

How repetition operates in Japanese and English: Introducing different cultural orientations towards conversation

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When we look at conversation, there are many linguistic and non-linguistic devices that, although they are given the same term or categorized as the same speech act, seem to work differently depending on the language. For example, we can probably find in most languages in the world devices called “repetition,” “backchannel,” and “nod,” but are their functions the same or somewhat similar, or rather very different according to the language? If they are different, can we assume that conversation per se is carried out under the same style and orientation cross-linguistically?

In order to explore such questions, this study makes a comparative examination of one minor linguistic device, the practice of repeating what others say in Japanese and English conversation. The study analyzes the conversation data of 13 Japanese pairs and 11 American pairs. Each pair was given approximately 5 minutes to talk in turn about the pre-selected topic, “What were you most surprised at?” The analysis is carried out through the following three stages: (1) the frequency of repetition, (2) the object of repetition, and (3) the function of repetition.

In terms of the frequency of repetition, a great difference was obtained between Japanese and English. There are 4.08 repetitions per minute in Japanese conversation while in English there are only 1.43 repetitions during the same period, which means that repetition occurs about three times more frequently in Japanese than English.

For the analysis of the object of repetition, all the repetitions in the data were classified according to what kinds of words, phrases, and sentences comprise the object of repetition, namely (i) objective facts, (ii) names of people, places, and times, (iii) topics, and the initiator's (iv) experiences, (v) assessments, and (vi) feelings. The obtained results show that in Japanese, where the initiator's assessments and feelings are most frequently repeated, the main object of repetition is the initiator's subjective expressions such as “how she feels” and “what she thinks.” On the other hand, in English, where they frequently repeat objective facts and names of people, places, and times, propositional information such as “who-does-what-to-whom where-and-when” is the main object of repetition.

For the analysis of the repetition function, the data was also classified into eight categories according to the repeater's motive for repeating the initiator's utterance. The categories are (a) agreement, (b) sympathy, (c) adoption, (d) questioning, (e) answering, (f) confirmation, (g) filling of space, and (h) enjoyment. The results show that in both languages, the repeaters frequently adopt words and phrases through repetition in order to better relate to

the topic and maintain coherence within the talk. On the other hand, there is also a profound difference. In Japanese, repetition mainly performs sympathizing and agreeing functions in order to reach like-mindedness and create a sense of unity between the participants. In English, in contrast, repetition functions as questioning, answering, and confirmation so that the participants can accurately elicit and understand each other's story and information.

By showing how differently repetition appears and works in the two languages, this study offers a further insight into the way a simple linguistic device like repetition operates in one language mirrors its speakers' cultural orientation towards conversation. Since conversation is an accumulation of all sorts of linguistic devices, their mechanisms are influential in the orientation of conversation as well as in the conversation structure. The study also reinforces the necessity of further research of more mechanisms and the social values of other linguistic devices in cross-linguistic data, which will surely give us ideas about how the speakers of the language regard conversation and what they wish to achieve through conversation.