elders, the shamans, the orators, or the literati of the society. Most of the people who are exposed to formal discourse genres are people who do not themselves fully control them, and who may not even understand them at all. If it is to communicate at all, formal talk must be elaborate; that is to say that since the people involved in a formal speech event do not all know, at the outset, what the conventions of the talk are, the rules must be made explicit in the discourse itself. To paraphrase a maxim used by public-speaking coaches, speakers in formal situations must 'tell them what they're doing' as they do it.

The talk that surrounds children learning language is bound by the same sort of requirement. No matter what it is that children are born being able to do, or born with a propensity to do, it is completely obvious that children are not born knowing anything at all about the language they will learn, or about the discourse conventions of their society. In one way or another (and the
ways vary greatly from culture to culture), *everything that a child needs in order to construct her or his language must be made available, overtly, in discourse.*

How is it, then, that the units of language and the rules or strategies for using these units are made overt in discourse, in situations in which control is not in the hands of all parties, like the two we are considering? My claim is that this happens through repetition. Repetition is never exact; it always involves some sort of similarity and some sort of difference, whether the difference be linguistic, as in alliteration or syntactic parallelism, or contextual, as when the same thing is said in different situations. When two different things occur in the same frame, there is a very basic perceptual strategy that disposes us to look for a relationship between the things. When, for example, we see two people standing together, we assume that they belong together (and for this reason, people are careful about who they are seen with). The following list of names from an announcement for an art exhibition works exactly because it plays on our tendency to interpret things in similar frames as being themselves similar. See Figure 1.

Bill
Morningsstar
  John Alexander
  Linda Benjes
  Jerry Evans
  Thadd Evans
  Jim Esneault
  Karl Klawitter
  Gregory Williams

Figure 1. *Graphic noise*

When presented with this list, people invariably try to figure out what the bold letters spell, or what they have in common, or what the patterning of bold and plain letters is, and they are frustrated to find that there is no pattern at all. (The lack of pattern here reflects the chaos that was the theme of the exhibition being advertised: the show’s title was ‘Urban Shamanism’, and the music played at the opening was called ‘Chamber Noise’. The graphic arrangement of bold and non-bold letters in the announcement truly creates noise.)

Repetition is thus a way of creating categories. New, unfamiliar items can be put into underlying linguistic and cultural categories with old, familiar
ones by being used in repeated frames in discourse. Repetition is a mechanism for assimilating the new to the old. It is for this reason, I think, that repetition is particularly characteristic of communicative situations in which not everyone knows the linguistic variety that is being used.

Let us now go a step further, and note that there is a very significant sense in which all communicative situations are like the prototypical ones I have just discussed. No two people ever share exactly the same linguistic system; linguistic 'systems' are emergent in discourse, and evanescent at best. Interlocutors in any situation create a shared language as they talk, by evoking shared memory and fitting what is not shared into what is. To the extent that people come to know as they talk, repetition is rhetorical, and to the extent that they fit what they don't know into what they do, repetition is cohesive. As Becker (1982) points out, understanding is an aesthetic phenomenon: you understand something when the new and the old are integrated into a coherent, that is, a familiar and repeated, pattern. So, as Foucault (1972) and others suggest, all text is intertext, or, in other words, all discourse is structured by repetition.

Notes

1. My interest in repetition owes its inception to a suggestion some years ago by A. L. Becker that I look into the topic. My thinking since then owes a great deal to discussions with Deborah Tannen, though my errors and misconceptions are my own. Some of the material discussed in this paper was presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in 1983.

2. I noticed this phenomenon especially clearly at a recent scholarly meeting, at which the respondent for a session of papers devoted several minutes of his very limited time to apologizing for having said 'Professor Porter's paper proves' twice during his remarks.

3. The only situation I can think of that involves exact repetition is when one experiences the phenomenon called 'dėja vu'. The reason why experiences of dėja vu seem so odd is precisely because they are experiences that seem to be exact repetitions of previous ones.

References


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