

Repetition

Repetition is central to the establishment of semiotic systems. When we have repetition, we have “the same thing” happening again, over time. What, however, makes something “the same” as something else? Judgments of identity and difference are the basis for all classification, and repetition of “the same” units underlies the recognition of pattern. Repetition is therefore fundamental to the definition of all cultural objects: of the phoneme, of particular kinds of act, of chunks of ritual, art, music, and performance, all of which involve meaningful re-enactments in some sense. Repetition is a prerequisite for learning, providing the possibility of assimilating experience, committing it to memory, and thus also the basis for prediction. Repetition is pervasive in social life, oiling the waters of social interaction, from the micro level (the rhythm of conversational interaction punctuated by repeated units of speech, gesture, prosody), to the level of daily routine (the predictability across contexts of politeness routines, social rituals, mealtimes, work schedules), to the annual cycle, and the life cycle. Repetition of events, based on our cultural definitions of what constitutes “the same event” (such that we can recognize another instance of it as a repetition), provides a variety of kinds of meaning to our social and cultural lives. In the realm of language, repetition enters at the basic level of what constitutes a code. Although two exemplars of a linguistic expression cannot ever be identical, on the basis of a code members of a linguistic community treat some features as criterial and thereby some sequences as if they were the same.

Repetition not only underlies semiosis, it also functions as a semiotic device. Even in the construction of the sentence we find repetition (e.g., concord and agreement repeat the coding of a semantic feature on different words; reduplication is used to indicate emphasis, intensity, iteration, or plural in many languages). Beyond the sentence level, repetition is an important stylistic device in narrative and poetic discourse. Indeed, as Roman Jakobson pointed out, “on every level of language the essence of poetic

artifice consists of recurrent returns." Repetition and "parallelism" (repetition with patterned variation) characterize high registers, formal styles, oratory, and ritual language in many societies, especially in oral communication ("We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills . . ."). In many speech communities around the world, "speaking in pairs" or couplets is the defining feature of elevated registers, prompting the suggestion that parallelism is a cognitive universal.

Less obvious, perhaps, is the fact that repetition is a ubiquitous communicative device in everyday verbal interaction, much of it below the level of awareness. Some is repetition of pure form, for example meter, alliteration, or the rhythms created by repetition/variation of phonemes, overlaid with prosody and gesture, that establish conversational synchrony. Some is purely on the semantic level, as in synonyms and paraphrases. Much repetition, however, combines both form and meaning; words, phrases, and syntactic structures are repeated in discourse. Repeating something calls attention to the prior thing, brings it into the now, claims its relevance; repetition is therefore crucial in establishing discourse coherence. Of course, not all repetitions are alike: we can distinguish self-repetition from repetition of a prior turn at talk, and exact repetition from repetition with expansion (going beyond the initial version) or ellipsis (leaving something out in the repeat). Repetition by self facilitates language production, enabling rapid fluent talk, by setting up a syntactic frame and slotting new information into it ("He did A, and he did B, and he did C . . ."). Self-repetition also occurs predictably in self-repair, and may be used to make a bid to retain the floor or tie a referent to the prior discourse.

People use repetition across turns, in responding to a prior utterance, to do many different sorts of communicative or conversational management acts, including answer a question; query a piece of information; affectively comment on it or play with it; agree with it, ratify it, or confirm an allusion; convey understanding (of what was said, and of its significance); make counter-claims or matching claims (the "me too" phenomenon); initiate repair; and collaborate in producing a conversational contribution. One important thing repeating all or part of a prior utterance can do is transform the repeated item from new into given information, which can then be commented upon or further developed. This is especially important in noisy or informationally critical settings (e.g., service encounters, air traffic control). But in some linguistic communities (for example, many Mayan ones), such cross-speaker repetition has been conventionalized as the default backchannel, the canonical way to respond to any utterance offering new information. This conversational practice makes Mayan conversations strike the outside observer as extraordinarily repetitive, drawing attention to the fact that tolerance for repetition in speech is culturally, as well as contextually, quite variable.

Another arena where repetition is frequent is in speech to and by children. Some scholars consider that it plays an important role in early language acquisition; for example, repetitive routines (patty-cake, etc.) between mother and baby have been claimed as the basis for how the infant learns what a "signal" is with communicative intent. Several kinds of linguistic

repetition from adult caregiver to child also may aid language learning. One kind is "expansions," where a child's utterance is picked up and reformulated in order to express the presumed communicative intent in a grammatically correct way (e.g., Child: "dog road." Mother: "Yes, there's a dog in the road"). Another arises in attempts to attract the attention of a young child, when a single communicative intention is recast—rephrased and repeated with lexical substitutions, addition or deletion of specific reference, and reordering—in response to the child's perceived response (or lack thereof). Children learning some languages (for example, Turkish and Tzeltal) routinely hear "the same" utterance repeatedly in different forms, which by their juxtaposition expose the structure of the language for the learner. There are also cultures where explicit prompting routines—telling the child what to say—are a language socialization practice, as in Bambi Schieffelin's well-known example from the Papua New Guinea Kaluli. The other side of the coin, repetition by a child of caregiver speech, is less clearly implicated in language learning per se, since these "imitations" are on the whole not "progressive"—not longer nor syntactically more complex than the child's spontaneous utterances. In fact, as Elinor Ochs has argued, children so often repeat the utterances addressed to them not necessarily with the intention of imitating, but because inexact repetition is the child's goal to satisfy some communicative obligation. A child using these is learning "communicative competence," the different uses of language.

So whether adult or child, layman or linguist, laborer, poet, orator, or priest, no speaker can do without repetition. It is a grammatical, stylistic, poetic, and cognitive resource associated with attention; as such it is a core resource in our mental and social life.

(See also *acquisition, codes, functions, grammar, meter, poetry, socialization, turn*)

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