

3 Repetition in conversation: toward a poetics of talk

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Gertrude Stein, *The gradual making of "The Making of Americans"*
Lectures in America, p. 214¹

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Roman Jakobson, *Dialogues* by Roman Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska, p. 100

Theoretical implications of repetition

According to Hymes (1981), the patterning of repetitions and contrasts is no less than a definition of structure itself. Hymes discusses the inadequacy of an early translation of a Chippewa (Ojibway) poem which changes what he calls its "structure": 'its points of constancy and variation, repetition and contrast,' as well as its literal content (41). Hymes explains:

The term "structure" is used here because of my belief that the true structure of the original poem is essential to knowledge of it, both ethnological and aesthetic. *By structure, I mean here particularly the form of repetition and variation, of constants and contrasts, in verbal organization.* Such structure is manifest in linguistic form. It does not exhaust the structuring of poems . . . But such structure is the matrix of the meaning and effect of the poem. (42, italics in original)

Becker (1984b) examines reduplication and repetition as variants of a repetitive strategy at different levels in an episode from a wayang (Javanese shadow play), in which a boy escaping from a demon breaks a taboo by upsetting a steamer of rice. Javanese grammatical constraints preclude the use of pronouns (there is no "it" in Javanese) or of ellipsis (in Becker's terms, "zeroing") in subsequent reference to inanimate topics. Instead, various forms of *dang* "to steam" are repeated, resulting in a dense discourse texture which, according to Becker, is characteristically Javanese.

Becker sees such discourse strategies as constituting the grammar of a language: not abstract patterns but actual bits of text which are remembered, more or less, and then retrieved to be reshaped to new contexts. And so, by a process of repetition, "The actual a-priori of any language event – the real deep structure – is an accumulation of remembered prior texts"; thus, "our real language competence is access, via memory, to this accumulation of prior text" (435).

Becker's account of linguistic competence is similar in spirit to that of Bolinger (1961:381), who observed:

At present we have no way of telling the extent to which a sentence like *I went home* is a result of invention, and the extent to which it is a result of repetition, countless speakers before us having already said it and transmitted it to us in toto. Is grammar something where speakers "produce" (i.e. originate) constructions, or where they "reach for" them, from a pre-established inventory . . . ?

Thus Hymes, Becker and Bolinger all suggest that repetition is at the heart not only of how a particular discourse is created, but how discourse itself is created.

Prepatterning

Analysis of repetition thus sheds light on our conception of language production, or, as Becker would say, "languageing." In short, it suggests that language is less freely generated, more prepatterned, than most current linguistic theory acknowledges. This is not, however, to say that speakers are automatons, cranking out language by rote. Rather, prepatterning (or idiomatity, or formulaicity) is a resource for creativity. It is the play between fixity and novelty that makes possible the creation of meaning. Because of these implications for an understanding of the nature of language, I discuss the ways language can be seen as prepatterned.

Prepatterning in language

Bolinger (1976:3) observes:

Many scholars – for example, Bugarski 1968, Chafe 1968, and especially Makkai 1972 – have pointed out that idioms are where reductionist theories of language break down. But what we are now in a position to recognize is that idiomatity is a vastly more pervasive phenomenon than we ever imagined, and vastly harder to separate from the pure freedom of syntax, if indeed any such fiery zone as pure syntax exists.

There has been increasing attention paid recently to idiomatity, or prepatterning, in both the narrow and the broad senses that Bolinger describes. In

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There has been increasing attention paid recently to idiomatity, or prepatterning, in both the narrow and the broad senses that Bolinger describes. In

the narrow sense, scholars are recognizing the ubiquity of prepatterned expressions *per se*. These have been variously named; Fillmore (1982) notes the terms "formulaic expressions, phraseological units, idiomatic expressions, set expressions." Other terms that have been used include "conversational routine," "routine formulae," "linguistic routines" and "routinized speech" (Coulmas 1981); "prepatterned speech" and "prefabs" (Bolinger 1976); "formulas, set expressions, collocations" (Matisoff 1979); and "lexicalized sentence stems" (Pawley and Syder 1983). Considerable attention has focused on the role of fixed or formulaic expressions in first and second language acquisition (for example, Corsaro 1979, Wong Fillmore 1979).

In order to move toward the broader sense of prepatterned, I will consider the range of prepatterned by which one may say that language in discourse is not either prepatterned or novel but more or less prepatterned.

A scale of fixity

Maximally prepatterned are instances of what Zimmer (1958) calls situational formulas: fixed form expressions that are always uttered in certain situations, the omission of which in those situations is perceived as a violation of appropriate behavior. Many languages, such as Arabic (Ferguson 1976), Turkish (Zimmer 1958, Tannen and Öztekin 1981), and modern Greek (Tannen and Öztekin 1981) contain numerous such situational formulas, many of which come in pairs.

For example, in Greek, one who is leaving for a trip will certainly be told the formula, "Kalo taxidhi" ("Good trip"). This is not unlike the American expression, "Have a good trip." But a departing American might also be told, "Have a nice trip," or a "great" one (obviously prepatterned but not as rigidly so) or something reflecting a different paradigm, like "I hope you enjoy your trip." Moreover, a Greek who is told "Kalo taxidhi" is likely to respond, "Kali andamosi" ("Good reunion"), making symmetrical the institutionalized expression of feeling. One wishes the other a good trip; the other expresses anticipation of meeting again upon return.

A similar routine in Greek with a similarly less routinized and less reciprocal counterpart in English is "Kalos orises" ("[it is] Well [that] you came"), parallel to the English "Welcome home." But whereas the English "Welcome home" has no ritualized rejoinder, the invariable response of a Greek to "Kalos orises" is "Kalos se [sas] vrika" ("[it is] Well [that] I found you" [sing. or pl.]). Thus an arrival event is marked in modern Greek by symmetrical routinized expressions of the sentiment, "I am happy to see you again."

As these examples and the need for this explanation testify, rigid situational formulas are less common in American English than in some other

languages and cultures. Such expressions are always uttered in exactly the same way and are associated with – indeed, expected in – certain situations. Their omission would be noticed and disapproved. For speakers who have become accustomed to using such formulas in their everyday interactions, not being able to use them (which happens when such a speaker moves to a country where they are not used) results in an uncomfortable feeling of being linguistically hamstrung, unable to say what one feels is appropriate or even necessary to say. (See Tannen 1980b for further discussion of this cross-cultural phenomenon.)

Highly fixed in form but less so in association with particular contexts are proverbs and sayings such as "It takes one to know one," which all native speakers of English would recognize and some would utter, if at all, in this form, although their occurrence could not be predicted, and their omission would not be remarked. There are cultural and individual differences with respect to how frequently such collocations are used and how they are evaluated.

A type of expression that is highly fixed in form though less predictable in situational association is proverbs. (See Norrick 1985 for an overview of this genre.) A good sense of the frequency with which proverbs can be expected and used in conversation in some cultures can be gained by reading the novels of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. For example, in *Things fall apart* (1958: 5–6), proverbs play a crucial role when a speaker, visiting a neighbor, is ready to get to the point of asking for the return of borrowed money:

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.

This excerpt illustrates the high regard in which proverbs, as fixed formulas, are held in this culture, as in many others. Americans, in contrast, are inclined to regard relatively fixed expressions with suspicion and are likely to speak with scorn of clichés, assuming that sincerity is associated with novelty of expression and fixity with insincerity.

Although many proverbs and sayings are known to English speakers, they are less likely to introduce them nonironically in everyday speech. Undertaking a study of proverbs in English, Norrick (1985:6) ended up using the Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs for his corpus, because he worked through the entire *A Corpus of English Conversation* (Svartvik and Quirk 1980) looking for proverbs and found only one true example and one marginal one in its 43,165 lines and 891 pages. . . . A perusal of the 1028 lines of transcribed conversation in Crystal and Davy (1975) for the sake of comparison turned up no examples whatsoever.

Although proverbs may not be routinely uttered in English conversation, idioms and other prepatterned expressions are pervasive in American speech, although their form in utterance is often only highly not absolutely fixed.

For English speakers, at least, it is common to use fixed expressions with some items in their canonical form altered, with no apparent loss of communicative effectiveness. This in itself is evidence that meaning is not being derived from the expressions directly, by a process of deconstruction according to definitions and rules, but rather is being arrived at in a leap of association, in keeping with Bolinger's observation that prefabs "have the magical property of persisting even when we knock some of them apart and put them together in unpredictable ways."

For example, I heard a politician on the radio asserting that the investigation he was spearheading would not stop "until every stone is unturned." There is no reason to doubt that hearers knew what he meant, by reference to the expression "leave no stone unturned," and no reason to believe that many hearers noticed that what he actually said, if grammatically decomposed, amounted to a promise that he would turn over no stones in his investigation. Another example is the metamorphosis of the expression "I couldn't care less" to "I could care less," with preservation rather than reversal of meaning.²

In addition to slightly altering formulas, it is common for speakers to fuse formulas – that is, utter a phrase that contains parts of two different though semantically and/or phonologically related set expressions. For example, some years ago, I told a number of friends and colleagues, on different occasions, that I was "up against the wire" in completing a project.³ It took a linguist who was studying prepatterned expressions, James Matisoff, to notice (or at least to remark, by whipping out his little notebook) that I had fused two different formulas: "up against the wall" and "down to the wire" (or perhaps "in under the wire").

Since this experience, and thanks to it (and to Matisoff), I have observed innumerable fused formulas. Only a few chosen from many I have heard (or unwittingly uttered), and the originals which I believe they fused, are as follows:

- It's no sweat off our backs
- It's no sweat
- no skin off one's nose
- [the shirt off one's back?]
- You can make that decision on the snap of the moment
- on the spur of the moment
- a snap decision
- at the drop of a pin
- at the drop of a hat
- hear a pin drop

something along those veins

– along those lines

– in that vein

How would you like to eat humble crow?

– eat crow

– eat humble pie

He was off the deep

– off the wall

– off the deep end

If you have any changes just pipe in

– pipe up

– chime in

My point here is emphatically not that these speakers made mistakes (although, strictly speaking, they did), but that the altered forms of the set expressions communicated meaning as well as the canonical forms would have. In other words, language is mistake-proof, to this extent. Meaning is gleaned by association with the familiar sayings, not by structural decomposition.

It is possible, if not likely, for the altered form to be enhanced rather than handicapped, enriched by association with more than one word or formula. For example, "eat humble crow" adds the lexicalized humiliation of "humble" from "humble pie" to the implied humiliation of "eat crow." "Pipe in" combines the enthusiasm of "pipe up" with the participation of "chime in." In another example, a speaker put her hand on her chest and said, "I felt so chest-fallen."⁴ One could well see this as a form of linguistic creativity rather than an error or misfire in the reaching for the word "crest-fallen." Thus fixity in expression can be a source of rather than an impediment to creativity.

Fixity of form can characterize chunks of smaller as well as larger size. English includes innumerable expressions and collocations such as "salt and pepper" or "thick and thin." These are shorter collocations whose form is fixed and whose meaning may be tied to that form, so that the expression "pepper and salt" is not likely to occur, and the expression "thin and thick" is not likely to be understood, except by reference to the original formula.

Cases of fixed expressions and collocations are the clearest examples of prepatternning. All discourse, however, is more or less prepatterned, in the sense that Friedrich (1986:23) notes, citing Leech (1969): "Almost all conversation is, at the surface, literally formulaic in the sense of conjoining and interlocking prefabricated words, phrases, and other units." As the sources cited by Bolinger attest, prefabrications also exist at the level of phonology and morphology.

Wittgenstein and Heidegger have shown that all meaning is derived from words by means of associations. According to Heidegger (1962:191), "The

ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality of involvements," and "Any assertion requires a fore-having" (199).⁵ In Wittgenstein's (1958:15) words, "Only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name." In other words, semantics too is a matter of prior text, in Becker's terms. Another way to express this, following C. J. Fillmore (1976, 1985), is that all semantics is frame semantics: meaning can be gleaned only by reference to a set of culturally familiar scenarios (scripts or frames).

Pawley (1986:116), in discussing his concept of "lexicization," notes that "it is important to separate those form-meaning pairings that have institutional status in this culture from those that do not, as well as to denote particular kinds and degrees of institutionalization." In a similar spirit, Hopper (1988a) identifies two types of grammar that he calls the "a priori grammar attitude" and the "emergence of grammar attitude." These two philosophical approaches to grammar are distinguished, in part, by their differential treatment of prepatternning. The a priori grammar attitude is "indifferent to prior texts," not distinguishing between repetitive utterances such as idioms and proverbs, on the one hand, and "bizarre fictional utterances" on the other (121). In the emergent grammar view (the one Hopper supports), the fact that some sentences are frequently said and others are not is crucial, not incidental. Finally, fixed expressions play a significant role in the construction grammar of Fillmore and Kay (Kay 1984, Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor 1988).

Bakhtin (1981:276) describes one sense in which meaning cannot be the sole work of an individual:

Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or, on the contrary, by the "light" of a line of words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. . . .

The living utterance . . . cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogue threads . . . ; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it – it does not approach the object from the sidelines.

Moving to larger units of text, the organization of discourse follows recognizable patterns, as discussed in chapter 2 under the involvement strategy; repetition of longer discourse sequences.

Another type of prepatternning, perhaps the most disquieting to some, is what to say. People feel, when they speak, that they are expressing personal opinions, experiences, and feelings in their own way. But there is wide cultural and subcultural diversity in what seems self-evidently appropriate to say, indeed, to think, feel, or opine. There is an enormous literature to draw

upon in support of this argument. All the scholars cited for work showing differing discourse strategies include observations about what can be said. Some further sources include Tyler (1978), Polanyi (1985), Schieffelin (1979), and all the work of Becker.

Mills ([1940] 1967) observes that individuals decide what is logical and reasonable based on experience of what others give and accept as logical and reasonable motives. And these "vocabularies of motives" differ from culture to culture. Referring to personal experience, everyone notices, upon going to a foreign country or talking to someone of different cultural background, that things are said and asked which take one by surprise, seeming unexpected or even uninterpretable.⁶

The unexpected, like a starred sentence in syntax, is noticed. Speakers rarely notice the extent to which their own utterances are routinized, repetitions of what they have heard. For example, during the 1984 American presidential election, I heard from several individuals, as the expression of their personal opinions, that Mondale was boring. Never before or since has this seemed an appropriate and logical observation to make about a presidential candidate, a basis on which to judge his qualifications for office. Yet it seemed so in 1984, repeated back and forth in newspaper opinions, private opinions, and newspaper reports of private opinions in the form of ubiquitous polls. As Becker (ms.: 4) notes, much of "apparently free conversation is a replay of remembered texts – from T.V. news, radio talk, the New York Times. . . ."

Dimensions of fixity

Given this sense in which all language is a repetition of previous language, and all expressions are relatively fixed in form, one cannot help but notice that some instances of language are more fixed than others. This may be conceived as a number of continua reflecting these dimensions. There is, first, a continuum of relative fixity in form, another of relative fixity with respect to context, and a third with respect to time.

The first two dimensions, fixity vs. novelty in form and by association with context, have already been illustrated with reference to rigid situational formulas. The dimension of relative longevity or wide-spreadness of prepatternning across time is represented, at one pole, by instant, ephemeral language which is picked up and repeated verbatim in a given conversation and then forgotten. Many examples of this are presented in this chapter. A question is repeated word for word and then answered; a listener repeats the end of a speaker's utterance by way of showing listenership, and so on. Inasmuch as the second speaker repeated the utterance of another, the second speaker found the utterance ready-made and used it as found. For

that speaker in that context, the utterance was prepatterned, formulaic, if fleetingly so.

Again as illustrated by many of the examples in this chapter, some phrases are picked up and repeated in extended play of more than a single repetition, repeated by more than one speaker in a multi-party conversation. Moving along the continuum of fixity in time (in contrast to fixity in form and situation), we find expressions which are re-used throughout an extended interchange, but only that one. For example, during her oral examination boards, a graduate student coined the term "vanilla linguistics" to distinguish it from the hyphenated disciplines such as socio-, psycho- and applied linguistics. Once she had done this, the phrase was picked up and used, repeated by the examiners and the student throughout that oral exam. However, it was not, so far as I know, ever used again by any of those speakers. The life of the expression was fixed, or formulaic, in, but did not outlive, that interaction.⁷

Had the student or the examiners used this term in future encounters with each other, that term might have become formulaic for them – a kind of "private language" such as individuals and groups of individuals develop, so that collocations have for them associations and ramifications accumulated in past interactions. It is the embellishment of such a private language that gives a recognizable character to communication among long-time associates, and is one of the reasons that it is sad when such extended interaction (for example, a relationship) ends: a language has died; one is left with ways of meaning that no one one speaks to can understand.

If, hypothetically, the phrase "vanilla linguistics" had been picked up by the faculty members on that examination board and used by them in professional interactions such as teaching, public lectures, or publications, or had it been subsequently repeated by the student to other students and repeatedly used by them, the phrase could have become a prepatterned expression for a larger group. Thus terms, phrases, and expressions diffuse through the language of small or large groups and become part of the language for a short or long time. Anyone returning to a home country after residence abroad notices phrases in common use that gained currency during their absence. The introduction of new terms and phrases can sometimes be perceived even when one has not been away. I recall the first time I heard someone refer to another's behavior as "off the wall": I had to ask what that meant. The phrase eventually came to sound very "natural" to me; for a time, I believe, I used it a lot; now, I believe, it has a circumscribed place in my repertoire.

In summary, then, repetition is at the heart of language: in Hymes's terms, language structure; in Bolinger's, language production; in Becker's,

all languaging. Considered in this light, it raises fundamental questions about the nature of language, and the degree to which language is freely "generated" or repeated from language previously experienced.

Repetition in discourse

Friedrich (1986:154) remarks on the "intensely poetic" nature of the child's learning experience, "involving sound play, complex figures of speech, and various experiments." If repetition is an essentially poetic aspect of language (as others have argued and I will argue it is), then it is not surprising that, as Keenan (1977:125) notes, "One of the most commonplace observations in the psycho-linguistic literature is that many young children often repeat utterances addressed to them," and that studies of children's discourse are the richest source of research on repetition. (The work of Bennett-Kastor [for example, 1978, 1986] is devoted to the study of repetition in first language acquisition.) Moreover, a glance at the child discourse literature reveals that nearly every study makes some reference to children's use of repetition.⁸

Grammatical parallelism – the whole network of equivalence and contrast relations – was an abiding concern of Jakobson. Waugh and Monville-Burston (1995) point out that much of Jakobson's intellectual energy in the 1960s and 1970s was devoted to analyzing these relations in poems. Best known perhaps is his discussion of "Grammatical parallelism and its Russian facet," showing grammatical parallelism to be the "basic mode of concatenating successive verses" (1966:405) in Russian folk poetry. Levin (1973:30) proposes that poetry is characterized by "coupling": putting "into combination, on the syntagmatic axis, elements which, on the basis of their natural equivalences, constitute equivalence classes or paradigms." Kiparsky (1973) examines both syntactic and phonological parallelism in poetry.

Johnstone (1987a), briefly surveying research on repetition, notes that repetition is especially frequent in highly formal or ritualized discourse and in speech by and to children. It is a way, she suggests, of creating categories and of giving meaning to new forms in terms of old. Research on ritual language has tended to be carried out by anthropologists and to focus on non-English languages. In contrast, research on or noting repetition in children's language has frequently concentrated on English.

Few studies have focused on repetition in conversation or other non-formal texts. (Exceptions are Schiffin 1982, Norrick 1987, and of course Tannen 1987a,b, the articles on which parts of this chapter are based.) Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) observe repetition in conversation as "format tying," and use this observation to critique a speech-act approach to

discourse. They remark that reducing conversation to underlying actions, intentions, or moves is like studying what a musician does but ignoring the music played. They point out that the coherence of a participant's move to a preceding one may lie in the "particularities of its wording."

That "particularities of wording" play a key role in creating coherence in conversation is a premise of this study to be illustrated at length here.

Functions of repetition in conversation

Why is there repetition in conversation? Why do we waste our breath saying the same thing over and over? (Why, for example, did I write the preceding sentence, which paraphrases the one before?) The varied purposes simultaneously served by repetition can be subsumed under the categories of production, comprehension, connection, and interaction. The congruence of these functions of discourse provides a fourth and over-arching function in the establishment of coherence and interpersonal involvement.

Production

Repetition enables a speaker to produce language in a more efficient, less energy-draining way. It facilitates the production of more language, more fluently. For individuals and cultures that value verbosity and wish to avoid silences in casual conversation (for example, those I have characterized as having "high-involvement styles"), repetition is a resource for producing ample talk, both by providing material for talk and by enabling talk through automaticity. (Evidence that repetitions can be produced automatically is presented in a later section of this chapter.)

Repetition allows a speaker to set up a paradigm and slot in new information – where the frame for the new information stands ready, rather than having to be newly formulated. An example is seen in a narrative elsewhere analyzed at length (Tannen 1982), in which a woman talked about a man who worked in her office (see Appendix II for transcription conventions):

And he knows Spanish,
and he knows French,
and he knows English,
and he knows German,
and HE is a GENTLEMAN.

The establishment of the pattern allowed the speaker to utter whole new sentences while adding only the names of languages as new information.

Repetition, finally, enables a speaker to produce fluent speech while formulating what to say next. I have used the term "linking repetition" for a phenomenon found in narratives told about a film (the much-analyzed

"pear stories" [Chafe 1980]), by which some speakers repeated clauses at episode boundaries. An example presented in that study (Tannen 1979:167) was taken from a narrative told about the film in Greek. I reproduce that example here, with the lines immediately following the repetition added to demonstrate the role of the repetition as a transition.

- 1 kai ta paidhakia synechisane to dhromo.
- 2 . . . synechisane: . . . to dhromo.
- 3 Kai to: n:
- 4 . . . kai afta . . . e:m kai pigainane:
- 5 pros tin fora pou 'tane to dhentro,
- 1 and the little children continued (going down) the road.
- 2 . . . (they) continued: . . . (going down) the road.
- 3 and the: mmm
- 4 . . . and they/these . . . u:m and (they) were going
- 5 toward the direction where the tree was,

The speaker repeats in line 2 the final clause of the episode (line 1) in which three children are walking down the road eating pears, as she devises a transition to the next episode, in which they will come upon the tree from which (unbeknownst to them) the pears had been stolen.⁹

To the extent, then, that repetitions and variations are automatic, they enable speakers to carry on conversation with relatively less effort, to find all or part of the utterance ready-made, so they can proceed with verbalization before deciding exactly what to say next.

Comprehension

The comprehension benefit of repetition mirrors that of production. Repetition and variations facilitate comprehension by providing semantically less dense discourse. If some of the words are repetitions, comparatively less new information is communicated than if all words uttered carried new information. This redundancy in spoken discourse allows a hearer to receive information at roughly the rate the speaker is producing it. That is, just as the speaker benefits from some relatively dead space while thinking of the next thing to say, the hearer benefits from the same dead space and from the redundancy while absorbing what is said. This contrasts with the situation that obtains when a written document is read aloud, and it may account for the difficulty of trying to comprehend such discourse – for example, the frequent inability of listeners at scholarly conferences to follow fully (or at all) most papers read aloud. The hearer, deprived of redundancy in such cases, must pay attention to every word, taking in information at a rate much faster than that at which the author compiled it.

Connection

Halliday and Hasan (1976) include repetition in their taxonomy of cohesive devices: it serves a referential and tying function. Repetition of sentences, phrases, and words shows how new utterances are linked to earlier discourse, and how ideas presented in the discourse are related to each other. But this is only the most apparent and straightforward way in which repetition allows a speaker to shape the material.

In a more pervasive and subtle way, repetition evidences a speaker's attitude, showing how it contributes to the meaning of the discourse. In terms of theme and rheme (Halliday 1967) or of topic and comment, repetition is a way of contributing to the rheme or comment. As Labov (1972) points out in introducing and defining "evaluation," repetition is evaluative: It contributes to the point. Here falls the function of repetition which is commonly referred to as emphasis, as well as a range of other evaluations of a proposition, or relationships among propositions.

For a brief illustration, consider again the excerpt about the man who knows languages:

- 1 And he knows Spanish,
- 2 and he knows French,
- 3 and he knows English,
- 4 and he knows German,
- 5 and he is a gentleman.

Repetition of "and he" in the final line ("and he is a gentleman.") ties the last line to the first four, indicating that the person referred to is the same throughout. Repetition of "and he knows" in lines 1–4 also serves a tying function, indicating that all the languages named are known by the same person. Beyond this simple tying function, however, the repetition of the phrases establishes a list-like rhythm, giving the impression that the languages which this person knows constitute a long list, longer even than the one given. Furthermore, and crucially, the evaluative effect of the list is to communicate that the speaker finds the length of the list impressive – and so should the listener. Moreover, the impact of the last line, "and he is a gentleman," is greater by virtue of its suddenly varying the frame. It carries over and reinforces the sense of admiration in the repetition of the rhythmic pattern which stresses "he."

Paradoxically, repeating the frame foregrounds and intensifies the part repeated, and also foregrounds and intensifies the part that is different. To quote Jakobson (Jakobson and Pomorska 1963:103), "By focusing on parallels and similarities in pairs of lines, one is led to pay more attention to every similarity and every difference." In a passage which is

especially interesting because it indicates that her fascination with repetition was inspired by her observation of conversation, Gertrude Stein (1935:213, cited in Law 1985:26) also notes that repetition sets both similarities and differences into relief:

I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different.

Interaction

The functions of repetition discussed under the headings of production, comprehension, and connection all refer to the creation of meaning in conversation. But repetition also functions on the interactional level of talk: accomplishing social goals, or simply managing the business of conversation. Some functions observed in transcripts I have studied (which are not mutually exclusive, and may overlap with previously discussed functions) include: getting or keeping the floor, showing listenership, providing back-channel response, stalling, gearing up to answer or speak, humor and play, savoring and showing appreciation of a good line or a good joke, persuasion (what Koch 1983a calls "presentation as proof"), linking one speaker's ideas to another's, ratifying another's contributions (including another's ratification), and including in an interaction a person who did not hear a previous utterance.¹⁰ In other words, repetition not only ties parts of discourse to other parts, but it bonds participants to the discourse and to each other, linking individual speakers in a conversation and in relationships.

Coherence as interpersonal involvement

By facilitating production, comprehension, connection, and interaction in these and other ways, repetition serves an over-arching purpose of creating interpersonal involvement. Repeating the words, phrases, or sentences of other speakers (a) accomplishes a conversation, (b) shows one's response to another's utterance, (c) shows acceptance of others' utterances, their participation, and them, and (d) gives evidence of one's own participation. It provides a resource to keep talk going, where talk itself is a show of involvement, of willingness to interact, to serve positive face. All of this sends a metamessage of involvement. This may be the highest-level function of repetition – in the sense in which Gregory Bateson (1972) adapts

Bertrand Russell's notion of logical types to describe the metamessage level of interaction: the level at which messages about relationships are communicated.

In a closely related way, repetition also serves the purpose served by all conventionalized discourse strategies at every level of language: giving talk a character of familiarity, making the discourse sound right. This is a verbal analogue to the pleasure associated with familiar physical surroundings: the comfort of home, of a favorite chair. It is the trust in a speaker one knows, or one who seems – by virtue of appearance, dress, kinesics, and ways of speaking – like one to be trusted. The pattern of repeated and varied sounds, words, phrases, sentences, and longer discourse sequences gives the impression, indeed the reality, of a shared universe of discourse.

But how, linguistically, is interpersonal involvement accomplished? In terms of the musical aspect of language, repeating a word, phrase, or longer syntactic unit – exactly or with variation – results in a rhythmic pattern that creates ensemble. In terms of mutual participation in sensemaking, each time a word or phrase is repeated, its meaning is altered. The audience reinterprets the meaning of the word or phrase in light of the accretion, juxtaposition, or expansion. In the words of Jefferson (1972:303), “a repeat” is “an object that has as its product-item a prior occurrence of the same thing, which performs some operation upon that product-item.” In other words, seeing the same item a second time, listeners re-interpret its meaning. An extreme representation of listeners supplying meaning in repetitions is in Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Being there*: A simple-minded gardener is thought brilliant by those whose words he repeats. The deep meaning they glean from his utterances is entirely the result of their own work.

Repetition and variation in conversation

Conventional wisdom: the negative view

“History repeats itself,” a radio announcer quipped. “That’s one of the things wrong with history.” This witicism reflects conventional wisdom by which repetition is considered undesirable in conversation. “You’re repeating yourself” can only be heard as a criticism. One cannot say, “Wait a minute, I haven’t repeated myself yet,” as one can say, “Wait a minute, I haven’t finished what I started to say.”

Evidence of negative associations with repetition abounds. The stereotypical popular image of repetition in conversation is represented by Woody Allen (1982:363) in the screenplay of *Stardust memories*:

And Jones and Smith, the two studio executives who are always seen together, Smith always yesing Jones, repeating what he says, appear on the screen next. . . .

JONES And what about the cancer foundation . . .
SMITH And what about the cancer foundation . . .
JONES . . . and the leukemia victims . . .
SMITH . . . and those leukemia victims . . .
JONES . . . and the political prisoners all over the world?
SMITH . . . and the political prisoners . . .
JONES What about the Jews?
SMITH The Jews!

The italicized description of the action, provided by the publisher, suggests a negative Tweedledee/Tweedledum interpretation of the repetition in the dialogue. Moreover, the repetition in the dialogue seems intended to belie the verbalized concern for the victims. Repetition here is synonymous with “yessing”: buttering someone up by hypocritically displaying continual automatic agreement.

A reviewer (Prescott 1983:82) criticizes an author by saying, “Her numbing repetition of perhaps a dozen significant sentences quickly becomes irritating.” The poet W. H. Auden ([1956] 1986:3) observed that “the notion of repetition is associated in people’s minds with all that is most boring and lifeless – punching time clocks, road drills, etc.” He lamented that this makes “an obstacle” of “the rhythmical character of poetry” because “rhythm involves repetition.” Auden’s observation of the necessity of repetition for poetry highlights the contrast that repetition has been taken seriously and highly valued in literary texts (Law 1985 notes a number of studies of repetition in literature), in contrast to its devaluation in conventional wisdom applied to conversation.

This chapter demonstrates, with reference to examples from conversational transcripts, that repetition is pervasive, functional, and often automatic in ordinary conversation.

Forms of repetition

Forms of repetition and variation in conversation can be identified according to several criteria. First, one may distinguish self-repetition and allo-repetition (repetition of others). Second, instances of repetition may be placed along a scale of fixity in form, ranging from exact repetition (the same words uttered in the same rhythmic pattern) to paraphrase (similar ideas in different words). Midway on the scale, and most common, is repetition with variation, such as questions transformed into statements, statements changed into questions, repetition with a single word or phrase changed, and repetition with change of person or tense. I also include patterned rhythm, in which completely different words are uttered in the same syntactic and rhythmic paradigm as a preceding utterance. There is also

a temporal scale ranging from immediate to delayed repetition, where "delayed" can refer to delay within a discourse or delay across days, weeks, months, and years. Formulaic language (or fixed expressions) is language repeated by multiple speakers over time.

All these boundaries are fuzzy. Although some expressions are readily recognizable as formulaic (for example, "A stitch in time saves nine"), many others have a familiar ring but are difficult to categorize with certainty as formulaic. Similarly, in identifying repetitions in a discourse, some cases are clearcut (such as most of those I present here), but in others, one must make what is ultimately an arbitrary decision about how far away in the transcript two occurrences may be in order for the second to be counted as a repetition of the first. Always, moreover, there is at least a theoretical possibility that both instances of the same string, or any instances of any string, are repetitions of a string which the speaker previously heard or uttered.

It would be hubris (and hopeless) to attempt to illustrate every form and function of repetition. I will try simply to indicate the pervasiveness of repetition in conversation by exemplifying many of its forms and functions, to show evidence that repetition can be automatic, and to discuss how it contributes to interpersonal involvement.

Repetition across discourses and time

My main focus in this chapter is syntactic repetition in casual conversation. To indicate, however, that repetition occurs across discourses and across time as well as within a discourse, I begin with an example of a narrative which seems to be structured around a remembered kernel sentence.

Elsewhere (Tannen 1978) I analyze a conversational story told by a woman in a small group as part of a story round that I sparked by asking if anyone had had any interesting experiences on the subway. In telling of the time she fainted on the New York subway, this speaker uttered a single sentence, with variation, three times. Near the beginning she said it twice in quick succession:

... a.nd . . . I remember saying to myself . . . [chuckling]
 "There is a person over there
 that's falling to the ground."
 . . . And that person was me.
 . . . And I couldn't . . . put together the fact that
 there was someone fainting
 and that someone was me.

After the speaker tells the story and the group discusses it briefly, the speaker reiterates the sentence by way of closing off that story and moving on to another:

And uh: . . . it was funny
 because in my head I said
 . . . my awareness was such . . . that I said to myself
 . . . "Gee well there's a person over there
 falling down."

... And that person was me.
 [Listener: It's weird . . . mmh]
 Okay that was . . . that experience.
 . . . And another experience

This sentence, in its three forms, encapsulates what was interesting about having fainted on the subway, or at least what the speaker is making the point of her telling: that she had an out-of-body experience, by which she saw herself as if from the outside. The sentences share a syntagmatic frame which includes slots that are filled with slightly different items. See Table 1 for a representation of the three sentences in this framework.

Table 1.

There is	a person over there that's	falling to the ground	and that person	was me.
There was	someone	fainting	and that someone	was me.
There's	a person over there	falling down	and that person	was me.

Insofar as this speaker repeated the sentence, slightly varied, twice after its first utterance, she could be said to have found the second and third utterances relatively ready-made in her own prior speech. I am convinced, although I cannot prove it on the basis of this example alone, that she had told this story before, and would tell it again, and that when she did so, she would use a variation of the same sentence because it encapsulated for her what was memorable and reportable about this experience. In this sense, at the time she told this story, she was repeating the sentence from her own prior discourse at earlier times.

The pervasiveness of repetition in conversation

At the beginning of each semester, I ask students in my discourse analysis classes to record spontaneous conversations in which they participate; they then choose segments to transcribe and analyze throughout the semester. Each term, the assignment everyone finds easiest is the one that requires them to identify lexical and syntactic repetitions in their transcripts. For example, the following segment came from a recorded conversation among four undergraduate housemates at home: (note that "Tab" is a soft drink.)¹¹

- (1) 1 MARGE Can I have one of these Tabs?
 2 Do you want to split it?
 3 Do you want to split a Tab?
 4 KATE Do you want to split my Tab? [laughter]
 5 VIVIAN No.
 6 MARGE Kate, do you want to split my Tab?
 7 KATE No. I don't want to split your Tab.

Of these seven lines, five are repetitions and variations of the paradigm established by a combination of Marge's question in line 2 ("Do you want to split it?") with the last word of line 1 ("Can I have one of these Tabs?").

Forms of repetition in this example include self-repetition:

- 2 MARGE Do you want to split it?
 3 Do you want to split a Tab?

allo-repetition:

- 3 MARGE Do you want to split a Tab?
 4 KATE Do you want to split my Tab? [laughter]

and repetition with slight variation, as seen in the two previous pairs. The functions of these repetitions include humor, seen in lines 3 and 4, where "a Tab" is reinterpreted as "my Tab" (note the accompanying laughter).

This example is not unusual. In another segment of the same conversation, Vivian told about an amusing event involving her and Marge, who occupied different bedrooms in the house. Vivian had been lying in bed when she heard "this- pounding upstairs, upon the ceiling in our room." Vivian checked with Marge, who said she didn't hear it; they returned to their respective rooms. Back in her room, however, Vivian continued to hear the pounding on her ceiling, so:

- (2) 1 VIVIAN So I stood on my bed →
 2 MARGE She pounded on the ceiling. →
 3 VIVIAN and I pounded on the ceiling. →
 4 MARGE she was pounding . . .
 5 VIVIAN and I hear Marge
 6 and I hear Marge dash out of her room,
 7 come downstairs and open the door,
 8 and I was like "No Marge. . ."
 9 MARGE She said "Marge, it's me."
 10 VIVIAN I'm like, "What is . . ."
 11 MARGE I was pounding on my ceiling.
 Bizarre!

This narrative, like the Tab interchange, is structured around a kernel phrase, "pounding on the ceiling." The irony and point of the story lie in the repetition: When Vivian uses the phrase "pounding on the ceiling" to describe her

own retaliatory action, she dramatizes that she created a noise similar to that created by the original "pounding on the ceiling," making it more plausible that Marge mistook Vivian's own "pounding" to be the externally-produced pounding she had previously not heard. In this way, the repetition of the phrase represents iconically the similarity of the two sounds.¹² As in the previous example, this kernel phrase is made up of two prior contiguous phrases from which the paradigm is drawn: Vivian had begun the story by saying "there was this pounding upstairs, upon the ceiling in our room."

The next example is also typical of transcripts prepared, year after year, by students in my classes. In the dyadic conversation from which the excerpt is taken, Frank complains that he has nothing to do because he is unemployed. His friend Terry takes the opportunity to encourage him to be more contemplative: She suggests he take advantage of his free time "to day-dream." To illustrate what she has in mind, she recommends that he stand on a bridge and watch the water go under it.¹³ He counters that he will finish the book he is reading. This frustrates Terry:

- (3) TERRY THAT'S NOT DAYDREAMING! . . . darn it!
 [laughter]
 FRANK Well, daydreaming is something that comes natural!
 You don't don't PLAN daydreaming.
 TERRY You don't even
 you're not even hearing what I'm SAYING! What?
 FRANK You can't PLAN daydreaming . . .
 "I'm going to go daydream for a couple hours guys, so"
 TERRY Yes you CAN plan it!
 You can plan daydreaming.

Thus speakers weave the words of others into the fabric of their own discourse, the thread of which is, in turn, picked up and rewoven into the pattern. Repetitions and variations make individual utterances into a unified discourse, even as they are used for evaluation: to contribute to the point of the discourse.

Examples of functions of repetition

Not all transcripts show a high percentage of repeated words but many do, and all show some. In this section I exemplify a range of functions served by repetition of words, phrases, and clauses in conversation: as participatory list-tenership, ratifying listenership, humor, savoring, stalling, expanding, participating, evaluating through patterned rhythm, and bounding episodes. Examples come from a Thanksgiving dinner table conversation in which I participated. (See Appendix I for information on this and other sources of examples.)

Repetition as participatory listenership

Examples (1)–(3) show repetition of a kernel sentence in a story or conversational segment. In these uses, each time the utterance is repeated, the theme of the story or interchange is developed, slightly changed in meaning as well as form. Another extremely common type of repetition, in a sense the most puzzling but also the most basic, is the exact or slightly varied repetition of a previous speaker's utterance. Person is varied if required by the change in speaker, but no information is added, and no perceptible contribution is made to the development of a story, theme, or idea. (4) and (5) come from a discussion of the Whorfian Hypothesis.

- (4) 1 DEBORAH You know who else talks about that?
2 Did you ever read R. D. Laing?
3 The Divided Self?
4 CHAD Yeah. But I don't /??/.
5 DEBORAH He talks about that too.
6 CHAD He talks about it too.

Chad's repetition in line 6 ("He talks about it too."), echoing my utterance in line 5 ("He talks about that too.") seems to be simply a way for Chad to participate in the interchange by showing listenership and acceptance of my utterance. (His partially inaudible line 4 ["Yeah. But I don't /??/."] is probably a statement that he has read but does not remember the book. If so, his repetition could also be a claim to credit for having read it, and perhaps for now recalling it.)

The next example comes from the same discussion:

- (5) 1 DEBORAH Like he says that
2 he says that Americans... →
3 CHAD L Yeah
4 or Westerners tend to uh...
5 think of the body and the soul
6 as two different things. →
7 CHAD L Right.
8 because there's no word
9 that expresses body and soul together.
10 CHAD L Body and soul together.
11 Right.

Again, Chad repeated in line 10 words in line 9, "body and soul together," as a show of listenership and perhaps shared expertise.

At various times during the dinner conversation, each participant's career furnished a topic of talk. The preceding topic, the Whorfian Hypothesis, grew out of a combination of the work of one participant, David, as an American Sign Language interpreter, and mine as a linguist.

The following segment of conversation occurred when participants were discussing violence in children's cartoons, relevant to Chad's job at an animation studio. Sally and I (not coincidentally, I suspect, the two women) claimed that, as children, we had been disturbed by violence in cartoons; three of the four men taking part in the conversation claimed they had not:

- (6) 1 STEVE I never saw anything wrong with those things.
2 I thought they were funny.
3 CHAD L Yeah.
4 DEBORAH I hated them.
5 CHAD I agree, [i.e. with Steve]
6 PETER What. The cartoons?
7 STEVE I never took them seriously.
8 I never — thought anyone was
9 DEBORAH L I couldn't stand it.
10 STEVE [One page of transcript intervenes.]
11 PETER I never... took that seriously.
L I never could take it seriously.

In lines 7 and 10, separated by a page of transcript, Steve repeats almost the same phrase, "I never took them/that seriously." By restating his contribution, Steve continues to participate in the conversation, even though he has nothing new to add.

In line 11, Peter repeats what Steve said in lines 7 and 10, with slight variation ("I never could take it seriously."). Although line 11 adds no new information to the conversation, it nonetheless contributes something crucial: Peter's participation. Moreover, it is not only what Peter says that shows that he agrees with Steve, but also the way he says it. By repeating not only Steve's idea, but also his words and syntactic pattern, Peter's contribution is a ratification of Steve's. At the same time, the three instances of a similar statement help to constitute the discourse and give it its texture.

Such immediate repetition of others' utterances is extremely frequent in the transcript. Indeed, ratifying repetitions often result in triplets. When Steve is serving wine, Sally declines, and her refusal is immediately repeated by David and Steve, speaking almost in unison:

- (7) SALLY I don't drink wine.
DAVID She L doesn't drink wine
STEVE L Sally doesn't drink wine.

These immediate allo-repetitions are shows of participation and familiarity. By transforming Sally's statement of her drinking habits into a third-person statement, David shows familiarity with Sally. By shadowing (speaking along with another speaker, with only split-second delay) the same observations, Steve both ratifies David's participation and displays his

familiarity with Sally too. (Steve knows Sally better; he lived with her for six years.)

Another triplet occurred in the Whorfian Hypothesis discussion. I commented that differences in ways of talking may be less cognitive than cultural. Chad and David both repeated my statement to show listenership:

- (8) 1 DEBORAH like you all see the same thing
2 but people in one culture
3 might notice and talk about one aspect
4 while people in another culture
5 might notice and talk about another one.
6 DAVID Yeah and which would have...
7 nothing to do with language.
8 DEBORAH It's expressed in language.
9 CHAD It's expressed in language.
10 DAVID It's expressed in language.

There is a striking parallelism in my proposition in lines 2-5. However, I am focusing here on the triplet in lines 8-10: Chad's and David's nearly simultaneous repetition of my phrase (line 8, "It's expressed in language"), showing understanding of my idea and also ratification and acceptance of my wording.

Ratifying listenership

In (9), Chad was telling about a promotional whistle-stop train tour he had participated in. He described a scene in which the train pulled into a station, and pandemonium resulted as a crowd rushed the train to approach the character being promoted: a man dressed as a large mouse.

- (9) 1 CHAD they all want to touch this... silly little mouse
2 STEVE At five o'clock in the MORNING on the TRAIN station.
3 CHAD Yeah.
4 DAVID In New Mexico.
5 CHAD In New Mexico.
6 With ice on the... ICE hanging down from things...

The main speaker, Chad, ratifies Steve's contribution (line 2: "At five o'clock in the MORNING on the TRAIN station.") by saying (line 3) "Yeah." But he ratifies David's contribution "In New Mexico" (line 4) by repeating it (line 5), incorporating it into his narrative.¹⁴

In another example, Chad remarked on his observation of the way a deaf friend of David manipulates space when he signs. Chad responded to my request for clarification by incorporating my word into his discourse. (Note too how the repetition of "room" grounds his discourse and gives substance to its main point.)

- (10) CHAD Y'know, and he'd set up a room,
and he'd describe the room,
and people in the room
and where they were placed,
DEBORAH and spatially?
CHAD and spatially.

Rather than answering my question "yes" or "no," Chad continues speaking, implicitly answering affirmatively by incorporating my word ("spatially") into his discourse.¹⁵

Humor

Humor is a common function of repetition with slight variation. Peter used repetition as a resource for humor when I commented on how well-behaved his dog Rover was. Steve simply agreed, but Peter converted my statement into an agrammatical wry one:

- (11) 1 DEBORAH Rover is being so good.
2 STEVE I know.
3 PETER He's being hungry.

When Peter echoes my line 1, "Rover is being so good," substituting "hungry" for "good," the resulting line 3, "He's being hungry," is humorous because he used the same grammatical frame to convert a common construction into an odd one.

A triplet that uses a prior syntactic frame to generate a humorous locution arose following my request for permission to tape record the conversation:

- (12) 1 PETER Just to see if we say anything interesting?
2 DEBORAH No. Just to see how you say nothing interesting.
3 PETER Oh. Well I-I hardly ever say nothing interesting.

In line 2, I used the wording of Peter's question, "say anything interesting," to create the reversal, "say nothing interesting." Peter made further use of the oddness of this locution in line 3, heightening the humor with a double negative, "I hardly ever say nothing interesting."¹⁶

In a final example of humorous repetition, the guests were sitting down to dinner as Steve, the host, was moving between the dining room and the adjoining kitchen. In the following excerpt, Steve repeated his own words because he was not heard the first time. (He began speaking when he was in the kitchen.) Then I picked up his phrase and repeated it in an exaggerated chanting manner, playing on the fact that the phrase "white before red" reminded me, rhythmically, of "i before e" in the children's spelling mnemonic "i before e except after c." I did not finish the paradigm because

David did so for me, introducing yet another joke by substituting a salacious word, "bed," in the final slot:

- (13) STEVE The only trouble about red and white wine
 DEBORAH No, I'm not going to be doing any work /??/
 STEVE The only trouble about red and white wine is you should have
 white before red.
 DEBORAH White before red except after
 DAVID after bed.

The humor of David's building on my humor by inserting "bed" in my chanting paradigm is enhanced (and occasioned) by its rhyme, that is, repetition of the vowel sound in "red."

Savoring

Not only can humor be created by repeating, but its appreciation can be displayed by repeating. For example, in the discussion of why Sally and I were disturbed by cartoon violence, Steve suggested it was because we "took them literally." Then David followed up:

- (14) 1 DAVID That's because you have a-
 /arcane/ view of reality. [laughter]
 2 DEBORAH Cause we're sensitive. [laughing]
 [laughter]
 3 SALLY Cause we're ladies.
 [laughter]
 4 STEVE Ladies. . . Ladies. [laughing]

I built on the paradigm established by David (line 1, "That's because you have a- /arcane/ view of reality") by slotting in a mockingly self-congratulatory adjective (line 2, "Cause we're sensitive"). Sally followed up by repeating the same paradigm, slotting in a word that is ironic because of its association with women of another era (line 3, "Cause we're ladies"). The word "ladies," uttered with Sally's British accent and applied to us, tickled Steve, who repeated it twice while chuckling and laughing (line 4). He seemed to be repeating her word in order to savor it, thereby also showing his appreciation of her irony.¹⁷

Stalling

Repeating a preceding utterance with slight variation is used in many other ways as well. One such way is to repeat a question, transforming second to first person. This allows the responding speaker to fill the response slot without giving a substantive response. At one point in the

conversation, David was talking about American Sign Language. Peter asked him a question, and David responded by echoing the question with rising intonation:

- (15) PETER But how do you learn a new sign.
 DAVID . . . How do I learn a new sign?

During playback, I learned that David had been uncomfortable with the speed of Peter's speaking turns. This, combined with the pause preceding his response ("How do I learn a new sign?"), led me to conclude that David repeated the question to slow down the conversation – an additional, related function of the repetition.

Expanding

I began a dyadic interchange with Peter by asking a question:

- (16) 1 DEBORAH Do you read?
 2 PETER Do I read?
 3 DEBORAH Do you read things just for fun?
 4 PETER Yeah.
 5 Right now I'm reading
 6 Norma Jean the Termite Queen.

Peter transforms my second person question (line 1, "Do you read?") into the first person (line 2, "Do I read?") as a stalling repetition. I repeated my initial question with elaboration (line 3, "Do you read things just for fun?"). Peter answered (line 4, "Yeah."), then grounded an expansion in the repetition with transformation of the question ("I'm reading" + name of book). Thus the reformulation of the question is the first step in the process of expansion; the question is then used as a scaffold on which to construct on-going talk.

Repetition as participation

(17) occurred in the context of talk about the composer Schumann. (Sally and Steve are professional musicians.) Sally had said that Schumann destroyed his fingers for piano-playing with a "contraption" that he designed to stretch them. This led me to recall a newspaper article about a case of mutilation involving a finger:

- (17) 1 DEBORAH I read something in the newspaper,
 2 I won't tell you.
 3 DAVID What contraption?
 4 STEVE I don't want to hear about it.
 5 DEBORAH You don't want to hear about it.
 6 SALLY Tell it. Tell it.

- 7 DAVID We want to hear about it.
 8 SALLY /?/
 9 DAVID Steve can go in the other room.
 10 STEVE I don't want to hear about it.

Sally's self-repetition in line 6 ("Tell it. Tell it.") displays her eagerness to hear the (presumably gruesome) story. Steve repeats in line 10 exactly what he said in line 4 ("I don't want to hear about it"). In line 5, I ratified what Steve said in line 4 by transforming his first person statement into the second person ("You don't want to hear about it."). David uses the same syntactic frame in line 7 to distinguish himself and the others from Steve ("We want to hear about it."). The result is a lot of talk resulting from a few words and ideas, linked together and distinguished by repetition.

The following example shows how repetition makes a fabric of conversation. Here Steve and his brother Peter recall the quonset huts in which they lived as children. (Quonset huts were odd-looking temporary structures built by the United States government to house returning veterans and their families following the Second World War.)

- (18) 1 STEVE Cause they were built near the swamp.
 2 We used to go . . . hunting frogs in the swamps.
 3 DEBORAH Where was it.
 4 Where were yours?
 5 STEVE In the Bronx.
 6 PETER In the Bronx.
 7 In the East Bronx?
 8 DEBORAH How long did you live in it?
 9 STEVE Near the swamps?
 10 . . . Now there's a big cooperative building.
 11 PETER Three years.
 12 DEBORAH THREE YEARS?

Steve is preoccupied with his recollection that the quonset huts were near the swamps where he remembers playing as a child, and he repeats this three times:

- 1 STEVE Cause they were built near the swamp.
 2 We used to go . . . hunting frogs in the in the swamps.
 9 STEVE Near the swamps?

In lines 6 and 7, Peter utters "In the Bronx," shadowing Steve's line 5, and also offering information that was as much his as Steve's, since they are brothers:

- 5 STEVE In the Bronx.
 6 PETER In the Bronx.
 7 In the East Bronx?

Peter's utterance in line 7 ("In the East Bronx?") is both a repetition of Steve's words in line 5 and an immediate self-repetition with expansion, adding "east" and introducing rising intonation. (The intonation seems to orient the answer to me, the questioner, to imply, "Do you know where the East Bronx is?"). Steve then echoes Peter's intonation (though not his words) when he utters line 9 with rising intonation, "Near the swamps?" Finally, Peter answers my question in line 8 "How long did you live in it?" with line 11 "Three years," and in line 12 I respond by repeating Peter's answer with emphasis ("THREE YEARS?").¹⁸

Evaluation through patterned rhythm

A type of repetition that does not involve repeating words at all is patterned rhythm. In a segment immediately preceding the lines cited in (9) describing pandemonium in a railroad station, Chad said:

- (19) 1 CHAD Because everyone . . . was . . . they were so INSANE.
 2 They'd come in and run in . . .
 3 and "I want to touch him."
 4 Well, when you have six thousand, five thousand,
 5 six thousand ten thousand people come in,
 6 they all want to touch this . . . silly little mouse

Why does Chad say that the people "come in and run in"? The second verb rephrases, with slight intensification, the idea of the first. (Koch 1984 examines such instant self-paraphrases as lexical couplets.) But it is not the case that the repetition with variation adds nothing: On the contrary, it creates the vivid impression of many people in great movement, through its intensifying, list-like intonation.

Another instance of list-like intonation occurs when Chad says lines 4 and 5 ("six thousand, five thousand, six thousand ten thousand people come in"). In addition to the repetition of "come in" from line 2, there are four items in the list which describe how many people were involved. Such a list might be expected to follow an order of increasing number. Instead, the order six, five, six, ten seems to be random; what is crucial is the rhythm established by the list. Furthermore, the violation of expected sequence contributes to the impression of confusion and disorder.

Chad again achieves a listing effect in the following comment, spoken in the discussion about cartoons. He defends violence in cartoons by explaining that the cartoon producer wanted his cartoons to include a variety of scenes:

- (20) 1 CHAD you have to run the gamut of everything.
 2 /You get/ scary parts, good parts, this things,
 3 and everything else.