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The Washington Post

August 2, 1992, Sunday, Final Edition

SECTION: OUTLOOK; PAGE C1**LENGTH:** 2380 words**HEADLINE:** You **Can Say** That Again;

And if You Want to Be Understood, You Probably Will -- That's the Way Conversations Are Built

SERIES: Occasional**BYLINE:** Deborah **Tannen****BODY:**

WHAT STRUCK me, when I listened to speeches at last month's Democratic convention, was the repetition. Not that the speakers said the same thing (though you could argue they did), but that each had a theme that was encapsulated in a repeated phrase. The great reliance on repetition in political rhetoric is not an isolated or cynically manipulative device but a natural reflection of how language works.

Over and over, Sen. Bill Bradley asked, "And what did you do, George Bush? [pause] You waffled, [pause], you wiggled, [pause], you wavered." Gov. Zell Miller's repeated theme was itself a saying, a phrase heard repeatedly in conversation: "And George Bush doesn't get it?" Barbara Jordan's speech didn't have just one phrase punctuating her points, but she repeated every point -- said the same words again, helping the meaning sink in and giving new meaning by slightly changing the intonation.

When excerpts were published, editors excised most of this repetition. Convinced that the main purpose of talk is informational, most Americans also believe that repeating is a waste of time. One can say, "Let me finish. I haven't made my point yet." But one can't say, "Let me finish. I haven't repeated myself yet." The negative value placed on repetition is evident in a humorous comment made by a D.C. radio announcer: "History repeats itself. That's one of the things wrong with history."

Yet I have found, by tape-recording and transcribing hours of casual conversation, that pervasive repetition has many unacknowledged and crucial functions. In one study, analyzing 2 1/2 hours of dinner-table conversation, I found speakers continually repeating their own and others' words. Questions

were turned into statements and statements into questions. Phrases were picked up and elaborated, or just picked up and repeated.

Each semester I ask my linguistics students at Georgetown University to record conversation and study the transcripts. And each semester, the assignment they find easiest is the one that asks them to identify the repetitions. For example, this segment was recorded by a student in her living room:

Marge: Can I have one of these Tabs?

Do you want to split it?

Do you want to split a Tab?

Kate: Do you want to split my Tab? [Laughter.]

Vivian: No.

Marge: Kate, do you want to split my Tab!?

Kate: No, I don't want to split your Tab.

Another example of the repetition that is vital to casual talk comes from the dinner-table conversation I taped. The conversational topic was disfiguring and dismembering accidents:

Deborah: I read something in the newspaper -- I won't tell you.

Steve: I don't want to hear about it.

Deborah: You don't want to hear about it.

Sally: Tell it. Tell it.

David: We want to hear about it. Steve can go in the other room.

Steve: I don't want to hear about it.

Although these snippets of conversation are fairly typical, not every segment of conversation has whole sentences that are echoed immediately numerous times. But in nearly all conversations, words and phrases are traded back and forth to show understanding or lack of it, to agree or disagree, to question or challenge, to stall for time, to get the floor or keep it, to emphasize a point, to show the relationship between ideas or between people.

These repetitions are spontaneous prefabs: Words, phrases and whole sentences are repeated a few times and then fade away. There is another kind of repetition that is equally pervasive and more long-lived: repetition of words that others have said at other times. Cliches, sayings, proverbs, idioms, set phrases and expressions make up a stock of prefabs that speakers use to build conversations.

Two friends meet unexpectedly and one says, "Fancy meeting you here." If they meet by arrangement, one could say it to be wry. "It's not my day," "just one of those things," "it takes one to know one" -- University of California linguists Charles and Lily Wong Fillmore began collecting such collocations,

and their tally quickly grew into the thousands.

There is now a growing interest in "formulaic language," and some linguists are even questioning not only the conventional image of language, but also the image of language that has characterized the dominant stream of linguistic scholarship. That tradition, known as generative grammar and pioneered by MIT's Noam Chomsky, sees sentences as "surface structures" that are generated from "deep structures," according to "syntactic rules." In this approach, freely generated syntax is the essence of innate language capacity.

The late Dwight Bolinger of Harvard criticized this as an "Erector Set" theory of language, suggesting instead that language is an organism. A key to seeing language in this way is recognizing how much of it is pre-patterned and retrieved from memory in ready-made segments.

The generative grammar approach, by contrast, sees language primarily as original production, as if individuals generate sentences anew each time they speak. But if the "formulaic" theorists are right, the reality is that language is more routinized, imitative and repetitious, and thus less in our control.

Expressions like "salt and pepper" or "thick and thin" come in standard forms. "Pepper and salt" would not be said, and "thin and thick" might not be understood -- at least not in its routinized sense. When people hear such prefabs, they do not decode the meaning word by word. Rather, they respond to the whole by association. Evidence for this lies in the frequency with which people get formulas a bit wrong -- turn them around, mix up parts, fuse them with other formulas -- without causing any confusion about their meaning.

For example, a politician announced that he would not stop his investigation "until every stone is unturned." By adjusting the formula "leave no stone unturned," he actually said the opposite of what he meant. But I doubt any listeners missed what he meant, and probably few noticed that he had literally promised to look under no stones at all.

Listening closely to conversation, I frequently hear (and utter) fused formulas. In one week, I encountered "You can make that decision on the snap of the moment," mixing "spur of the moment" with "snap decision"; "He is off the deep," mixing "off the deep end" with "off the wall"; "It's really the best of both possible worlds," mixing "best of both worlds" with "best of all possible worlds"; and "I'm up against the wire" mixing "up against the wall" and "down to the wire." As I interrupted this writing to open my mail, I received a fused formula as a gift from a colleague: "pipe in," mixing "chime in" and "pipe up."

My point is emphatically not that these speakers made mistakes. The point is that, in this sense, the language is mistake-proof -- their meaning was clear in spite of the mistakes. So meaning is not decoded by a set of instructions but is supplied ready-made by association with familiar expressions.

Further evidence for this is found in numerous expressions that no longer mean what they literally say. For example, "I could care less" has recently developed from its grammatical antithesis, "I couldn't care less," with no change in meaning despite the loss of the grammatically crucial negative, "not." Technically, if you could care less, then you do care some. The meaning comes by association with the expression, not by grammatical decomposition.

There are other ways in which conversations are little routines. What one says to begin, to carry on, to end, and to begin to end, is fairly predictable. When someone says, during a telephone conversation, "So I'll see you next Thursday," or "So, I'll try to have that in your mailbox first thing in the morning," you

know she or he is trying to wind down the call. When someone says, "Well, it was nice of you to call" or "It was nice talking to you," then the call is wound down.

Such signals are the basic gears of interaction, and if all is well, they shift unobtrusively. Explicitly ending a conversation is unusual, like the grinding of gears, as witness the audience laughter that follows the father's habitual statement, "End of conversation," in the play "Conversations With My Father."

That the father in this play habitually uses this phrase to end conversations illustrates the role played by repetition in expressing an individual's personality. This should comfort those who find it disquieting to think of language as composed largely of prefabs and repetitions. Many prefer to think they are independently inventing sentences to express the ideas they independently think of.

Yet even the ideas that people express may not be as original as they think. What one is likely to say in a particular situation -- what one feels is sayable -- is highly constrained.

When I was single, I noticed that people felt free to ask if I liked living alone and whether I might like to get married eventually. I was not free, however, to ask my married friends if they liked living with their spouses and whether they might like to get divorced one day.

Even the opinions that people like to think they have personally minted have more often than not been heard or read somewhere. During the 1984 presidential election, I asked a friend why she was planning to vote for Reagan. The independent opinion she offered was, "Mondale is boring." Her personal opinion was an echo of an evaluation that was blasted into our private conversation from unending repetition in the media and in the talk of others. Never before or since was being boring an election issue. But by a process of repetition, it became a major one in 1984.

Why do people repeat words, phrases and ideas? A possible answer came to me in an essay about "Tics" by Oliver Sacks in the New York Review of Books. Sacks describes Tourette's, a syndrome of "multiple convulsive tics."

In Sacks's account, tics, and the extreme case of Tourette's, are, in part, the impulse to imitate and repeat gone haywire. A ticqueur named O. wrote, "I have always been conscious of a predilection for imitation. A curious gesture or bizarre attitude effected by anyone was the immediate signal for an attempt on my part at its reproduction, and is still."

O.'s drive to imitate was an expression of a general desire 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."

Sacks's descriptions of Tourette's are riveting because we recognize in the extreme cases he describes a kernel of familiar experience. We recognize the urge to feel again a sensation we have felt, to capture the lilt of someone else's phrasing, to try out their words. The Touretter who feels driven to imitate and repeat seems to be exhibiting a compulsive and intensified form of what we have all experienced: As Freud observed, "Repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure."

What purpose could be served by the pleasure associated with repetition, the human drive to imitate and repeat? None other than the basic human purpose of learning. University of Michigan linguist A.L. Becker suggests that time and memory are the key to language learning. One hears language -- "prior text" -- over and over, and learns it, through "repetitions and corrections, starting with the simplest utterances of a baby."

That imitation and repetition are basic ways of learning is supported by the observations of child language researchers, and of anyone who has spent time around small children.

Awareness of the usefulness of imitation and repetition, however, will not in itself make everyone happy about acknowledging its pervasiveness. Sacks's discussion of the pathological case may contain a clue to the source of resistance -- he observes in Tourette's an "existential conflict between automatism and autonomy"

We are caught in a similar existential conflict between automatism and autonomy in our competing paradigms in linguistics. The generative view allows us to see ourselves as willfully producing novel sentences of infinite variety. But seeing language as relatively pre-patterned, seeing our conversations as relatively repetitious and imitative rather than freely generated, does not have to mean that we are automatized.

People are not jugglers performing independently, but players in a group game, tossing balls back and forth. And there is still ample room for creativity in the way individuals retrieve, reshape and interpret prior text.

Just as Sacks calls for a "personal neurology," linguist Becker has called for humanistic linguistics, noting that the scientific model for linguistics "does not touch the personal and particular." Like Sacks's neuroanatomy, the new linguistics movement approaches the study of language not simply as an abstract, compartmentalized system but as an organic whole that people use to make and maintain relationships with each other and with the world.

Repetition is as fundamental a part of language use as is the independent creation of ideas and syntax that we are more likely to value. As Gertrude Stein said, "Repeating is in every one." And it is everywhere, whether or not the speaker is consciously aware of it. For example, a conservative GOP congressman was quoted in last week's Newsweek as saying "It's time for Quayle to go." It seems unlikely that he intended to echo Al Gore's acceptance speech refrain. But that's how language works: The phrases we hear creep into our mouths, and the meanings we think we are putting into words are inescapably intertwined with the associations evoked by those who have used the words before.

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GRAPHIC: ILLUSTRATION, NURIT KARLIN FOR TWP