

Allo-repetition in English Narratives: Functional Distribution and Collaboration between Storytellers and Story-recipients

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This paper analyzes the use of immediate allo-repetition, or repetition of a speaker's utterances by one of his or her listeners, in English-language narratives to illuminate how repetition by storytellers to story-recipients and by story-recipients to storytellers affects storytelling. I investigated the use of allo-repetition in terms of place, form, and content, focusing on three components initially proposed by Ochs et al. (1992) in their model of narrative as a theory-building activity: explanation, challengeability, and redrafting.

Previous studies of narratives (Labov & Waletzky 1967; Jefferson 1978; Lerner 1992) have explained how storytellers build their stories or convey important points. They suggested that storytellers relate the details of an event and that story-recipients react to them. Conversely, Ochs et al. (1992) and Nishikawa (2005) argued for collaboration in narrative-building and emphasized the contributions of recipients to the completion of narratives. However, no research has analyzed how narratives are created from one linguistic expression.

This review addresses and answers why storytellers and story-recipients use repetition and how the functional distribution of the three components of repetition differs.

The data used in this study were collected in ten audio-recorded face-to-face conversations between English speakers, contained in the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English. Based on previous studies of repetition, including those conducted by Tannen (1989), Kim (2002), and Machi (2007), the following eight functions were measured: agreement, confirmation, questioning, answering, acceptance of humor, linking, correction, and sympathy.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that story-recipients often presented their repetitions as links, questions, or confirmations to encourage storytellers to provide more precise information to clarify the story. Moreover, repetitions of storytellers' words were most frequently presented as questions (50%) when explanation was the goal, as linking (27.9%) when recipients were challenging tellers, and as humor (36.4%) in the service of redrafting.

Storytellers, on the other hand, repeated the story-recipients' words primarily as answers and connections to summarize and develop their stories. In addition, answering emerged most frequently in response to challenges (34.3%), whereas linking occurred most frequently in the context of explanation (50%) and redrafting (56%).

The results, discussed in terms of the relationship between voice (Bakhtin 1981) and the participation framework (Goffman 1981), identified two kinds of collaboration in story development that are enabled or encouraged by repetition: (1) contextual collaboration that helps to clarify story content, and (2) expressional collaboration that helps synchronize two voices. In contextual collaboration, repetition is often regarded as a signal to restart the storytelling, leading to the clarification of focal points. Indeed, story-recipients typically have less information about the topic at hand than do storytellers, creating a situation in which listeners need to keep pace with the speaker to develop the ongoing narrative. Additionally, storytellers are able to use repetition to confirm listeners' understanding and incorporate their words into the stories.

During expressional collaboration, each repetition belongs to the speaker him/herself in his/her role as an “animator” (Goffman 1981: 144). At the same time, however, the repeated words are initially uttered by a previous speaker and thus belong to that original speaker in his/her role as “author” (ibid.). The expressive similarity between two voices enables storytellers and story-recipients to build cooperative relationships in the service of completing a given narrative.

The results of this study highlight the importance of repetition in the co-construction of stories and help to clarify how interlocutors jointly construct information in narratives.

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