Reviews of Barbara Johnstone (ed.), Repetition in Discourse: Interdisciplinary perspectives

Barbara Johnstone

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These two volumes consist of a total of 28 chapters resulting from a conference titled ‘Repetition in discourse’ held at Texas A&M University in 1990. The objective, as stated by the editor (Vol. 1, xi), is to explore ‘a way of thinking about repetition that ties together the insights from various fields and perspectives and various texts and genres’. As such, the scope of these volumes is very broad indeed—from literary discourse in novels, drama, poetry, and nonfiction (Vol. 1, Chs. 4–10) to language use in learning and acquisition interactions (Vol. 1, Chs. 11–16); from spontaneous, ordinary conversation (Vol. 2, Chs. 1–4) to talk at workplaces (Vol. 2, Chs. 5–7); from repetition of sounds, syllables, and syllabic organization (Vol. 1, Ch. 9) to repetition of plots, events, and dress (Vol. 1, Ch. 5); from repetition in the psychological sense (Vol. 1, Ch. 10) to repetition in visual discourse (Vol. 2, Chs. 8–10); from methodological concerns (Vol. 1, Chs. 2 and 3) to cultural, philosophical rethinnings (Vol. 2, Chs. 11 and 12).

Given that every verbal or nonverbal act and activity is, to the extent that it is understood, intertextual in some way, what then is/is not repetition? ‘Repetition in discourse: A dialogue’ (Vol. 1, Ch. 1 by Barbara Johnstone et al.) provides a rich, thoughtful discussion of this question. In attempting to define the ‘multifaceted phenomenon’ (19), the authors conceive of repetition as some sort of pattern (sameness) which triggers the same cognitive reflex, which can be recognized given our cultural bias, and which to some extent depends upon the native speaker’s intuition. In terms of its form, repetition is omnipresent (‘we find repetition in everything’, 15); it can range from the reiteration of a sound pattern to the reproduction of prior texts from a collective cultural memory. With regard to its function, the authors assert that ‘the functions of repetition may be the same as the functions of discourse’ (13); in other words, repetition can serve whatever functions discourse and language can in shaping human activities and interpersonal relationships.

With such a broad, open definition, how can we recognize repetition? And how can repetition be represented through transcripts? These issues are taken up in Vol. 1, Chs. 2–3. Drawing on data from service encounters and classroom settings, Marilyn Merritt (Ch. 2, ‘Repetition in situated discourse’) offers some procedural suggestions and a list of what repetition may involve, be associated with, and function as. Joel Shierzer (Ch. 3, ‘Transcription, representation, and translation’) emphasizes that the very ways in which language is encoded affect our understanding of its roles and functions. In analyzing repetition and parallelism in Kuna (Indian) discourse, Sherzer suggests that native American verbal art ‘is best analyzed and represented as linear poetry rather than block prose’ (44).

The seven chapters that concern repetition in literary, planned discourse illustrate such themes as the role of semantic repetition (Dina Sherzer, Ch. 5, ‘Effects of events a little, C how in Schneiders absurdly written...uers(Didion’).

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5, ‘Effects of repetition in the French new novel’); how repeating narrative events can invoke a shift in perspective and index multiple voices (Susan Ehrlich, Ch. 5, ‘Repetition and point of view in represented speech and thought’); how repetition constructs negative communicative stances (Cynthia Schneebly, Ch. 7, ‘Repetition and failed conversation in the theater of the absurd’); and how to situate repetition in the quantifiable differences between written genres, between modes of communication, and between individual writers (Dennis Rygier, Ch. 8, ‘Lexical parallelism in the nonfiction of Joan Didion’).

Of the six chapters that focus on repetition in learning and teaching settings, Russell Tomlin (Ch. 12, ‘Repetition in second language acquisition’) presents a particularly strong case in which he differentiates repetition types and their associated functions in task-based tutorials by integrating the notion of an event network with a theory of rhetorical action. By treating repetition as a rhetorical action, his work suggests that cognitive models are crucial to a general theory of repetition. Martha Bean and Genevieve Patthay-Chavez (Ch. 14, ‘Repetition in instructional discourse’) report how self-repetition and allo-repetition in a number of instructional settings serve jointly to construct expertise and ultimately to accomplish the task of learning. Their work highlights the affective as well as cognitive roles that repetition plays. From a creole language and child language acquisition point of view, Susan Shepherd (Ch. 15, ‘Grammaticalization and discourse functions of repetition’) draws our attention to the relationship between forms of repetition and modes of discourse (oral vs. written) across cultures.

Vol. 2 begins with four chapters on ordinary conversation, among which Ch. 3, ‘Repetition and play in conversation’ by Robert Hopper and Phillip Glen, is particularly interesting. Their work on how poetry and play are accomplished—through repetition in seemingly mundane interactional contexts such as a speech error and joint laughter—demonstrates that repetition is a socially, cognitively distributed phenomenon.

All three chapters on repetition in institutional settings are strong. Steven Cushing (Ch. 5, ‘Linguistic repetition in air-ground communication’) shows that, in aviation, whether or not to repeat and whether or not to repeat verbatim is far more than a matter of stylistic choice but rather can be of a matter of life and death. Kathleen Ferrara (Ch. 6, ‘Repetition as rejoinder in therapeutic discourse’) delineates the functions and distributions of echoing and mirroring. Her study interweaves perspectives from cohesion, intonation, variation, and interaction. Robert Nofsinger (Ch. 7, ‘Repeating the host’) focuses on the guest’s repetition of the host’s repair formulation in a TV program on computers. He proposes that repetition in this case is a co-construction of expertise and of discourse identity in general.

The three chapters on visual discourse represent an aspect of research on language and interaction which is gaining increasing importance. The topics covered in this section include referential practice in American Sign Language (Elizabeth Winston, Ch. 8, ‘Space and reference in ASL’), the impact of page layout in professional writing (James Porter and Patricia Sullivan, Ch. 9,
'Repetition and the rhetoric of visual design'), and the constitution of authority through images in the media (B. Hannah Rockwell, Ch. 10, 'Image and idea').

These two volumes end with two essays under the thematic heading 'Repetition and the replication of knowledge'. I particularly enjoyed reading A. L. Becker's witty essay (Ch. 12, 'Repetition and otherness'), which returns one to the question raised by Johnstone et al. in the very first chapter, 'Are there in fact only two things we can do in discourse, either repeat or do something different?' (19).

The editor did an admirable job of grounding the volumes in a multidisciplinary orientation, summing them up through a succinct preface, grouping the chapters thematically, providing subject and author indexes, and offering an annotated bibliography of close to 300 items.

The contributions to these two volumes are of varying quality, however. In some instances, claims are made on the basis of displayed but underanalyzed data. Some chapters (e.g. Vol. 1, Ch. 16, 'Affirming the past and confirming humanness') would need further embedding to be understood as being connected with the other chapters. Rather than indiscriminately treating everything as repetition, some chapters could benefit from a clearer, operational focus that would warrant the presentation of the chosen phenomena.

In addition to providing ways of thinking about repetition as a discursive practice, these two volumes afford us an opportunity to reflect upon what constitutes interdisciplinary research. Many analytical approaches are reflected in the volumes—conversation analysis, linguistic anthropology, human interaction and performance, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, stylistic analysis, critical discourse analysis, to mention a few. One thus feels compelled to ask the following questions: Might we adopt an anything-goes attitude or do we now have a better sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches represented here vis-à-vis the phenomenon of repetition? To what extent is there a dialogue or an engagement of ideas between various disciplines in chapters other than the jointly authored introduction? What sort of new knowledge regarding both repetition and ways of understanding it has been generated through the fusing of these diverse fields of inquiry?

Space does not permit me to do justice to these two volumes. They are certainly a useful contribution to the rapidly growing interdisciplinary scholarship in language and human interaction.

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REFERENCES


Cynthia Schneely describes how Theater of the Absurd playwrights Pinter and Albee successfully model ordinary conversational repetition - at the same time showing how the device can impede, obscure, or prevent conversational involvement. The way subsequent repetitions build on earlier ones, producing reinterpretation and nuance, is well illustrated here. This resonating quality of repetition is one of its most remarkable potencies (seen also by Rebecca Gault in Effie Briest). However, the routinization and “faux involvement” that are played upon so skillfully by these dramatists can elsewhere, as in the computer software manuals examined by J. E. Porter & P. A. Sullivan (Vol. II), directly undermine discourse goals. The best example of the power of ritualization to decrease the cognitive impact of repetition comes from Steve Cushing’s study of talk in air traffic control towers (also in Vol. II), a paper at once fascinating and terrifying.

Analysis of Joan Didion’s frequent use of lexical parallelisms in her essays leads Dennis Rygiel to argue that here the usage is deployed to produce the effect of a mind in the process of thinking. This function is somewhat like the delaying, plot-detonating functions discussed by Dina Sherzer, and also noted in papers by Susan Ehrlich (on point-of-view in Woolf’s novels) and Katherine Kelly (on parody in postmodern drama). Similar slowing effects of repeated material are apparent in ritual language - cf. Thomas Hudak on Classical Thai poetry, and A. L. Becker (Vol. II) on traditional Malay epi- and I have seen the same pattern in spontaneous personal narrative in Mocho (Mayan). Some sort of comparative analysis seems called for here.

Among papers dealing with repetition and learning, Tina Bennett-Kastor’s admittedly sketchy treatment of repetition in early language development argues forcefully for an approach to developmental research that accepts the increasing grammaticalization of repetition as the key pattern in the progress of conversational (i.e. linguistic) autonomy and competence. Bennett-Kastor sees the entire range of adult discourse genres as emerging from the dialogic/interactive nature of conversation and the practice of mutuality through imitative repetition. The pragmatic functions of repetition in strengthening interactional connectedness are also illustrated by Jeutonne Brewer - who calls for a developmental rather than deviance model for the study of the language of elderly individuals - and by Laurie Knox, in a treatment of self-repetition in conversations between native and non-native speakers. Her paper is especially valuable in underscoring how repetition often reveals the richness of linguistic interaction, not its poverty. Similarly, M. S. Bean & G. G. Pathat-Chavez stress the multifunctional and dynamic roles of repetition, which has both cognitive and affective functions: facilitating cognitive processing and learning, while aiding in the joint negotiation of social interactional roles.

Russell Tomlin, using L2 acquisition data, takes the position that a proper theory of repetition must be able to distinguish sub-types explicitly, and requires the conjunction of structural and functional (including intentional) analysis to do so. (JoEllen Simpson’s preliminary attempt at the former task in Vol. II, using intonational cues, may overlook the significance of this second requirement.) Tomlin emphasizes the nature of repetition as “rhetorical action,” part of the dynamic interactive processes of discourse, grammar, and behavior. A similar focus on rhetorical intention is unexpectedly central to some of the discussions of visual discourse in Vol. II, including J. E. Porter & P. A. Sullivan’s examination of the consequences of repetition in the visual design of computer manuals, and Elizabeth Winston’s fascinating account of “Space and reference in American Sign Language.” ASL spatial referencing is a specific linguistic device available for manipulation through repetition, for purposes both rhetorical and grammatical; and, like uses of repetition in other discourse contexts, it is a valuable resource for accomplishing discourse cohesion.

This emphasis on the complexity of discourse contexts in which interlocutors can mobilize the resources of repetition for different purposes is the central theme of Jill Brody’s analysis of Tojolabal conversational repetition. Tojolabal functions such as turn and topic negotiation, boundary marking, and demonstration of social alignment are mirrored in Neal Norrick’s analysis of conversational joking in English. Given the relatively low aesthetic evaluation conventionally given to repetition by English speakers, it would be interesting to investigate whether the presence of a humorous or ironic key makes necessary repetition more acceptable. Like Norrick, Robert Hopper & Phillip Glenn observe that repetition, by “locating” prior text, increases metacommunicative awareness and thus provides sites for commentary on conversational form. They also highlight the intricate poetic structuring produced by ordinary speakers at play.

Kathleen Ferrara’s distinction of client-generated, contiguous, clausal repetitions for emphatic agreement (“echoing”) vs. therapist-initiated, displaced, phrasal repetitions used as indirect requests for elaboration (“mirroring”) may have useful applications to other sorts of data. Her analysis also reminds us that speakers deploy repetition deliberately and strategically, a fact further illustrated in Robert Nofskiger’s data from guest/host interactions on a televised talk show.

Vol. II closes with two papers on the larger relationships between discourse repetition and culture. Greg Urban asserts convincingly that repetition is the key to all socially circulating discourse, i.e. to culture itself. According to him, only in the use of repetitive structures can communities identify what it is they share. (Rockwell makes a related point less successfully.) Finally there is a stimulating paper by A. L. Becker, which defies easy summary, but forwards a similar argument through his own intricate use of repeated “prior