

Repetition in conversation: A Role and Reference Grammar analysis

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Despite its common usage, repetition of utterance in conversation, such as those given in (1), has not drawn significant attention in grammatical analysis. Repeated utterances may be taken as syntactically unchallenging and lacking referential novelty (Ferrara 1994, *inter alia*); thus, the intrinsic redundancy of repetition poses a challenge for grammatical theories. Yet, it has been claimed that repetition has important pragmatic functions such as expressing affirmation, confirmation, and disagreement (Norrick 1987); thus, repeated utterances are informative in light of their contribution to the semantic content of discourse. Based primarily on cross-speaker repetition of exact utterance in English and Japanese, I will discuss usage of repetition in conversation, examine their discourse-functional typology, present application to RRG (Van Valin 2005, 2023), which further develops the RRG theory of syntax-discourse interface.

First, proper analysis of repetition must elucidate two seemingly contradictory elements: redundancy and informativeness of repeated utterances. In the information structure of an utterance, there is general mapping of contextually “redundant” information and the nonfocus of the utterance, since the nonfocus part of the utterance conveys information that has been presupposed or active at the time of the utterance. What is peculiar about repetition is that a repeated utterance *per se* is nonfocus because of the entity denoted by the entire utterance being given (unless it is intended to re-activate previously given information that is inactive or semi-active, which is outside the current scope). For example, *that’s Broadway over there* and *it moved* in (1B1) and (1B2) respectively are nonfocus sentences. These are similar to what was called *neutral-focus* in Shimojo (1995), which is exemplified by (2B/B’) where the active entity ‘Ken’ and the active open proposition ‘X is American’ are combined. However, this neutral-focus has a narrow focus that is determined by previous discourse; the focus may be either ‘Ken’ or ‘X is American’, depending on relative activation of entities assumed by the speaker. If (the speaker assumes) ‘Ken’ is more activated than ‘X is American’ (in the hearer’s mind prior to the utterance), the open proposition would be the focus of the sentence, hence the focal stress on it as shown in (2B), and ‘Ken’ is the nonfocus. On the other hand, if the open proposition is more active in the immediately preceding context, ‘Ken’ would be the focus as shown in (2B’).

Similarly, utterances repeated by another speaker are in neutral-focus due to the repetition of information that has already been active (unlike same-speaker repetition, which would duplicate the original focus assignment); however, this neutral-focus should be treated differently from that given above for the following reasons. First, cross-speaker repetition does not involve a narrow-focus that is determined by the previous discourse. The entire information that is repeated is focal in the sense of *imposed salience* (Clamons et al. 1993, Mulkern 2003), thereby the speaker foregrounds the information and guide the hearer’s attention to it. In other words, focus for the purpose of the “speaker-oriented attention guidance” for the hearer indicates *forward-looking salience* (Chiaros 2009: 33); therefore, it must be separated from the *backward-looking* sense of focus-nonfocus, which is represented by the focus structure of sentences. Given this argument, I propose that the two dimensions of focus must be differentiated in RRG. On one hand, the focus structure of sentences, which is derived from discourse representation structures [DRSs] whereby the DRS of the current utterance differs from the previous one (Van Valin 2005: 172), captures focus-nonfocus relevant to backward-looking salience. On the other hand, the speaker’s foregrounding of information in repetition, which is relevant to forward-looking salience, is represented directly by the DRS of a repeated utterance, which contains the referent(s), and a proposition if applicable, expressed by the utterance. For example, the DRS of the repeated sentence *that’s Broadway over there* in (1B1) contains two entities ‘that (over there)’ and ‘Broadway’, and the same entities were contained in the DRS of the previous utterance (i.e. the question asked by DS), and the duplicate of the entities in the DRS shows the forward-looking focus *imposed* by the speaker. This makes the repetition informative. On the other hand, the focus structure of the repeated sentence shows neutral-focus because there is no new entity in the current DRS, hence redundancy.

The account of cross-speaker repetition outlined above is further elaborated in an analysis of Japanese, which exhibits discourse-organizational functions of repetition. It has been pointed out that, in contrast to English in which utterances are repeated primarily for clarification of information (i.e. confirmation, disagreement, etc.), cross-speaker repetition in Japanese is frequently used for rapport-building between speakers (Machi 2021). My analysis of online task-based Japanese conversation (3 hours in total) has revealed that rapport-building repetition is typically an utterance of a referential phrase only, which is repeated in order to maintain it as the topic of subsequent discourse, by implicitly prompting the hearer to provide further information related to the entity (in lieu of explicitly asking about it). In example (3), ‘cooking’ initially mentioned by speaker A is repeated by speaker C, which is then followed by speaker A’s elaboration on the entity in (3A2). What separates this rapport-type repetition from the clarification type described earlier is, in the former, the repeated entity is foregrounded without propositional content; therefore, the hearer is prompted to respond and develop the subsequent discourse about the entity, and the topic often continues even further (utterance 3A2 is followed by nine utterances about cooking).

In RRG, the contrast between the two types of repetition is captured in the DRS of repeated utterances. While the DRS of the clarification type of repetition contains referents and propositions (retrieved from a preceding DRS if not overtly mentioned in the repetition), the DRS of the rapport type of repetition contains only the referents repeated (thus, salience is imposed on these entities only). I will also address how the sense of rapport, or such perlocutionary intention, is conveyed with this type of repetition based on the RRG analysis. Overall, I argue that the mechanism to capture forward-looking focus is essential to describe not only repetition of utterance but also any linguistic phenomena, including the so-called focus constructions, in which the speaker’s attention guidance for the hearer plays a critical role.

Examples

(1) A1: Excuse me. Is this Broadway, or is that Broadway over there?

B1: *That’s Broadway over there.*

A2: It moved. (smiling)

B2: *It moved.* (smiling)

A3: Thank you.

(Van Lancker Sidtis & Wolf 2015: 264)

(2) A: Is Sally American and Ken British?

B: No, Ken is AMERICAN.

B’: No, KEN is American.

(3) A1: gutaitekina mono-ni suru nara ryoori
 specific thing-DAT do if cooking
 ‘If (we) do something specific, (it would be) cooking.’

B: un
 yes

C: aa (2.0) ryoori
 INJ cooking
 ‘Oh. ... *Cooking.*’

A2: sakki hanashita anoo sorezorenokuni dokujino mono-o
 beforetalked INJ each country unique thing-ACC
 shookai-tte yuu no to ibento-o onrain-de isshoni suru-tte
 introduction-QT say NMZ COM event-ACC online-LOC together do-QT
 yuu no-ga awasatteru to omou
 say NMZ-NOM be.combined COMP think
 ‘(I) think (cooking) combines the introduction of a unique thing of each country (which we) talked about earlier and doing an event online.’

Abbreviations

ACC=accusative, COM=comitative, COMP=complementizer, DAT=dative, INJ=interjection, LOC=locative, NMZ=nominalizer, NOM=nominative, QT=quotative

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