Ordinary Conversation and Literary Discourse: Coherence and the Poetics of Repetition[a]

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OVERVIEW

ORDINARY CONVERSATION achieves coherence through linguistic features generally regarded as quintessentially literary: use of, and repetition and variation of, rhythm; phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and discourse structures; ellipsis ("indirectness" in conversation); imagery and detail; constructed dialogue; and figures of speech and tropes. This is so because literature, like conversation, both creates and depends for its meaning on interpersonal involvement.

Although conversation and literature operate on the same constraints, they are not the same. I have been trying, in recent research, to identify and compare the form, frequency, and function[b] of the patterns listed above, in conversational and literary discourse. Thus far, I have focused analysis on indirectness/ellipsis (or silence) in conversation as well as drama (for example in the plays of Pinter) (Tannen 1990), repetition (Tannen 1987a,b), and constructed dialogue (what has been called reported or direct speech) (Tannen 1986, 1988).

In this paper I begin by discussing the larger framework and practical significance of this research in terms of the study of conversational coherence, and the sense in which this can be thought of as an aesthetics or poetics of conversation. I then summarize the aspects of discourse I have been looking at, giving brief illustrations of a number of them. The bulk of the paper then presents extended analysis of one aspect of discourse patterning, repetition, as seen in a short segment of conversation. Finally, I examine some aspects

[b] Note how the alliteration of initial /f/ and the rhythm of threes contributes to an impression of the rightness of these three items. Note also, in the preceding sentence, how the repetition of the /r/ sound in "rhythm" and "rightness" and the repetition of the word "three" (in addition to its cohesive function) are aesthetically pleasing. This indicates that the patterning of discourse I am attributing to conversational and literary discourse is also crucial in the discourse type that probably differs most noticeably from conversation and fiction: scholarly expository prose.

of repetition in literary discourse as compared to conversation. (The order of clauses here reflects the disorder of much scholarly study which has focused on literary texts and dismissed conversation as trivial. In fact it is literary discourse which makes use of the dynamics of conversation. Poets, in contrast, have always known this. W. H. Auden, for example, defined poetry as "memorable speech." The ethnographic work of Shirley Brice Heath [1986] with contemporary poets supports this as well.)

THE AESTHETICS OF CONVERSATION

The interrelated dynamics which I have described for discourse can be thought of as an aesthetics of conversation, in Becker's (1979, 1982) sense of aesthetics. Far from denoting something trivial or superimposed—form for its own sake—aesthetics, in this sense, implies that form and meaning are inseparable; understanding grows out of form as much as—or more than—it grows out of propositional or referential meaning. Hearers and readers respond to familiar patterns of discourse at all levels listed which (1) make the discourse sound right, thereby lending credibility, (2) make comprehension possible, and (3) establish, as they build on, interpersonal rapport.

Sharing coherence conventions for conversation—that is, expectations about patterns of linguistic structure at all the levels mentioned—is essential not only to understand discourse but also to feel coherent in the world, as Becker (1979:241) suggests about perceiving coherence in Javanese shadow theater.

> The universal source of language pathology is that people appear to say one thing and "mean" another. It drives people mad (the closer it gets to home). An aesthetic response is quite simply the opposite of this pathology. . . . Schizophrenia, foreign language learning, and artistic expression all operate under the same set of linguistic variables. . . . The difference is that in madness (and in the temporary madness of learning a new language or a new text) these constraints are misunderstood and often appear contradictory; whereas in an aesthetic response they are understood as a coherent integrated whole. Shadow theater, like any live art, presents a vision of the world and one's place in it which is whole and hale, where meaning is possible. The integration of communication (art) is, hence, as essential to a sane community as clean air, good food, and, to cure errors, medicine. In all its multiplicity of meaning, a well-performed wayang is a vision of sanity.

Extending Becker's parenthetical juxtaposition of art and communication, I am suggesting that conversation is daily, unrehearsed found art. I am suggesting, further, that, much as Becker argues for a well-performed shadow play, a well-calibrated conversation is an aesthetic experience and a vision of sanity. Becker, following Dewey, defines aesthetics as "the emergent sense of coherence." In my terms, when conversational style is shared—when the message and the metamessage (Bateson 1972) are congruent, when conversational rhythm is effortlessly established, when one's intentions seem to be understood and one's interlocutor's intentions seem clear and appropriate—one gets

the feeling that one is a right sort of person and the world is a comfortable place. But when conversational style is not shared—when one cracks a joke and others grimace or look blank, when one tries to show interest and is thought pushy or tries to show annoyance and is taken to be compliant—when, in other words, one's intentions are consistently misunderstood and others' behavior and talk consistently seem inappropriate or incomprehensible, one starts to feel that there's something terribly wrong with oneself or with others and hence all is not right with the world.

Such cross-cultural communication problems are at the heart of much personal as well as international distress. The research project I have described, investigating the ways that discourse is constructed and that meaning is communicated in discourse, also contributes to an understanding of how sharedness and lack of sharedness of discourse conventions affect individuals and interaction. Furthermore, understanding the means of such communication breakdown offers a window on the processes that go unnoticed when communication is successful, when conversational style is shared.

How is conversation a means to coherence in the world? The means to meaning in interaction are the same patterns that give conversation a recognizable character: conventional patterns of sound, intonation, pitch, prosody, lexicon, and syntax, as well as the ideas conventionally chosen for communication. These are the devices by which meaning is communicated; at the same time conventionalized use of such devices gives discourse, as created by speakers in cultural groups, a familiar character. The familiarity of the discourse conventions both makes comprehension possible by means of reference to familiar frames or scripts, and also makes the discourse sound right—much as one can relax and luxuriate in the familiarity of one's own home, in contrast to the expenditure of energy necessary to negotiate unfamiliar surroundings.

This is the sense in which I suggest that conversation works much like literary language: hearers experience an aesthetic response to the coherence of form and meaning in the discourse which contributes to their apprehension and appreciation of the utterances. Thus, understanding in conversation is the result of a subjective process—a process of being MOVED.

EMOTIONALITY IN DISCOURSE

Havelock (1963) suggested that Plato did not want poets—who in his time were itinerant bards—involved in educational processes in *The Republic* because they moved audiences emotionally to what he called subjective knowing, in contrast with the objective knowing that he associated with literacy. I am suggesting that in conversation, as in poetry and other literary genres, subjective knowing is the goal, and it is created in two ways. Audiences are moved (1) by being swept along by patterns of sound and rhythm as well as by such patterns as repetition and parallelism, and (2) by the sense of identification that results from being required to participate in sensemaking. That is, in interpreting indirectness, ellipsis, tropes, imagery, and detail, the audience has to do a lot of filling in of meaning, and this participation contributes to the

sense of a shared universe, and of coherence in the world, at the same time that it contributes to persuasion (just as teachers are encouraged to allow students to draw their own conclusions).

This is not to say that there is no difference between conversation and literature, nor that conversation is poetry, but rather that literary language makes use of, builds on, and artfully manipulates and elaborates features that are spontaneous and commonplace in ordinary conversation because both depend for their effect on what Havelock (1963) and Ong (1967) call subjective knowing. As Rosen (1984) puts it, "Every genre can be heard in embryo in unrehearsed conversation."

Friedrich (1986:24) defines poetic language as "all parts of a language system that exemplify a figure" and demonstrates that this applies to every level of language, such as "metaphorlike relations in grammar," idioms, and word play of all types. "Poetic language," he shows, "is actualized in all domains of life," so that "the reality is not poetry vs. nonpoetry but more poetry versus less poetry". It is the poetic in language that fires the imagination — "the processes by which individuals integrate knowledge, perceptions, and emotions in some creative way" (p. 18).

My claim, then, is that conversation is inherently poetic because of its structure, its use of figures of speech and ellipsis (or indirectness), imagery and detail, and its rhythmic or musical quality, all of which serve to move hearers (or readers) — that is, in Friedrich's terms, to affect our imaginations, the pot in which knowledge, conviction, and emotion are brewed in aesthetic constraints. We decide what to believe and what to care about by measuring arguments, people, and texts against expected forms.

A POETICS OF DISCOURSE

Scattered findings from disparate fields, when brought together, yield evidence of features common to literary language and ordinary conversation — although generally the connection among these features has not been remarked upon by the researcher. I group these in the categories of (1) rhythm (2) surface linguistic form and (3) contextualization, or audience participation in sensemaking.

Surface linguistic form includes patterns of sound (alliteration, assonance, rhyme), morphology, lexical items, syntactic constructions, and discourse structures such as line and verse, and organization of information associated with conventional discourse genres such as narrative. Included here, finally, are what Levin (1982) calls "style" figures of speech.

Audience participation in sensemaking includes indirectness, ellipsis (called implicature in conversation), imagery, detail, dialogue, and "thought" figures of speech (Levin 1982), or tropes.

In each of these categories, conversation has been observed by linguists and social scientists to exhibit features that literary scholars have identified as quintessentially literary or poetic. I claim that these features contribute to processes of subjective knowing, or speaker/writer-audience involvement. This

similarity exists because both ordinary conversation and literary discourse seek to MOVE an audience. In contrast, expository prose and (I would add) content-focused oral discourse such as lectures and instruction-giving, in principle (but I would argue never in fact) seek to CONVINCE without emotional involvement. The way discourse MOVES is centrally related to a definition of aesthetics. I have come to the conclusion that all discourse seeks to move; even apparently content-focused persuasion proceeds by means of appeal to aesthetic senses — that is, by adherence to or pointed departure from familiar coherence constraints.

LINE AND VERSE STRUCTURE

The similarity of rhythmic dynamics in poetry and conversation is captured by scholarship in American Indian ethnopoetics. Tedlock (1972) and Hymes (1981) have led a movement recommending that American Indian narrative be transcribed in lines and verses and have suggested, moreover, that the discovery of such structure in American Indian narratives indicates that they should be considered poetry, not prose. I argue that rather than distinguishing poetry from ordinary talk, line and verse structure is the way written poetry captures in print the rhythmic chunking of talk. In other words, line breaks in poetry encourage readers to perceive the poetic discourse as they perceive all spoken discourse — in spurts. As Chafe (1980) has demonstrated at length, language in oral discourse emerges not in a steady stream but in small chunks segmented by prosody, intonation, pausing, and discourse markers such as "and," "but," and "yknow." Thus, when any oral discourse is transcribed, its comprehension is facilitated by transcription in (poetic) lines rather than undifferentiated (prose) blocks.

Consider, for example, a brief segment of an English narrative, first transcribed in prose. The segment is taken from Tannen (1978). In it, a woman who lives in New York is answering my question about whether she had any memorable experiences on the subway.

> I just had two p . . . particular incidents that I remember, and one-uh-I-neither one of them really had any kinds of endings or anything, that you know resolution, they just happened, um . . . one of them was-uh-back in . . . what '66? '67? when I fainted on the subway. It was very um . . . a . . . frightening experience. I had don't even remember fainting before in my life let alone on the subway. And uh-and I was going into the city, from Queens? And I was standing in a very crowded car. And I remember standing I was standing up, and I remember holding on to the center pole, and I remember saying to myself there is a person over there that's falling to the ground. And that person was me.

Now consider the same segment transcribed in lines:

> I just had two p . . . particular incidents that I remember,
> and one-uh-I-
> neither one of them really had any kinds of endings or anything,
> that you know resolution,
> they just happened,

um . . . one of them was–uh–back in . . . what '66? '67?
when I fainted on the subway.
It was very um . . . a . . . . frightening experience.
I had don't ever remember fainting before in my life
let alone on the subway.

And uh– . . . it was a h– very hot August day,
and I was going into the city,
from Queens?
And I was standing in a very crowded car.
And I remember standing
I was standing up,
and I remember holding on to the center pole,
and I remember saying to myself
there is a person over there
that's falling to the ground.
And that person was me.

The discourse is easier to read and understand when presented in this way because the line breaks serve as cues to the segmentation of ideas. For this reason, Becker (1984a) explains that he presents a text in this format in order "to slow the reader down." Perhaps such slowness approximates the necessary slowness of on-the-spot listening.

Verse breaks capture in print the larger episodic units that are characteristic of oral discourse—units of more varying but generally larger size which are characterized by unity of theme, action, or setting and are marked off by other, often longer, discourse markers such as "well", "and then," or "but anyway." Verse breaks are indicated by line spaces in the preceding transcription and are signalled by the discourse markers "um" and "and uh" as well as pauses and hesitations. (Chafe 1980 discusses episodic structure in oral narrative.)

REPETITION IN CONVERSATION

The background of this discussion, then, is the relationship between conversational and literary discourse in terms of their reliance on linguistic patterns which are part of a system of coherence constraints. I would like now to move to a detailed presentation of one aspect of linguistic patterning: repetition, as seen in a single short segment of conversation. The segment is taken from a dinner table conversation among friends. The larger conversation has been the subject of an extended study (Tannen 1984), but this segment has not been previously analyzed.[c]

[c] As discussed in the longer study, I was a participant in the conversation and therefore will refer to myself, as participant, in the first person. It seems to me that to do so is a prerequisite of what Mary Catherine Bateson (1984) calls "disciplined subjectivity," acknowledging and correcting for my bias rather than attempting to mask it and pretend an impossible objectivity.

First I will present the segment of conversation as I had originally tran-
scribed it.[d]

> CHAD: I go out a lot.
> DEBORAH: I go out and eat.
> PETER: You go out? The trouble with ME is if I don't prepare and eat well, I
>   eat a LOT. . . . Because it's not satisfying. And so if I'm just eating like
>   cheese and crackers, I'll just STUFF myself on cheese and
>   [fast - - - - - - -
>   crackers. But if I fix myself something nice, I
>   - - - - - - -]
>   don't have to eat that much. ⌉ I've noticed that, yeah.
>   DEBORAH: ⌊ Oh yeah? ⌋
> DEBORAH: Hmmm . . . Well then it works, then it's a good idea.
> PETER: It's a good idea in terms of eating, it's not a good idea in terms of
>   time.

Wondering whether the poetic line structure that Tedlock and Hymes find
in American Indian narrative, and that Chafe suggests characterizes English
and probably all narrative, was more generally characteristic of conversation,
I tried laying out this conversational segment in lines. I found, further, that
moving around bits of the lines made more of the repetition stand out. Fi-
nally, Dell Hymes pointed out to me that the segment has a clear verse struc-
ture as well:

```
 1  CHAD:      I    go out a lot.
 2  DEBORAH:   I    go out and eat.
 3  PETER:     You go out?

 4            The trouble with ME is
 5              if  I don't prepare
 6            and   eat  well,
 7                  I  eat  a LOT. . . .
 8     Because  it's       not satisfying.
 9   And so if  I'm just eating like      cheese and crackers,
10                I'll  just STUFF myself on cheese and crackers.
11      But if  I             fix myself something nice,
12              I don't have to eat that much.
13  DEBORAH:                                       Oh yeah?
14  PETER:     I've noticed that,              yeah.

15  DEBORAH:   Hmmm . . .
16        Well  then it works,
17              then it's    a good idea.
18  PETER:            It's   a good idea in terms of eating,
19              it's not a good idea in terms of time.
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[d] Punctuation in transcription is used to give a rough indication of intonation; it does not
reflect grammatical conventions for writing. Three dots (. . .) indicate a pause of a half second
or more as measured by a stop watch. CAPS indicate emphatic stress. Brackets linking two lines
show simultaneous speech.

Verse Structure

This segment, a short interchange on the topic of eating, can be seen as having three verses, indicated by line spaces in the transcript. Lines 1-3 constitute an opening, and lines 15-19 a closing or coda. It is probably not a coincidence that these parts are characterized by the most pervasive repetition, since openings and closings are often the most ritualized parts of any behavioral unit. The center verse constitutes the meat of the interchange, like the filling in a sandwich, made up of an if/then proposition which Peter creates and elaborates (i.e., If I don't prepare good food, I eat a lot of junk food; if I do prepare good food, I eat less of it).

Let's look more closely now at the repetitions of words, phrases, and sounds in this segment and consider what they are doing.

Lexical Repetition

Perhaps the first thing one notices about this segment is the repetition of the word "eat" in lines 2, 6, 7, 9, 12, and 18. The best way to represent visually the cohesive function of these (and other) repetitions is to highlight them on the transcript itself. Therefore I will, in this and succeeding examples, present the segment again, with the highlighting of the repetition under discussion superimposed on it.

```
1   CHAD:      I    go out a lot.
2   DEBORAH:   I    go out and eat.
3   PETER:     You go out?

4          The trouble with ME is
5       if  I don't prepare
6      and     eat  well,
7          I   eat  a LOT. . . .
8   Because  it's      not satisfying.
9   And so if  I'm just eating like      cheese and crackers,
10          I'll just STUFF myself on cheese and crackers.
11   But if  I          fix myself something nice,
12          I don't have to eat that much.
13  DEBORAH:
14  PETER:    I've noticed that,           Oh yeah?
                                           yeah.
15  DEBORAH:  Hmmm . . .
16      Well then it works,
17          then it's    a good idea.
18  PETER:         It's  a good idea in terms of eating,
19          it's not a good idea in terms of time.
```

The repetition of the verb "eat" thus provides a surface level reflection of the cohesive thread created by the topic, eating.

A number of other repetitions are quickly perceived when the transcript

is studied briefly. First is the repetition of the two-word verb "go out" found in the utterances of all three speakers in the opening verse, lines 1–3:

```
1 CHAD:     I  | go out |  a lot.
2 DEBORAH: I  | go out |  and eat.
3 PETER: You | go out? |
```

In addition to setting the topic of talk, eating, these lines establish a sense of rapport among the three speakers by their echoes of each other's use of the phrase "go out."

In the middle verse, a solo by Peter, there is a highly noticeable repetition of the phrase "cheese and crackers" as well as of the words "just," "myself," and "yeah":

```
 9  And so if I'm | just |  eating like           | cheese and crackers, |
10            I'll | just |  STUFF | myself | on   | cheese and crackers. |
11      But if I              fix | myself | something nice,
12      I don't have to eat that much.
13                                     DEBORAH: Oh | yeah? |
14  PETER:   I've noticed that,                    | yeah. |
```

When Peter utters "cheese and crackers" for the second time, he does so more quickly than the first, and his intonation remains steady and low across the phrase. The effect of this intonation is to mark the self-reference to his earlier utterance of the same phrase.

The meanings of the two instances of "just" are somewhat different. In the first instance, (9) "And so if I'm just eating like cheese and crackers," "just" is a mitigator, meaning "only": "if I'm eating only cheese and crackers." But in the second instance, (10) "I'll just STUFF myself on cheese and crackers," it is an intensifier: "I'll absolutely stuff myself with cheese and crackers." This difference in the meanings of the repeated word "just" underlines the significance of its repetition. In other words, he didn't just (!) repeat the word because he meant the same thing.

More will be said in a later section about the repetition of "myself."

When Peter says (14) "I've noticed that, yeah," his "yeah" repeats mine in the preceding line, ratifying my listener response to his talk and giving a sense of coda to that verse of the segment.

Like the first three lines, the last four are highly repetitive:

```
16            Well | then it | works,
17                 | then | it | 's    a good idea.
18  PETER:              It's    a good idea | in terms of | eating,
19                 it's | not | a good idea | in terms of | time.
```

The words and phrases "then," "it's a good idea," and "in terms of", which make up the bulk of this part of the discourse, are all repeated. Paradoxically, the repetition of these words serves to highlight the words which are not repeated: "eating" and "time." They are highlighted by their newness in contrast to the sameness of the repeated words, a slot and filler means to focusing attention in the discourse.

Another group of repetitions are somewhat further from each other in the discourse but seem to cohere through their rhyming:

```
 1  CHAD:          I   go out  a lot.
 2  DEBORAH:       I   go out and eat.
 3  PETER:         You go out?

 4                 The trouble with ME is
 5          if     I don't prepare
 6          and       eat  well,
 7                 I  eat  a LOT. . . .
 8  Because        it's        not satisfying.
 9  And so if      I'm just eating like         cheese and crackers,
10                 I'll  just STUFF myself on cheese and crackers.
11      But if     I               fix myself something nice,
12                 I don't have to eat that much.
13  DEBORAH:                                          Oh yeah?
14  PETER:         I've noticed that,                    yeah.

15  DEBORAH:       Hmmm . . .
16          Well   then it works,
17                 then it's      a good idea.
18  PETER:             It's       a good idea in terms of eating,
19                 it's not a good idea in terms of time.
```

I have drawn the connection between lines 8 and 19 as a broken rather than a solid line because it strikes me that the argument to be made for the repetition of "it's not" is a bit weaker than that to be made for the repetition of "a lot". This is both because the lines in which "it's not" appears are further apart, and also because "it's not" is a structure occasioned by grammatical conventions for negation in English. Nonetheless, there are other grammatically correct ways to effect negation, such as "it isn't" or "it is not." The choice of "it's not" rather than other alternatives echoes the earlier use of "a lot."[e]

Another kind of patterning which is also closely linked to the grammar of the language is that of pronouns and discourse markers (see FIG. 1). Although these function words are likely or even required to occur frequently in any English discourse, it is nonetheless the case that their frequent occurrence plays a part in giving the discourse its characteristic shape and sound. In this sense, their repetition plays a significant role in establishing the shared universe of discourse created by conversational interaction in that language. As Becker (1984b) demonstrates for Javanese textbuilding strategies, "This kind of non-rational homology is one of the things that binds a culture" (p. 435). In other words, such conventionalized figures both grow out of and contribute to the textual and noetic aesthetic of a language and culture.

```
 1  CHAD:      I go out a lot.
 2  DEBORAH:   I go out and eat.
 3  PETER:     You go out?

 4             The trouble with ME is
 5             if  I don't prepare
 6             and    eat well,
 7             I eat a LOT. . . .
 8             Because it's        not satisfying.
 9             And so if I'm just eating like      cheese and crackers,
10             I'll just STUFF myself on cheese and crackers.
11             But if I          fix myself something nice,
12             I don't have to eat that much.
13  DEBORAH:                                    Oh yeah?
14  PETER:     I've noticed that,               yeah.

15  DEBORAH:   Hmmm . . .
16             Well then it works,
17                  then it's    a good idea.
18  PETER:          It's    a good idea in terms of eating,
19                  it's not a good idea in terms of time.
```
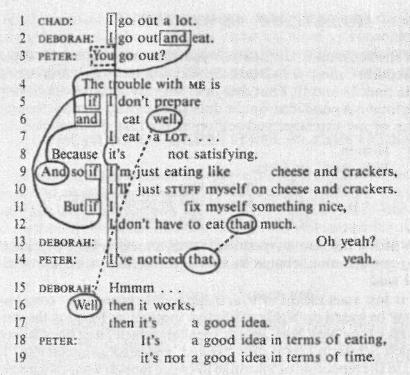
FIGURE 1.

A particularly intriguing repetition in this segment occurs when Peter says (7) "I eat a LOT." To create this utterance, Peter took the end of Chad's utterance (1) and the end of my utterance (2) and stuck them together to make his own utterance (7):

```
 1  CHAD:      I go out a lot.
 2  DEBORAH:   I go out and eat.

 7  PETER:     I eat a LOT.
```

In this way, the idea that Peter expresses is a response to what Chad and I said, at the same time that the form of his response — that is, its repetition — is a ratification of our preceding contributions. Ongoing discourse is thus woven of the threads of prior talk. When fishing for words, speakers cast a net in the immediately surrounding waters of conversation.

I return now to a repetition mentioned earlier, found in lines 10 and 11:

```
10        I'll just STUFF myself on cheese and crackers.
11  But if I         fix myself something nice,
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Here the choice of "fix myself" seems to be occasioned by the pattern of the preceding "stuff myself." This becomes even more compelling when the choice of "fix myself" is considered in contrast to the use of "prepare" in line 5: "If I don't prepare and eat well." The unmarked case would have been for Peter to repeat the same word he used to introduce the idea: "prepare."

REPETITION AS RAPPORT

The end of the segment under analysis provides an example of how the form of the discourse can serve to create rapport and ratify an interlocutor's contribution. In lines 18 and 19, Peter disagrees with my comment that taking time to prepare food is a good idea, but he does so by casting his disagreement in the paradigm of my utterance and self-repeating that allo-repetition.

```
15 DEBORAH:  Hmmm . . .
16          Well then   it works,
17                then  it's      a good idea.
18 PETER:          It's      a good idea in terms of eating,
19                 it's not  a good idea in terms of time.
```

Thus the form of the discourse, repetition, sends a metamessage of rapport by ratifying my contribution, even as its message disagrees with the proposition of what I said.

I believe it is just such means by which apparently contentious conversational styles may be based on highly affiliative motives, as found in the conversational styles of the New York Jewish speakers which I describe (Tannen 1984), and which Schiffrin (1984) calls "Jewish argument as sociability." It is found as well in the repetition of formulae to create rapport while disagreeing in the highly ritualized modern Greek verbal art of *mantinades* as described by Herzfeld (1985). In other words, the form of the discourse, repetition, contributes to the meaning of the utterance just as much as (if not more than) the words. In particular, the form operates on what Bateson (1972) calls the metamessage level, the level on which messages about relationships between people are communicated.

PHONOLOGICAL REPETITION

An example of repetition of sounds in this segment is the repetition of initial /t/ in line 19:

```
19 it's not a good idea in terms of time.
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Repetition of medial vowels was seen in the "lot/not" pattern discussed above. It is also seen in the repetition of the vowels in "just," "stuff," and "much":

```
9  And so if I'm just   eating like               cheese and crackers,
10          I'll just stuff  myself   on  cheese and crackers.
11 But if I            fix  myself  something nice,
12          I don't have to eat that much.
```

One wonders whether the /ʌ/ sound in "trouble" (line 4) should also be included in this constellation. In order to know how much attention to pay to such patterns of sound, it is necessary to determine whether or not it is statistically random for vowel sounds to recur in such close proximity. In the absence of such evidence, however, it can still be observed that repetition of sounds

contributes to the effect of sweeping the hearer along with the discourse. One need only listen to a language with recurrent vowel or consonant sounds not used in one's own language, to experience the jarring impressions they make — for example, for Americans, the recurrent nasals in Portuguese or pharyngeals in Arabic.

FUNCTIONS OF REPETITION IN CONVERSATION

Repetition in this segment serves the purposes of showing listenership and humor, of establishing coherence, and of making possible the production of more talk than there are new ideas to be verbalized. All of this is done while giving the discourse a familiar sound and making it comprehensible by placing meaning where hearers expect to find it. Moreover, the act of repeating each others' words sends a metamessage of rapport.

A Note on Intentionality

To say that repetition serves these functions is not to imply that the speakers were consciously intending to serve these purposes when they were talking. Every aspect of discourse analysis raises questions of intentionality. I suggest that most language is uttered fairly automatically. Speakers talk in ways that seem appropriate to say what they mean. Their consciousness is focused on that level: If asked why they said something, they are likely to answer in terms of what they meant. Similarly, if asked why they performed a particular act of walking, most people will reply in terms of where they wanted to get to. If pressed, they might explain why they wanted to get there. Nonetheless a physiologist might analyze the various body movements that make up walking and therefore function in getting people where they want to go. Such movements are not exactly unconscious — people know they are moving their legs and arms — but neither are they the level on which intentionality focuses. Just so, the form of utterances and discourse strategies can be functional without being consciously intentional.

REPETITION IN LITERARY AND CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

The bulk of this paper has been devoted to analyzing a segment of conversation to show that it is characterized by the same pervasive patterning of repetition that has profitably been studied in literary discourse. Although I am suggesting that repetition, like the other aspects of discourse I listed at the outset, are the basis of coherence in both conversational and literary discourse, I am not suggesting that this or any other aspect is identical in all discourse genres. The types of repetition found in conversational and literary discourse are likely to differ. I will illustrate this briefly by reference to segments of two such genres: conversation and drama.

The larger project of which the present analysis is a part addresses the occurrence and use of the aspects of discourse listed in a variety of conversational and literary genres. One segment of that project compares the dinner table talk already described with the language of a play that was written based on the same conversation: Glen Merzer's *Taking Comfort.*[f] Preliminary counting of instances of sound and word repetition in 10,000 word segments of these two samples indicates that repetition of word-initial sounds is twice as frequent in the play, whereas word or phrase repetition is twice as frequent in the conversation. This is shown in TABLE 1.

TABLE 1. Repetition in Conversation and Drama

	Conversation	Drama
Sound	48	91
Word or Longer	575	229

To illustrate, I will present a short segment from the play. The speaker is a woman named Nancy who is about to see Larry, her former lover, after a long separation.

> When I talk to myself, I talk to Larry. We have terrific fights in my head that he always wins. Now he'll be speaking for himself. I wonder if he'll do as well.

As before, I will now present the same segment laid out in lines in order to capture its rhythm and highlight its structure:

> When I talk to myself,
>   I talk to Larry.
> We have terrific fights in my head
>   that he always wins.
> Now he'll be speaking for himself.
> I wonder if he'll do as well.

The repetition of the first two lines sets up a slot-and-filler paradigm to highlight the relationship between "myself" and "Larry" — the identity that a woman feels between herself and the man she lived with and loved for many years. But as Nancy continues with this idea, she switches the verb from "talk" to "speak." For one thing, the second line plays on the common expression "speak for yourself." This does not weaken the argument that there is significance in her varying the verb; it enhances it.

This type of variation seems to be felt as necessary when discourse is written, to avoid the impression of monotony. (A similar finding is reported by Chafe 1985). When repetition of words is found in drama, it seems to be deliberate, intended to play up and play on the repetition of exact words which charac-

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[f] Glen Merzer wrote *Taking Comfort* after reading my dissertation and the transcript of the dinner table conversation which it analyzed. He consciously based the play on the transcript and its context. *Taking Comfort* has received three productions: two college productions in Indiana and one equity production in Lansing, Michigan.

terizes conversation. Pinter is a master of this. Consider, for example, this segment from his play, *The Birthday Party*:[8]

STANLEY: Meg. Do you know what?
MEG: What?
STANLEY: Have you heard the latest?
MEG: No.
STANLEY: I'll bet you have.
MEG: I haven't.
STANLEY: Shall I tell you?
MEG: What latest?
STANLEY: You haven't heard it?
MEG: No.
STANLEY: (advancing). They're coming today.
MEG: Who?
STANLEY: They're coming in a van.
MEG: Who?
STANLEY: And do you know what they've got in that van?
MEG: What?
STANLEY: They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.
MEG: (breathlessly). They haven't.
STANLEY: Oh yes they have.
MEG: You're a liar.
STANLEY: (advancing upon her). A big wheelbarrow. And when the van stops they wheel it out, and they wheel it up the garden path, and they knock at the front door.
MEG: They don't.
STANLEY: They're looking for someone.
MEG: They're not.
STANLEY: They're looking for someone. A certain person.
MEG (hoarsely): No, they're not!
STANLEY: Shall I tell you who they're looking for?
MEG: No!
STANLEY: You don't want me to tell you?
MEG: You're a liar!

By repeating words and phrases Pinter plays on the effect of ordinary conversation, highlighting its absurdity and creating as well a sense of ominousness.

Returning to the excerpt from the play *Taking Comfort*, let's consider the repetition of sounds:

When I talk to myself,
    I talk to Larry.
We have terrific fights in my head
    that he always wins.
Now he'll be speaking for himself.
I wonder if he'll do as well.

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[8] *The Birthday Party*, by Harold Pinter. Copyright © 1959, 1987 by Harold Pinter. Used by permission of Grove Press, a division of Wheatland Corporation. I am grateful to Ahmet Egriboz for calling my attention to the relevance of Pinter in general and this segment in particular.

The /t/ sound in "talk" seems to have occasioned the choice of "terrific," and there is a repetition of initial /w/ in "wins," "wonder," and "well" as well as medial /w/ in "always."

It seems then that literary discourse intensifies the tendency of spontaneous spoken discourse to repeat sounds, sweeping the audience along, while tempering its tendency to repeat words and phrases, probably to avoid the monotonous effect of such repetition—the very effect that Pinter plays on by intensifying such repetition in his plays.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested that conversation and literary discourse both can be understood in terms of their use of coherence conventions which amount to a system of aesthetics or poetics. This is aesthetics in the sense of Becker, following Dewey: an emergent sense of coherence. It is poetics in the sense that Michael Herzfeld intended in titling his book *The Poetics of Manhood*.

At the 1981 Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics, William Bright (1982) delivered a paper supporting the claim of Tedlock and Hymes that American Indian narrative should be considered poetry. In discussion following this paper, William Labov and others suggested that poetry should rather (or additionally) be identified by its effect of moving the audience emotionally. In this sense, I am suggesting, conversation too is poetic: By creating patterns of form and meaning which dovetail, it moves its participants to understanding and rapport—or their opposites—in either case, an emotional process.

Thus, conversation is poetic in its structure as well as its effect. In this sense, all discourse is not poetry, but all discourse is poetic, operating on systems of coherence in which form and meaning intertwine. Repetition is one of an array of dynamics by which conversation, like literary discourse, achieves this aesthetic effect.

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