

Repetition and Relevance

Ryo Ido

English

Abstract

We will be concerned with repetition and will investigate its contribution to the hearer's interpretation of an utterance. Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995²) and Jucker (1994) suggest the analyzability of repetition from the principle of relevance. We will elaborate on these analyses from the processing effort side of relevance, and show that repetition is used not only to increase cognitive effects, but also to save the hearer's processing effort, so that it is considered as encoding procedural information.

0. Introduction

Repetition is characteristic of spoken language or unplanned discourse, hence is so pervasive in daily speech both in English and in Japanese, though unnecessary repetition is sometimes considered to be inappropriate in English. It is relatively recent that the topic of repetition has attracted attention in the field of linguistics; however numerous attempts to explain repetition have been made over the past few decades¹ from various standpoints, such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics, most of which arrive at fairly general agreement that repetition is used as a means of emphasis.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the function of repetition based on the relevance-theoretic framework, which was introduced by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995²). Although they devote only a few pages to the analysis of repetition, their analysis sheds new light on it from the cognitive point of view, that is the principle of relevance. They examine it from the cognitive effect side of relevance which repetition achieves². Sperber and Wilson's line of thinking has been developed further by Jucker (1994) which sees repetition from the processing effort side of relevance, and insists that repetition is also used as an effort saving device.

Based on both Sperber and Wilson's and Jucker's analyses, this article will elaborate on these

analyses for the sake of great accuracy of the analysis of repetition. After reviewing previous analyses and pointing out some problematic issues of them, we will reanalyze repetition especially whose function is to fill the pause, which has been ignored as merely an error. We will argue that such repetition is not just an error but encodes procedural information in order to reduce the hearer's processing effort for the interpretation of an utterance. We will also expand our investigation briefly into allo-repetition which both Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995²) and Jucker (1994) seem to have overlooked in their research.

1. Previous Analyses of Repetition

First of all, we will review some previous analyses of repetition. In these analyses, it is usually said that repetition is used for emphasis. Consider the following examples (1-4) :

- (1) This house is *far, far* too expensive. (Leech and Svartvik 1994 : 153)
 (2) I think that the lectures are *very very* boring. (Ibid.)
 (3) You *bad, bad* boy! (Ibid.)
 (4) I agree with *every word* you've said—*every single word*.
 (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973 : 428)

The speaker expresses that the price of the house is more expensive than she expected in (1) ; that the lectures are very boring in (2) ; that the speaker's child is very bad in his behavior in (3) ; and that the speaker completely agrees with all that was said in (4). All of these examples show that by repeating a word, the speaker denotes the degree *extremely*.

This fact would be clear if we compare these examples with their counterparts (1'-4') below without the repetition³ :

- (1') This house is far too expensive.
 (2') I think that the lectures are very boring.
 (3') You bad boy!
 (4') I agree with every word you've said.

From these examples, it seems reasonable to suppose that there is some kind of emphatic effect in repetition ; what seems to be lacking, however, are why repetition has such an effect and what an emphatic effect is. Moreover, as Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995² : 219) argue, these

intensifying effects of repetition are not as constant as claimed. We will return to this point later in 2.1.

Repetition is also used to help the planning of the speaker to think of what to say next, or to indicate that she intends to go on talking. This function is conceivable partly because such repetition is characteristic of unplanned discourse or spoken language as in (5) :

- (5) *they'd they'd* left plenty of time for all their connections. . . . I couldn't get on with things and *I I* get really em - you know *when when* I'm trying to cook - and people come and chat *I I* get terribly put off - can't get on with things at all erm - and yet you feel terribly anti-social if *you you* do just stay in the kitchen anyway.

(Leech and Svartvik 1994 : 11)

Later in 3.2., we will try to give a more precise account of this kind of repetition which we call *filler* repetition.

Tannen (1989 : 54-55) gives us several classifications for repetition. First, she distinguished between *self-repetition* in which a speaker herself repeats what she has said, and *allo-repetition* in which one repeats what an other speaker has said. Second, the linguistic material repeated ranges from *exact repetition* which repeats exactly the same word to *paraphrase* which repeats similar ideas in different words. Furthermore, there is a temporal scale of repetition. One is *immediate repetition*, that is, there is no intervening material between the first utterance and the repeated material, and the other is *delayed repetition* which occurs after some intervening linguistic materials. Jucker (1994) visualize Tannen's dimensions of repetitions as in Figure 1 below.

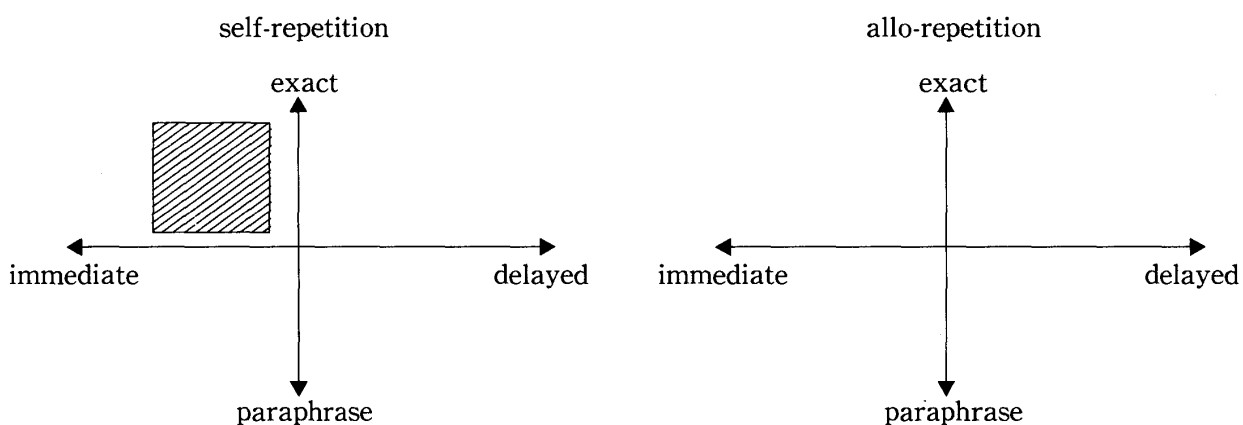


Figure 1 : Dimensions of Repetitions (Jucker 1994 : 48)

As Tannen herself points out, these boundaries of repetition are fuzzy⁴, though it seems to be

useful to classify the repetition. The analyses done so far were mainly interested in the shaded rectangle in the figure, that is, self-exact-immediate repetition, which is also our primary concern in the following of this article. Then we will move to relevance-theoretic account of repetition suggested by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995²), and Jucker (1994).

2. Relevance-based Analyses of Repetition

Before looking at the analysis of repetition in the framework of relevance theory, we should give a brief sketch of the theory. Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995²) maintain that *relevance* is defined in terms of *cognitive effect* and *processing effort*.

Cognitive effects are achieved by (a) strengthening of existing assumptions ; (b) contradicting and eliminating of existing assumptions ; and (c) yielding contextual implications which are derived from the newly presented information and the context combined. They claim that the greater the cognitive effects, the greater the relevance.

However, these contextual effects do not come free. The hearer needs some effort to derive them. Factors which affect the effort needed to process an utterance include the form in which information is presented and the accessibility of the context. The smaller the effort needed to achieve cognitive effects, the greater the relevance.

As they argue elsewhere, other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects achieved by the newly presented information, the greater its relevance will be. On the other hand, other things being equal, the greater the effort involved in the processing newly presented information, the less its relevance will be.

They also insist that every utterance comes with a guarantee of relevance ; in other words, every utterance is worthwhile processing. This principle is formulated into *Communicative Principle of Relevance* as below :

Communicative Principle of Relevance :

Every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

(Sperber and Wilson 1995² : 260)

An utterance is optimally relevant to an addressee if and only if ; (a) it is relevant enough to be worth the addressee's processing effort, and (b) it is the most relevant one compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences.

2.1. Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995²)

Basing on this communicative principle of relevance, Sperber and Wilson argue that styles, such as metaphor and irony arise in the pursuit of relevance, as does repetition, and give some examples shown below :

- | | |
|---|---|
| (6) Here's a red sock, here's a red sock, here's a blue sock. | (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995 ² : 219) |
| (7) We went for a long, long walk. | (Ibid.) |
| (8) There were houses, houses everywhere. | (Ibid.) |
| (9) I shall never, never smoke again. | (Ibid.) |
| (10) There's a fox, a fox in the garden. | (Ibid.) |
| (11) My childhood days are gone, gone. | (Ibid.) |

The speaker conveys that there are two red socks in (6) ; that the speaker went for a very long walk in (7) ; and that there were great many houses in (8). The emphatic effects among these examples are reflected in the propositional content of the utterance. While in (9) the speaker conveys that she will definitely never smoke again, and in this example, the emphatic effect is reflected not in the propositional content as in (6-8), but in the speaker's degree of commitment to that propositional content or explicature. In (10) the speaker does not refer to two foxes in the garden, but expresses her excitement about finding the foxes in the garden, and in (11) expresses her sorrow about the fact that her childhood days are gone. In these cases (10, 11), emphatic effects are reflected in the speaker's attitude. Following the communicative principle of relevance, extra processing effort must be compensated by cognitive effects, so Sperber and Wilson maintain that the extra processing effort incurred by the repetition must be outweighed by some increase in cognitive effects triggered by the repetition itself.

Although all of these examples (6-11) are considered to encode conceptual information⁵, Sperber and Wilson divide these repetitions into two types according to their contributions to the utterance ; one is addition to the explicature and the other is to the implicature. Examples (6-8) illustrate the former case of addition to the explicature. Modifying the explicature, they achieve extra cognitive effects. In short, these repetitions are relevant by adding directly to the explicature of an utterance. Examples (9-11) illustrate the latter case of addition to the implicature. In (9) the speaker attaches a higher confirmation value to the proposition. Thus repetition strengthens the explicature and all its contextual implication, a result of which

increases the cognitive effects. And in (10, 11), by encouraging the hearer to extend the context and thereby add further implicatures, these repetitions yield the increase of cognitive effects⁶.

Sperber and Wilson's analysis is the first one which deals with repetition from a cognitive viewpoint, and in that sense, it deserves to be evaluated, though there remain some problems. First, they only focus on self-immediate-exact repetition, and all of their examples to support their argument, such as above in (6-11) are artificial ones. And second, their analysis of repetition is attempted only from the effect side of relevance and concludes that repetition contributes to only that side of communication. However, since relevance is defined in terms of both effect and effort, there seems to be repetition which is concerned with the effort side of relevance. Jucker (1994) notices these points and improves their analysis. In the following section, you will find out how Jucker deals with the function of repetition.

2.2. Jucker (1994)

Following Sperber and Wilson's analysis on repetition such as above, Jucker (1994) gives us the third category of repetition to which Sperber and Wilson pay little attention. That is the repetition that adds nothing either to the explicature or to implicature of the utterance, but contributes to reducing the hearer's processing effort. He classifies this third category of repetition into two subtypes, *recycle after overlap* and *false starts*.

Recycle after overlap is the repetition that occurs immediately after an overlap and restates the material that occurred within the overlap. Consider the following examples which Jucker cites from a dinner table conversation⁷:

- (12) Marion: I've got,
 s-sent you a little present.
 [I've got it somewhere].
 Bill: [her-her prezzie-] her prezzie is on the =.. (1.1) (Jucker 1994 : 55)
- (13) Sue: [oh what's she sent me a present for?]
 Derek: [per- perhaps it's a tape],
 a tape. (Ibid.)
- (14) Sue: [Oh yeah]
 Marion: [and she's got a] --
 [she's got] a magnificent organ, (Ibid.)

In these cases, the speaker is not sure that the hearer properly heard the utterance spoken in overlap with another speaker, so that it is recycled or repeated immediately after the end of the overlap in order to help the hearer's interpretation and reduce the processing effort.

The other subtype is the false start. In this case, there is no overlap as (12-14) above, and of course these repetitions do not add anything to the explicature or implicature.

- (15) Marion: [and she's got a] --
 [she's got] a magnificent organ,
 Sue: [really?]
 Marion: it's it's a..great big one, (Jucker 1994 : 56)
- (16) Marion: now, you can these these brochures and things.. (0.6) (Ibid.)

Marrion's second utterance "it's it's" in (15), and "these these" in (16) are the typical examples what Jucker calls the false start.

According to Jucker (1994 : 56), there are some characteristic features among these examples of the false start. First, it always occurs at the beginning of a syntactic unit. Second, the speaker repeats materials with a low informational content such as pronouns, articles, and prepositions. Lastly, this repetition typically occurs just before an element which is relatively high in informational content.

The hearer can deduce from this false start repetition that the frame is still relevant, and since this type of repetition occurs just before high informational materials as Jucker points out, it is relevant enough for him to wait for the continuation. Giving such information, this false start repetition reduces the hearer's processing effort.

Whereas we recognize the importance of his analysis, there is still room for further investigation. If his examples (12-16) contribute to the utterance interpretation by reducing hearer's processing effort, they should be analyzed in terms of procedural information. Moreover, as to the false start, there are a few exceptions to his argued characteristic features. Such exceptional repetitions seem to reduce processing effort but do not fall within the Jucker's two categories. We will see in detail in the following section.

3. Repetition as an Effort Saving Device

Now we will look at some examples of repetition which neither Sperber and Wilson's analysis nor Jucker's can deal with. Such repetitions do not add anything either to the ex-

plicature or to the implicature. Moreover, there are no overlaps in their occurrences nor should they be categorized as false starts, even though they seem to reduce the hearer's processing effort.

In order to explain such exceptions, we will have to reformulate the relevance-theoretic analysis which we have seen so far, by introducing such concepts as *procedural information*, *filler*, and *renegotiation of the background assumptions*.

3.1. Repetition for Clarity

According to Quirk, Leech and Svartvik (1985 : 1441), repetition is tolerated in legal language in order to avoid misunderstanding. They claim that this is because in such a context of legal language, misinterpretation is of more serious concern than adverse stylistic criticism. The following examples are from legal documents in (17), and from an instruction about official regulations in (18) :

- (17) If at the time of any *loss, destruction, or damage* arising under this Policy there is any other insurance covering such *loss, destruction, or damage*, the Company shall not be liable for more than its ratable proportion of such *loss, destruction, or damage*.

(Quirk, Leech and Svartvik 1985 : 1441)

- (18) And that is about what happens *when someone leaves a job of their own accord*.—So what happens *when someone leaves a job of their own accord*, what happens to their unemployment benefit. (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan 1999 : 1056)

These cases do not add anything either to the explicature or to the implicature. There is no overlap, and neither can we call these examples false starts, since the speaker repeats materials which are highly informational in their own right.

In spite of these facts, these examples seem to reduce the hearer's processing effort. Repeating phrases such as "loss, destruction, or damage" in (17), and "when someone leaves a job of their own accord" in (18) both of which are loaded with highly important information, the speaker prevents the hearer's misinterpretation, and as a result she leads the hearer to save the effort needed for the interpretation.

Within the recent framework of relevance, such as Wilson and Sperber (1993), it is argued that there are two types of information which are linguistically encoded ; that is *conceptual* and *procedural information*.

Conceptual information, such as nouns and verbs encodes their own concept ; on the other

hand, discourse connectives such as *but*, *so*, and *after all* encode not conceptual information but procedural information, which indicates how to process the utterance hence reducing the processing effort⁸.

We consider that these examples (17, 18), as well as the examples which are cited from Jucker (1994) such as (12-16) above, should be regarded as encoding procedural information, since they do not contribute to the conceptual aspect of communication but to relevance by reducing hearer's processing effort.

3.2. Repetition as a Filler

Repetition is sometimes used as *filler* in order to take time, fill in the silence, and hold the floor when the speaker is searching for proper words to say next. The function of filler is explained by Brown (1977) as follows :

These (fillers) are words, phrases and sometimes just noises like *er* which do not contribute much, if anything, to the new information content of an utterance but perform several valuable functions in speech... It seems that the hesitation noises, the conventional words and phrases which occur outside the main syntactic structures, and much of repetition, must be interpreted as performing the same function : to fill the silence and maintain the speaker's right to speak while he organizes what he wants to say. Since their function is to fill the silence I am going to call all of these phenomena 'fillers'. (Brown 1977 : 107-109)

Repetitions in the examples below illustrate this filler repetition :

(19) She waited in the *station hall* uh *station hall*. (Monnik 1996 : 124)

(20) A : On the floor.

B : *on on the* well *on the* you know *on the* hatchway there⁹. (Svartvik 1980 : 171)

(21) A : What is *the most unique career experience* you've ever had?

B : Well, okay. Yeah, *my most unique career experience*...

(NHK Educational TV : English Conversation II)

Example (19) is self-repetition and while (20, 21) are allo-repetition, both of whose function seems to be just filling in the pause.

We would like to add up another function of filler as a skill to draw the hearer's attention

to the words being introduced right after fillers. In order to handle this kind of filler repetition, we have to introduce the notion of *renegotiation of the background assumptions* which was firstly introduced by Jucker (1993) for the analysis of the discourse marker *well*. We will show that they function not just filling in the pause but playing an important role in the utterance interpretation.

When the hearer interprets the utterance, he will have to access a number of background assumptions which then will constitute the context, which is a set of assumptions used to interpret the utterance. Sometimes though, many of them may be mistaken, and these mistaken assumptions will necessitate an act of renegotiation or elimination. The expressions which suggest this act of renegotiation can be defined as signposts. They suggest to the hearer that the set of assumptions which he might have are not relevant enough for the interpretation of the upcoming utterance so that they should be renegotiated.

We will enlarge this argument to filler repetitions. These repetitions (19-21) above also can be regarded as a means of encoding such procedural information as renegotiation of the background assumptions, since they orient the hearer toward appropriate choice of context which leads to an intended interpretation. Let us see more in detail.

3.2.1. Self-repetition

In spontaneous speech we have no time to think what to say in advance, but we must organize a scheme for our message as we go along. These repetitions indicate that the speaker has more to say and does not want to yield the floor. Here is an example of such speech (repeated below) :

- (5) *they'd they'd* left plenty of time for all their connections. . . . I couldn't get on with things and *I I* get really em - you know *when when* I'm trying to cook — and people come and chat *I I* get terribly put off — can't get on with things at all erm — and yet you feel terribly anti-social if you you do just stay in the kitchen anyway.
- (19) She waited in the *station hall* uh *station hall*.

Both of these examples seem to be such a case of the false start as Jucker suggests, however these repetitions function not only as the false start but also taking time for thinking of the next words to say, in other words as filler. Moreover, in (19) since the speaker repeats a relevant phrase or materials which are loading important information “station hall”, it does not fit the definition of the false start which Jucker (1994 : 56) establishes.

We argue that the main function of this kind of filler repetition is to convey the procedural information that the hearer should renegotiate his background assumptions which might include that “the speaker’s utterance is over” since such an assumption does not hold. In fact, in these examples the speaker seems to try to continue his utterance if he can find the proper words. If the speaker keeps the silence in thinking what to say next, the hearer misunderstands his silence as yielding the floor. So these repetitions, by signaling the hearer that the speaker has not finished his talk yet, contribute to reducing the processing effort. Moreover, since the speaker cannot provide proper words straightaway, it seems that what has to be renegotiated also includes the speaker’s own cognitive environment.

We will now attempt to extend this observation to allo-repetition, which neither Jucker nor Sperber and Wilson pay attention to.

3.2.2. Allo-repetition

The points we have made in 3.2.1. above also apply to allo-repetition which acts as filler. Consider the following examples (repeated below) :

(20) A: On the floor.

B: *on on the well on the you know on the hatchway there.*

(21) A: What is *the most unique career experience* you’ve ever had?

B: Well, okay. Yeah, *my most unique career experience...*

In both examples, B’s utterance just repeats what A has said, and it is not relevant from the effect side. By repeating, B suggests that A’s assumption, such as “B has nothing to say” in (20), and “B tells an interesting story by now” in (21), does not hold. Moreover, since proper words or an interesting story to which A wants to listen to does not come to B’s mind straightaway, what should be renegotiated also includes B’s own cognitive environment.

4. Conclusion

Based on a revision of Jucker’s analysis, we have examined repetition from the principle of relevance, especially from the effort side of that principle. This analysis reveals that the repetition is used not only to increase cognitive effect, but also to save an effort as a procedurally encoded information.

This conclusion brings about some interesting matters. Wilson and Sperber (1993) claim that all linguistic properties or utterances encode conceptual or procedural information. In short, all the information which is linguistically encoded is either conceptual or procedural, so that their distinction is a mutually exclusive one. As we have seen, there are two types of repetition. One is repetitions which add either explicature or implicature of an utterance such as the ones adduced in (6-11) which are conceptually encoded. The other type of repetitions does not add anything to either explicature or implicature, but contributes to the relevance by reducing the processing effort such as both in (5) and (12-21) which are procedurally encoded. If this analysis is right, it leads us to conclude that one linguistic act of repetition is used for both conceptual and procedural encoding. This fact remains as a matter to be discussed further.

We would also like to develop this approach which is based on the principle of relevance by expanding our investigation to other types of repetition which we did not deal with in detail in this paper, such as paraphrase-repetition¹⁰ and allo-repetition.

Notes

1. For example, Bazzanella (ed.) (1996), Fischer (ed.) (1994), and Johnstone (ed.) (1994a, 1994b).
2. See also Pilkington (2000 : 123-131).
3. Note that both examples (1-4) and their counterparts (1'-4') make the same contribution to truth conditions of the utterances.
4. See Tannen (1989 : 54-55).
5. See Wilson and Sperber (1993).
6. Yasui (1982 : 452) claims that repetition which has emphatic effects usually repeats the word or phrase twice or three times, such as "She ran and ran and ran" and that the speaker should avoid repeating four times such as "She ran and ran and ran and ran" since it sounds diffuse. This fact can be explained also in terms of effort and effect of relevance. The effort demanded to repeat the same word more than three times may not be offset by the effect which is obtained from such repetition.
7. In all of the examples cited from Jucker (1994), '[]' indicates speech overlap, '=' lengthening, '.' short pause, '(1.1)' duration, and '- -' truncated intonation unit.
8. As for the expressions which encode procedural information, see Blakemore (1992).
9. The interesting point in this example is the co-occurrence of the discourse markers *well* and *you know* as a delaying device or as filler. These expressions also are considered as expressions conveying procedural information. For the functions of the discourse marker *well* from relevance-theoretic point of view, see Jucker (1993).
10. See Blakemore (1993, 1997) for the relevance-theoretic analysis of paraphrase repetition.

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