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Repetition in conversation as spontaneous formulaicity*

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Abstract

Repetition is a pervasive type of spontaneous prepatterning in conversation. I begin by discussing the work of others to put linguistic prepatterning in theoretical focus. After considering the range of prepatterning in conversation, I present and discuss examples of self- and other-repetition in tape recorded, transcribed conversation. I explore an analogue of initiation and repetition in neuroanatomy, suggesting that there is a universal human drive to initiate and repeat, which is of use in learning. A view of language as prepatterned, initiative and repetitious might be resisted because it seems to see humans as less autonomous; however, I suggest, drawing on recent work by Paul Friedrich on the individual imagination and by neurologist and essayist Oliver Sacks on neuroanatomy, that, by means of prepatterning and automaticity, speakers are highly interactive individuals for whom repetition enhances interpersonal rapport, creativity, and sense of self. I conclude with implications for linguistic theory and method of the view of language proposed.

Introduction

A crucial sense in which discourse is interactionally developed has been argued recently by some linguists and many anthropologists and sociologists who study language in interaction. This sense is captured by the title of a recent special issue of TEXT: *The Audience as Co-Author*. In the introduction to that issue, Duranti (1986) gives an excellent overview of the theoretical foundations of this perspective. Many other studies reflect this approach as well. Scollon and Scollon (1984) show that Athabaskan storytellers shape

their stories in response to their listeners. Kochman (1986) demonstrates the use of 'strategic ambiguity' in certain Black speech genres, such that the receiver, not the speaker, determines meaning. Erickson (1980: 294) gives an elegant demonstration of 'the influence of listeners' communicative behavior upon the communicative behavior of speakers', using the apt metaphor that 'talking with another person ... is like climbing a tree that climbs back' (316). The interactional nature of all meaning in conversation is demonstrated, moreover, by the entire body of work in conversation analysis by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and those working in the paradigm they created (see especially Schegloff, 1982, in press; Goodwin, 1981).

I want to suggest another sense in which discourse is interactionally developed – all types of discourse: conversational or formal, multi-party or monologic, fragmentary or extended. It is the sense in which any utterance echoes prior utterances. That is, individuals say particular things in particular ways because they have heard others say similar things in the same or similar ways.

This amounts to little less than a reconsideration of our understanding of the nature of language and of grammar. My understanding of this view of language traces to the work of A. L. Becker (1984a, 1984b, in press). A similar view was suggested by Bolinger in 1961 and elaborated by him in 1976. The work of Hopper (1987, in press) and Pawley (1986) are part of this movement. It has foundations in the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein (1958) and Heidegger (1962). The recently much-cited work of Bakhtin (1981) reflects a related view as well. Moreover, speech formulas and idiomatity, all ways discussed by a few (Chafe, 1968, 1970; Makkai, 1972), and receiving increasing recent attention (Coulmas, 1981; Fillmore, 1982; Lambrecht, 1984), inevitably evoke a view of language as relatively prepatterned, repetitive and imitative, a radically different understanding of grammar, of linguistic competence, than has been widespread in recent linguistic theory.

In this paper, I first consider the work of some of the scholars I have mentioned, which puts linguistic pre patterning in theoretical focus; then consider the range of pre patterning in conversation, and then suggest that repetition is a pervasive type of spontaneous pre patterning in conversation. After presenting some examples of repetition in conversation, I explore an analogue of imitation and repetition in neuroanatomy, which provides a basis for the speculation that there is a universal human drive to imitate and repeat, which is of use in learning. A view of language as pre patterned, imitative and repetitive might be resisted because it seems to see humans as less autonomous; however, I suggest, drawing on recent work by Paul Friedrich on the indi-

vidual imagination and by neurologist and essayist Oliver Sacks on neuroanatomy, that pre patterning need not be seen in this light. Rather, by means of pre patterning and automaticity, speakers are highly interactive individuals who can use repetition as the basis for creativity and sense of self. I conclude by discussing implications of a view of language as pre patterned for linguistic theory and method.

Grammar as memory: other voices

Twenty-five years ago, Bolinger (1961: 381) suggested that speech may have more to do with memory than with novel production:

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 preestablished inventory ... ?

Elaborating this argument fifteen years later, Bolinger (1976) cites linguists working on three different levels of language to support his view of language as 'an organism' rather than 'an Erector set' (2):

I want to take an idiomatic rather than an analytic view, and argue that analyzability always goes along with its opposite at whatever level, and that our language does not expect us to build everything starting with lumber, nails, and blueprint, but provides us with an incredibly large number of pre-fabs, which have the magical property of persisting even when we knock some of them apart and put them together in unpredictable ways. (1)

Bolinger cites Freeman Twaddell (1972) on syntax: 'there is also much in linguistic activity which seems to be more plausibly described as the recall of quite specific memories' (1). On morphology, he cites Anttila (1972): 'Speakers are being endowed with productive mechanisms that no longer produce anything. The truth is that we have the words, but they are stored as independent units' (2). Finally, he cites Ladefoged (1972) who provides a similar argument for phonetics: '... instead of storing a small number of primitives and organizing them in terms of a [relatively] large number of rules, we store a large number of complex items which we manipulate with comparatively

simple operations. The central nervous system is like a special kind of computer which has rapid access to items in a very large memory. . . . ' (2). All these linguists, like Bolinger himself, assign a much larger role to memory in the production of language: memory for the innumerable instances of language that have previously been heard.

In Becker's terms, all utterance, all language, is the reshaping of prior text to new contexts. Becker (1984b) examines reduplication and repetition as variants of a strategy of repeating at different levels in an episode from a Japanese shadow play. He concludes that such discourse strategies constitute the grammar of a language: not abstract patterns but actual bits of text which are remembered, more or less, then retrieved to be reshaped to new contexts. By a process of repetition, 'the actual *a priori* of any language event — the real deep structure — is an accumulation of remembered prior texts. . . . And our real language competence is access, via memory, to this accumulation of prior text' (435).

Hopper (in press) identifies two approaches to grammar 'whose polar extremes are dominated by radically different understandings of the nature of human language'. The '*a priori* grammar attitude' sees grammar as 'a discrete set of rules which are logically and mentally presupposed by discourse', so that 'grammar is logically detachable from discourse and precedes discourse'. In contrast, the 'emergence of grammar attitude' sees 'grammar as the name for a vaguely defined set of sedimented (i.e. grammaticized) recurrent partials whose status is constantly being negotiated in speech. . . . The two approaches to grammar are 'competing ideologies, corresponding broadly to the two major intellectual trends of our day: structuralism, with its belief in and attention to prior structures of consciousness and behavior, and hermeneutics, with its equally firm conviction that temporality and context are continually re-shaping the elusive present'. Hopper notes that the *a priori* grammar posture is 'indifferent to prior texts', not distinguishing between repetitive utterances such as idioms and proverbs, on the one hand, and 'bizarre fictional sentences' on the other. In the emergent grammar view, the fact that some sentences are frequently said and others not is crucial, not incidental.

A similar point is made by Pawley (1986) in his discussion of 'divergent views of lexicon held by grammarians and lexicographers' which 'reflect different assumptions about what a language is' (98). Pawley cites Grace's (1981) contrast between 'the view of language as a "universal encoder" with that of language as a "cultural encoder"' (115). In the universal encoder view, language is separable from culture, and 'All sentences are equal, regard-

less of whether they encode ideas that are familiar in the language community or ideas that are novel or exotic'. In contrast, the cultural encoder view is concerned 'with ideas that are familiar to the language community, with how things are commonly said in that community. . . . Therefore 'it is important to separate those form-meaning pairings that have institutional status in the culture from those that do not, as well as to denote particular kinds and degrees of institutionalization' (116).

The next section of this paper is a first attempt 'to denote particular kinds and degrees of institutionalization' — that is, to describe the types of pre-patterning that characterize conversational discourse.

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 idiomaticity 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 idiomaticity, or pre-patterning, 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); 'pre-patterned 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 prepatterning, as the work of scholars briefly reviewed in the preceding section indicates, let us consider the range of prepatterning by which one may say that language in discourse is not either prepatterned or novel but more or less prepatterned. 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 Oztek, 1981), and modern Greek (Tannen and Oztek, 1981) contain numerous situational formulas of this type, many of which come in pairs.

For example, in Greek, one who is leaving for a trip will certainly be told the formula, *'Kalo taxidi'* ('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 taxidi'* may respond, *'Kali andamos'* ('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'. 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 the arrival event is marked 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. 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 a very uncomfortable feeling of being linguistically hamstrung, unable to say what one feels is necessary to say. (See Tannen, 1980a, for further discussion of this cross-cultural phenomenon.)

Highly fixed in form but less so in association with particular contexts are conventional 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 the occurrence of the conventional sayings could not be predicted, and their omission would not be remarked upon. 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 the proverb. (Norrick, 1985, gives an excellent 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 lack of it.

Although many proverbs and sayings are known to English speakers, they are less likely to introduce them non-ironically 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, rather than utterly, fixed.

For English speakers, at least, it is common to use fixed expressions, altering some items in their canonical form, with no apparent loss of communicative effectiveness. This, in itself, is evidence that meaning is not being derived from the expressions by a process of deconstruction according to

definitions and rules, but rather is being arrived at in a leap of association or abduction (Bateson, 1979), 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 all 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.¹

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.² 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. A few I happened to hear or involuntarily utter in the weeks immediately preceding the current writing, and the originals which I believe they fused, are as follows:

- the best of both possible worlds
 - the best of all possible worlds
- the best of both worlds
- You can make that decision on the snap of the moment
 - the spur of the moment
- snap decision
- It gave him something to lash into
 - lace into (as in, He laced into her)
 - lash (whip/attack)
- He was off the deep
 - off the wall
 - off the deep end

- You can pipe in with your ideas
 - 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 their meaning as well as the canonical forms would have. In other words, the language is mistake-proof, to this extent. Meaning is gleaned by association with the familiar sayings, not by structurally decomposing them.

Indeed, it is possible that in some cases the altered form is enhanced rather than handicapped, enriched by association with the other word or formula. For example, the intensified sense of attack in 'lash' may have added appropriate meaning to the standard but tamer 'lace into (her/him)'. '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 chestfallen'.³ One could well see this as a form of linguistic creativity rather than an error or misfire in the reaching for the standard term 'crestfallen'. Thus fixity in expression can encourage, rather than discourage, creativity.

Fixity of form can characterize chunks of smaller size. English includes innumerable expressions and collocations such as 'salt and pepper' or 'thin 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 pre patterning. 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).⁴ In Wittgenstein's (1958: 15) words, 'Only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name'.⁵ In other words, semantics too is a matter of

prior text, in Becker's terms. Another way to express this, following Fillmore (1976, 1979), is that all semantics is frame semantics: meaning can be gleaned only by reference to a set of culturally familiar scenarios (scripts or frames).

Bakhtin (1981: 276) eloquently describes the sense in which meaning cannot be the sole work of an individual:⁶

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 dialogic 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 a growing body of work in cross-cultural discourse analysis demonstrates. Becker's (1984b) analysis of repeating strategies in Japanese is an example of this. Another is Becker's (1979) analysis of 'text-building strategies' in a Japanese shadow play. Other examples include Gunperz (1982) on British English vs. Indian English discourse strategies; Kochman (1981) on black and white styles; Labov (1972) on narrative structure in general and inner-city black vs. middle class white narrative in particular; Tannen (1980b) on Greek vs. American narrative strategies and Tannen (1984, 1986) on differences in conversational style among Americans of different regions, ethnicity, class, gender, and age.

A final level of prepatterning, perhaps the most disquieting to some, is what to say. Whereas individuals feel that they are expressing personal opinions, experiences, and feelings, 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), and all the work of Becker. For example Becker (in press) cites Ortega y Gasset's (1957: 246) observation that 'each language represents a different equation between manifestations and

silences. Each people leaves some things unsaid in order to be able to say others'.

Mills (1940) observed 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 – are unexpected, or uninterpretable.⁷

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 opinion, that Mondale was boring. Never before had this seemed an appropriate and logical observation, a basis on which to judge a presidential candidate's 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. . . .'

Repetition as spontaneous prepatterning

With this in mind, one may nonetheless observe that some uses of language are more prepatterned than others. We have seen a continuum of relative fixity vs. novelty in form and another of relative fixity vs. novelty in association with context. A third dimension is fixity vs. ephemerality over time.

The rigid situational formulas and culturally shared sayings and idioms which have been previously discussed provide examples of language that is highly fixed in form, relatively fixed in association with context, and relatively fixed in temporality – that is, long-lived. They are expressions that have remained prepatterned and available to speakers over time. My focus in this paper is on expressions that, while relatively prepatterned in form, are highly ephemeral temporally: expressions that are picked up and repeated verbatim or slightly varied in a particular discourse. I present only a few examples, to give a sense of the pervasiveness and functions of repetition in conver-

sation. Numerous different examples are presented and discussed at length elsewhere (Tannen, in press; 1987).

It is not without significance that I am focusing on conversation and other oral discourse. Researchers comparing spoken and written discourse (for example Ochs, 1979; Chafe, 1982) quickly observed that exact repetition is more commonly found in oral discourse. In most cases, oral discourse samples were transcripts of conversation. To show the preponderance and working of repetition in a spoken as compared to a written text, I will start with an excerpt from a public address extemporaneously composed.

The excerpt is from a lecture given by John Fanselow, a gifted public speaker, at the 1983 Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics. Fanselow was explaining what he calls 'the tape recording syndrome': the pattern of behavior by which teachers who are ostensibly attempting to record their classes for analysis and evaluation keep turning up without having made the recording, blaming their failure on one or another tape recorder malfunction.⁸

The point is, I think,
(I've done this in many countries incidentally,
even Japan, where, you know, electronics is no problem.)

Same syndrome.

Same syndrome.

Both with American teachers

and teachers from other lands.

I think we're fearful of looking.

I think we're fearful of looking.

I think teachers are fearful of looking,

and we're fearful of looking.

The repetition that characterizes this excerpt is set in relief by contrast with the same comment as it appeared in Fanselow's (1983: 171) written version of his paper:

One reason I think many teachers fail to tape for a long time is that they are fearful of listening to themselves. And, I think that a central reason why we who prepare teachers avoid evaluations is that we, like those we prepare, are fearful of listening and looking as well. The tape recording syndrome is widespread.

There is parallelism in the written version, too, but it is less rigid. Further-

more, the 'fearful of looking' construction appears twice in the written version as compared to four times in the spoken one.

Contrasting the written version makes clear some of the functions of repetition in the spoken version. The widespreadness of the tape recording syndrome is lexicalized in the written version ('The tape recording syndrome is widespread'), in the terms Labov (1972) coined with respect to narrative, it is conveyed by external evaluation: the speaker steps outside description to state the point explicitly. The same idea is conveyed in the spoken version by internal evaluation: the description is rendered in such a way as to make the point implicitly.

Same syndrome.

Same syndrome.

I think we're fearful of looking.

I think we're fearful of looking.

Similarly, the observation lexicalized in the written version, that teacher trainers are 'like those we prepare' in being fearful, is conveyed in the spoken version by parallelism:

I think teachers are fearful of looking.

and we're fearful of looking.

By appearing in the same paradigmatic slot in the syntactic string, 'teachers' and 'we' are placed in the same semantic class, their similarity foregrounded.

Elsewhere (Tannen, 1978), I analyzed a conversational story that was told by a woman in a small group as part of a story round, that I elicited 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. She reports having thought:

'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.

This sentence, in its three forms, encapsulates what was interesting about the experience, 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 Figure 1 for a representation of the three sentences in this framework.

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.	

Figure 1.

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 readymade in her own prior speech. Furthermore, 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 if and 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 found the sentence readymade even the first time it occurred in this telling.

Repetition in conversation. The two preceding examples are of self-repetition in monologic discourse. I now turn to examples taken from a dinner table conversation that I have previously analyzed (Tannen, 1984) for other aspects of conversational style as well as for repetition (Tannen, forthcoming).⁹ The examples presented here have not been analyzed or discussed elsewhere. They illustrate both self- and other-repetition in the context of multi-party discourse. I was a participant in the conversation.

A basic and common form of repetition is expansion. One of the participants in the dinner table conversation, David, was an American Sign Language interpreter. At one point, he explained the derivation of some signs, and I asked him how he knew their derivations ('Do you figure out those . . . those um correspondences? or do- when you learn the signs, . . . /does/ somebody tell you?'). In response to an equivocal answer, I rephrased my question, 'Cause somebody tells you? Or you figure it out?' David answered:

David: uh: Someone tells me, usually.
... But- a lot of 'em I can tell.

I mean they're obvious. . . .
The better I get, the more I can tell.
The longer I do it the more I can tell
what they're talking about. . . .
without knowing what the sign is.

The phrase 'I can tell' is the core of three utterances. Furthermore, the rephrasing 'The longer I do it' is identified as a clarification of 'the better I get' by virtue of being slotted into the same paradigmatic relation to 'the more I can tell'. Moreover, the kernel phrase 'I can tell' may have been 'touched off' (H. Sacks, 1971) by the recurrence of the verb 'tell' in my questions and the beginning of David's response, and the recurrence of 'tell' there may have been touched off by an interchange a bit earlier in the same discussion in which the question of whether a signer uses signs for 'talk' and 'tell' in referring to signing is discussed.

- 1 David: If you're signing, Deborah: Yeah
2 you use this.
3 You don't use that.
4 Deborah: Oh oh I see you mean it does mean talking.
5 Yeah. Talking, literally talking
6 And if you're signing,
7 and you're saying I'm gonna tell you something? Yeah
8 Steve:
9 you say I sign You use, . . .
10 Deborah:
11 What's tell?
12 David: Huh?
13 If you're signing
14 and you're gonna say
15 I wanna tell you something.
16 Listen, I wanna tell you something.
17 I wanna let you know.
18 David: [laughs] Let you know. Let you know. [signing]
19 Steve:
20 You do say tell.
21 Deborah: I bet you do say tell.
22 David: I do.

This segment gives a good sense of the various uses of repetition, and the extent to which each individual's speech is woven with the thread of preceding conversation. For example, (3) 'you use this' becomes the frame for the op-

position, (4) 'you don't use that'. In (6) 'talking' is repeated to suggest a literal interpretation of its meaning, a common use of lexical repetition, functionally similar to the double construction (Dray, 1986). Though David's repetition of 'let you know' in (19) seems to reflect the repetition of signs common in the structure of ASL, my repetition (16-17) of 'I wanna tell you something' is for clarification, and David (18) uses my paradigm as the basis for his disagreement: 'I wanna let you know' (i.e. 'A deaf person would not sign, "tell"'). Finally, I repeat Steve's comment (20) 'You do say tell' with slight variation in (21) 'I bet you do say tell', using his words as a basis for participation, without adding new information.

During the dinner, conversation turned to the question of whether or not a deaf person thinks differently from hearing people, because of the differences in their language. As David was the expert on ASL, I was the expert on linguistics, and so I explained the Whorf Hypothesis and gave an illustration with reference to R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self*. Chad, who was familiar with many of the ideas I mentioned, repeated my words as a show of listenership and also shared expertise:

Deborah: Like he says that he says that Americans... or

Chad: Yeah

Westerners tend to uh: ... think of the body and the soul as two different things. Because there's no word

Chad: Right.

that expresses body and soul together.

└ Body and soul together. Right.

Chad:

Chad found the phrase 'body and soul together' readymade in my phrasing; furthermore, when I uttered 'body and soul together' I ran the words together, with monotonic intonation, in contrast to the word by word articulation of the preceding occurrence of the same words in 'the body and the soul as two different things'. Thus my first utterance of 'body and soul together' sounds formulaic, both because of its fixity as a familiar collocation and because of its echoing my immediately preceding utterance of the same words.

Chad remarked on his observation of the way Victor, a friend of David's who is deaf, 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.)

Chad: Yknow, and he'd set up a room,

and he'd describe the room,
and people in the room
and where they were placed,

└ spatially?

Deborah:

Chad: and spatially.

While speaking, Chad demonstrated the way Victor manually locates referents in space and manipulates them when telling a story. David expanded Chad's phrase 'he'll push' to collaborate in narrating the story, and Chad repeated David's utterance to incorporate it into his own narration:

Chad:

He gets when he... when he's done with something,
/or it's like/ he'll take it and go

he'll push the whole thing aside,

Deborah:

That's great.

Chad:

Or if he wants to hold it for a while
he'll push - it over to someplace else

Deborah:

└ Yeah

David:

He'll push it there.

Chad:

He'll push it there.

A bit later in the same discussion, I suggested that the difference may be less cognitive than cultural, that is, 'in how the culture conventionalizes what's appropriate to talk about'. As I go on, I use parallel structure to state my point, and Chad and David both repeat my statement to show listenership:

1 Deborah:

like you all see the same thing
but people in one culture

2

might notice and talk about one aspect
while people in another culture

3

might notice and talk about another one

4

Yeah and which would have ...

5 David:

nothing to do with language/
it's expressed in language.

6 Deborah:

It's expressed in language.

7 Chad:

└ It's expressed in language.

8 David:

└ It's expressed in language.

The second time I said (5) 'might notice and talk about', I found the phrasing readymade: I repeated it from the first instance (3). When Chad and David

repeated my phrase (9-10) 'It's expressed in language', they found it ready-made. Their repetitions showed agreement on a meta-level: the repetition not only showed understanding but also ratified and approved of my wording.

Speakers use repetition to contribute an idea by adding a single unit to a paradigm established by others as well as themselves. For example, when Steve complained about the heavy step of the person living in the apartment above his, David made a humorous suggestion and Peter built on it:

David: You should buy her some helium balloons.

Peter: You should buy her the book Robert Graves Peter Graves.

As in this example, repetition is often the basis for verbal play. 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 a chanting manner, playing on the fact that the phrase 'white before red' reminded me of 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:

Steve: The only trouble about red and white wine

Deborah: No, I'm not gonna 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.

Sex was the occasion for extended humorous conversation about children. Peter told of an occasion when his son Johnny's five year old playmate asked him, 'How did you make Johnny?' Amid general laughter, Peter went on:

Peter: How do you answer that question?

Steve: What does she know, yeah

Peter: I mean like what does she know, so

Deborah: What does she wanna know,

yeah.

Peter's articulation of the reason why it was hard to answer the girl's question ('What does she know') was originally formulated by Steve, with the tag

'yeah' to indicate that he was rephrasing what he saw as Peter's point. My repetition with slight variation ('What does she wanna know') also echoed Steve's tag 'yeah'.

A final example illustrates a number of the functions and types of repetition noted above and pervasive in conversation. Peter was talking about his recent divorce. He said that he would have stayed with his wife, even though they had a difficult relationship. I supplied the end of his sentence, which became material for extended play:

- 1 Peter: yknow I would've stayed in the relationship
- 2 but it wasn't um -that it was so great,
- 3 Deborah: -mhm
- 4 it was just that I felt like
- 5 in terms of bringing up the children, and uh
- 6 Deborah: That's what you do yeah.
- 7 Peter: That's what you do.
- 8
- 9 Steve: I hate to tell you Peter
- 10 but that's not what you do any more.
- 11 [all laugh]
- 12 Deborah: this is what you do.
- 13 Steve: This is what you do. [laughter]

In (7) Peter repeated my offering to incorporate it into his discourse. In (10) Steve, Peter's brother, transformed the phrase into the negative and elaborated it to humorous effect. In (12) I built on Steve's humor, supporting his joke, repeating my original phrase with slight variation and different emphasis. In (13) Steve repeated my reformulation in what I have called a savoring repetition: He seems to echo it to show his enjoyment and hold it up for the further enjoyment of others.

The drive to imitate

In a recent essay about 'Tics', neurologist and essayist Oliver Sacks (1987) gives an account of Gilles de la Tourette's syndrome, 'a syndrome of multiple convulsive tics'. In Sacks' description, this syndrome can take the form of the drive to imitate and repeat gone haywire. By representing an extreme form of the drive, however, it provides evidence for the existence of such a drive.

Sacks quotes extensively from a 1907 account by a ticqueur called O.:

I have always been conscious of a predilection for *imitation*. A curious gesture or bizarre attitude affected by anyone was the immediate signal for an attempt on my part at its reproduction, and is still. Similarly with words or phrases, pronunciations or intonation, I was quick to mimic any peculiarity.

When I was thirteen years old I remember seeing a man with a droll grimace of eyes and mouth, and from that moment I gave myself no respite until I could imitate it accurately. (38)

O's drive to imitate was not confined to imitation of others; it was an expression of a general urge to repeat, including the drive to imitate himself.

One day as I was moving my head I felt a 'crack' in my neck, and forthwith concluded that I had dislocated something. It was my concern, thereafter, to twist my head in a thousand different ways, and with ever-increasing violence, until at length the rediscovery of the sensation afforded me a genuine sense of satisfaction, speedily clouded by the fear of having done myself some harm. (38)

Thus the ticqueur's characteristic compulsive motions can be understood as the urge to reexperience a particular sensation.

Elsewhere, Sacks (1986: 117-118) gives an account of a contemporary Tourette whom he chanced to observe on a New York City street displaying the same pattern of behavior, intensified, now seen from the outside:

My eye was caught by a grey-haired woman in her sixties, who was apparently the centre of a most amazing disturbance, though what was happening, what was so disturbing, was not at first clear to me. ...

As I drew closer I saw what was happening. *She was imitating the passers-by* — if 'imitation' is not too pallid, too passive, a word. Should we say, rather, that she was caricaturing everyone she passed? Within a second, a split-second, she 'had' them all.

Why do humans experience a drive to imitate — a drive that is intensified in Tourette's syndrome? Freud observed, in a line which Kavin (1972: 1) uses as the epigraph to a book on repetition in literature and film, 'Repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure'. In a related observation, Norrick (1985: 22), citing Mieder (1978), notes that 'newspaper headlines are often modelled on proverbs and proverbial phrases in order to attract attention and arouse emotional interest'. This is obviously true — and quite astonishing. Wouldn't common sense suggest that what is

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prepatterned, fixed, and repetitions would be boring rather than attention-getting, bland rather than emotional? Why is emotion associated with fixity? Perhaps partly because of the pleasure associated with the familiar, the repetitions.

What purpose could be served by the drive to imitate and repeat? None other, I think, than the fundamental human purpose of learning. Becker (1984a: 138) proposes a

kind of grammar, based on a different perspective on language, one involving time and memory; or, in terms of contextual relations, a set of prior texts that one accumulates throughout one's lifetime, from simple social exchanges to long, semi-memorized recitations. One learns these texts in action, by repetitions and corrections, starting with the simplest utterances of a baby. One learns to reshape these texts to new context, by imitation and by trial and error. ... The different ways one shapes a prior text to a new environment make up the grammar of a language. Grammar is context-shaping (Bateson 1979: 17) and context shaping is a skill we acquire over a lifetime.

That imitation and repetition are ways of learning is supported by the extensive, indeed pervasive, findings of imitation and repetition in children's talk, such that Keenan (1977: 125) notes, 'One of the most commonplace observations in the psycholinguistic literature is that many young children often repeat utterances addressed to them'. (See research reviewed in Tannen, forthcoming).

Generative grammar sees language as novel production, as if individuals reinvent sentences each time they speak. The reality of language is less in our control, more imitative and repetitious, more automatic.

In observing that the prepatterning that characterized idioms may not be restricted to utterly fixed expressions, Bolinger (1976: 7) asks, 'may there not be a degree of unfreedom in every syntactic combination that is not random?' The word 'unfreedom' suggests one reason why many may resist the view of language as imitative and repetitious, that is, relatively more prepatterned and less novel than previously thought. Sacks (1987: 39) describes an aspect of the experience of Tourette's as an 'existential conflict between automatism and autonomy (or, as Luria put it, between an 'it' and an 'I')'. In this framework, seeing language as relatively imitative or prepatterned rather than newly generated seems to push us toward automatism rather than autonomy — make of us more of an 'it' and less of an 'I'. But a view of language as relatively prepatterned does not have to be seen this way. Rather, we may see it as making of us more interactional 'I's'.

We are dealing with a delicate balance between the individual and the social environment. Friedrich (1986) elaborates the central role played by the individual imagination in language:

The idea most fundamental to my thesis is that of the individual imagination. By 'the imagination' I mean the processes by which individuals integrate knowledge, perceptions, and emotions in some creative way which draws on their energies in order that they may enter into new mental states or new relations with their milieu. My idea clearly emphasizes the emotions, imagery and image use, sensuous imagery above all (dreams), aesthetic apprehension, and the more mythic side of life. But . . . the imagination includes cognition, literal description, and reason — concrete, abstract, and practical. (18)

Paradoxically, it is the individual imagination that makes possible the shared understanding of language. Imagery created by a speaker's imagination can be recreated by the imagination of a listener. Images, one might say, are part of dramas staged in the speech of one individual and enacted in the imagination of another. Similarly, linguistic prepatternning is a means by which speakers create worlds that listeners can recreate in their own imaginations, recognizing the outlines of the prepatternning. Through prepatternning, the individual speaks through the group, and the group speaks through the individual.

The examples I have given here suggest what I have demonstrated at length elsewhere (Tannen, forthcoming): that much repetition in conversation is automatic. Just as canonical formulaic expressions have been shown to be processed by automatic brain function (Van Lancker, 1987), I suggest that speakers repeat, rephrase, and echo (or shadow) others' words in conversation without stopping to think, but rather as an automatic and spontaneous way of participating in conversation. Another book by Oliver Sacks (1984) dramatizes the paradoxical necessity of automaticity for freedom. Following a severe accidental injury, Sacks's leg was surgically repaired. But despite his surgeon's insistence that he was completely healed, he had no proprioception (i.e. self-perception) of his leg. Not only did he have no feeling in it, but he had no sense of its being there, or of ever having been there. Consequently, he walked as if he had no knee.

Sacks's knee did not 'return', spiritually, conceptually, and pragmatically, until he was tricked into using it automatically. Caught off guard by being pushed into a pool, he automatically began to swim. When he stepped out of the pool, he walked normally for the first time following his accident. What

he had not been able to accomplish with all his conscious efforts had occurred without effort, by automaticity and spontaneity. Sacks eloquently emphasizes the necessity of automatic, spontaneous use for one to sense one's body as part of one's self. In other words, automaticity is essential to a sense of 'I' rather than antithetical to it.

Against atomism

The view of language as relatively prepatterned is more rather than less humanistic in the sense that it supports a holistic view of language and of the individual's experience of language. Sacks's account of neuroanatomy provides an illuminating if troubling analogue to developments in linguistics. Repeatedly he argues against atomism both of disciplines and of methodological approaches to observation. He notes (Sacks 1987: 41) that modern medicine has resulted in 'a real gain of knowledge coupled with a real loss in general understanding.'

Discussing Tourette's, Sacks refers to a time when 'naturalism (or what we now call phenomenology) had not yet collapsed under the advances of science' (38). Neuroanatomy 'became compartmentalized. . . , seeing the motor, the intellectual, and the affective in quite separate and noncommunicating compartments of the brain' (37). The results were:

persistent efforts, in this century, to 'physicalize' or 'mentalize' [the syndrome], to make it one or the other, when it is so manifestly both. . . . By the turn of the century a split had occurred, into a soulless neurology and a bodiless psychology, and with this any full understanding of Tourette's disappeared. . . . What Tourette's is really like — this has been forgotten, and we can only recapture it if we listen minutely to our patients, and observe them, everything about them, with a comprehensive eye; or go back, as I have done here, to the older descriptions, where verisimilitude has not been sacrificed to narrow formulations or theories (40).

In addition to compartmentalization, excessive abstraction precludes understanding. Citing William James, Sacks distinguishes "'between all possible abstractionists and allivers in the light of the world's concrete fullness. . . .". He concludes that the Tourette's 'externalized dream flashes and ticcy figments . . . require high-speed videotaping, with slow motion playback and analysis of individual frames, to reveal their full character, connection, and meaning' (41).

Noting that papers on the syndrome at a scholarly conference 'gave no feel whatever of what it was like to have Tourette's', Sacks calls for 'a neurology of living experience'. Making a similar argument elsewhere (Sacks, 1986: 3) he calls for 'a personalistic neurology'.

Many of the scholars cited who argue that language has more to do with repetition and memory than with generation, also argue against atomism. For example, Bolinger (1976: 1) states, 'What I want to challenge is the prevailing reductionism – the analysis of syntax and phonology into determinate rules, or words into determinate morphemes, and of meanings into determinate features.'¹⁰

Proposing the notion of emergent grammar, Hopper (in press) concludes that 'The assumed priority and autonomy of the Sentence are at the head of a line of implications which lead to the "modularity" of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics – the separation of structure from meaning, and meaning from use'.

Becker's (1984b, in press) call for a 'linguistics of particularity', and his observation (in press) that the problem with science is that 'it does not touch the personal and particular', parallels Sacks's concerns in neuroanatomy. The kind of linguistics Becker calls for and exemplifies, like that argued in this paper, enhances rather than limits our vision of the human and amounts to 'a linguistics of living language', even a 'personalistic linguistics'.

Notes

- * This is a significantly expanded version of a paper entitled 'The Interactional Development of All Texts: Repetition in Conversation as Spontaneous Idiomaticity', delivered at the session 'Text Linguistics: Interactional Development of Texts', XIV International Congress of Linguists, GDR, August 10-15, 1987. Many of the ideas discussed here – the importance of memory in grammar, the caution against atomism, and the implications of my own work on repetition, owe much to my continuing discussions with colleagues, especially A. L. Becker, and also Barbara Johnstone and Paul Hopper. Earlier drafts of this paper, with different examples, were presented at the Conference on Formularity held at the Linguistic Institute, University of Maryland, July 1982; the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, IL, December 1982, and the Linguistic Society of America meeting at Minneapolis in December 1983. Those who have made helpful comments on this work in other forms include David Bleich, Paul Friedrich, and Barbara Johnstone. Work on this research began with the support of a Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship and continued during a sabbatical leave from Georgetown University, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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1. Note however that the intonation shifted from stressing 'could' in 'couldn't care less' to 'I' and 'less' in 'I could care less'. If the new form is uttered with stress on 'could' ('I could care less') it seems to emphasize the change in meaning rather than making it.

2. The fact that I used the same expression in speaking about this topic with different people on different occasions is an example of individual diachronic prepatterning. It seems that when we tell about the same thing repeatedly, we often make use of phrases we have already devised.

3. With thanks to Diane Tong for reporting this fused formula to me and to Carolyn Alder for reporting 'pipe in'.

4. Heidegger's sense of 'fore-having' is also rendered 'fore-sight' and 'fore-conception'.

5. Janet Skupien told me of this citation.

6. With thanks to Ray McDermott for showing me this citation and introducing me to Bakhtin.

7. As the work of Gumperz (1982) and my own (Tannen, 1984, 1986), which builds on his, elaborately demonstrates, often the extent to which this is true is not recognized. Not realizing that interlocutors of differing cultural or subcultural backgrounds are talking in a way that is routinized and commonplace in their speech community, many cross-cultural conversationalists draw unwarranted (often negative but possibly positive) conclusions about the others' personalities, abilities, and intentions.

8. I am grateful to Jackie Tannen of Georgetown University's Department of Language Learning Technology for providing a videotape of this lecture, and to John Fanselow for permission to use it.

Transcripts are presented in lines to facilitate reading by representing in print the chunking accomplished in speaking by intonation and prosody. The following transcription conventions are employed:

- () parentheses indicate 'parenthetical' intonation
- , comma shows clause final intonation ('more to come')
- period indicates sentence final falling intonation
- ? question mark indicates rising intonation
- :
- colon indicates elongation of vowel sound
- ... three dots show perceptible pause of less than ½ second
- ... three dots show a ½ second pause
- each extra dot indicates an additional ½ second of pause
- dash represents a glottal stop, i.e., an abrupt cutting off of sound
- ˈ accent indicates primary stress
- CAPITALIZATION indicates emphatic stress

- [brackets connecting two lines, including those missing top flap, indicate two speakers talking at once
- [brackets with reversed flaps] indicate latching: no interturn pause

- /?/ indicates indecipherable utterance
- /words/ in slashes are best guesses at uncertain transcription

- underlines highlight repetitions

9. There were six participants: four men, two women; all were middle class white, professionals or artists; three were from New York, two were from California, one

- (not cited here) was British. For more discussion of characters and context see Tannen (1984). Although I have documented the pervasiveness and functions of repetition in conversation with many examples from this 250 page transcript (Tannen in press, 1987), I wanted to use different examples in this paper. Returning to the transcript, I had no problem finding new examples; on the contrary, my problem was deciding which to choose and where to stop: every page exhibited numerous examples I was tempted to discuss.
10. The resistance to reductionism is seen in other aspects of the discipline as well. For example, Talmy (in press) argues for a non-reductionist semantics.

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