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Repeating yourself: Discourse paraphrase and the generation of language

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REPEATING YOURSELF: DISCOURSE PARAPHRASE
AND THE GENERATION OF LANGUAGE
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1. Introduction

I have been studying the nature and function of repetition for several years, and often have occasion to talk to people about what I am doing. Such conversations often begin like this:
other person: What kind of research do you do?
me: I am working on repetition.
o.p.: What?
me: Repetition.
o.p.: What?
me: I am interested in why people repeat.
o.p.: What?
At this point I usually catch on to the game, and groan or make a disgusted face.

The question of why I keep falling for this is probably interesting in its own right, but what is more interesting is the fact that my utterances in these conversations are almost never exact repetitions (unless the other person pretends, by means of non-verbal cues like ear-cupping, that he simply didn't hear), but rather paraphrases. In non-technical English parlance, "repetition" usually means paraphrase. When a lecturer is asked to "please repeat that last point," he or she will almost inevitably paraphrase it, sometimes to the disgruntlement of note-takers or non-native speakers who really wanted exact repetition. Paraphrase is what composition teachers respond to with marginal notations like "REP" (repetitive) or "RED" (redundant). When I ask laypeople for examples of repetition in conversations they have heard, they are most likely to provide examples of paraphrase; despite the fact that, as Tannen (1983) and others have pointed out, conversations are riddled with other kinds of repetition as well: syntactic parallelism, phonological echoing, lexical chaining, and so on.

In this paper, I will discuss paraphrase in spoken discourse. Specifically, I will be interested in spontaneous, that is non-elicited, self-paraphrase, of the kind that is seen in examples (1) and (2):

1. They're not equally good. Some of them are better than others.
2. But it scared me and I was just afraid.

The examples I will use were all observed in actual conversation, and descriptions of their linguistic and social contexts were collected along with them. I will be interested in the functions of spontaneous self-paraphrase in conversation, and I will be examining self-paraphrase from a number of fairly disparate psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and rhetorical angles. I will end with a linguistic-theoretical perspective which will tie all the others together into one way of understanding self-paraphrase, and, in fact, other kinds of repetition as well.

The methodology of this study is, as I believe it has to be, eclectic. In examining a phenomenon as multi-faceted as repetition, one has to take advantage of all the clues that offer themselves. Thus, my comments about the function of self-paraphrase are based partly on previous scholars' observations about what makes conversations cohere and how people persuade one another of things, partly on empirical data about what kinds of paraphrases speakers actually produce in conversations and what the results of self-paraphrases are (such as, for example, the facts that co-conversationalists rarely respond any differently to self-paraphrases than they do to non-paraphrased utterances and that self-paraphrasers do not apologize for, or "repair," their paraphrases), and partly on my own intuitions about what self-paraphrasers intended to do and what their utterances mean.

It is probably the case that most (though not all) self-paraphrases are unplanned; that they are produced as speakers monitor themselves and their hearers as they talk, catching and correcting potential lacunae in expression and understanding. It would be possible to regard all self-paraphrases as speech errors, or, more precisely, to regard the first part of any self-paraphrase as an error (what the speaker said by mistake) and the second as a correction (what the speaker really meant to say). Prescriptive studies of written language take this approach, as perhaps they should: as Uch's (1970) points out, paraphrase is less common, and less necessary, in planned discourse. It is admittedly impossible to be sure in any given case of what a speaker intended to say, and some of the self-paraphrases that I have observed in my own talk have been self-corrections. But not all have this status. The data I will adduce make it clear that in the majority of cases the second part of a self-paraphrase cannot be seen as a corrected version of the first part, and that the two parts function together as a semantic, cohesive, and rhetorical unit. Speakers do monitor and edit as they talk, and hearers reinterpret as they listen, but not all rephrasings and reinterpretations are corrections: lost are additions, which create greater, not different, understanding.

2. Conversational cohesion and rhetorical force

In her 1983 LSA paper, Deborah Tannen presents a very interesting discussion of how repetitions of all kinds function in conversation. She shows that repetitions of one's own and of others' sounds, rhythmic patterns, words, phrases, and syntax create a shared universe of discourse as talk proceeds. Repetition is an easy and automatic strategy for making conversation coherent, and for creating what Tannen calls involvement (1972:7) by sweeping the speakers along on a familiar flow. Specifically, she claims, repetition aids in the production of talk (it is efficient to build conversation by repeating parts of what other people have said), in comprehension (by creating redundancy and making conversation sound familiar), and in interaction.
(people use repetition to get or keep the conversational floor, to show that they are listening and enjoying what others are saying, and for humorous purposes).

One could paraphrase Tannen's observations by saying that repetition lends cohesion to conversation. But Tannen's approach to cohesion is more interesting than many others. For her, cohesion is not a kind of epiphenomenon of successful talk; rather, talk is simply the mutual process of creating coherence. Repetition does not just create coherence in talk; it creates talk. To the very large extent that all interaction is rhetorical (as Kenneth Burke [1950 et passim] and others have claimed), another way of talking about the sorts of things Tannen discusses would be to look at the rhetoric of repetition, or, specifically, and the rhetoric of self-paraphrase.

Self-paraphrase functions rhetorically in two ways. First, a speaker who uses paraphrase to get or keep the floor in conversation, or to make sure that others understand, or to be funny, is making an interactional point, a point about himself or herself as a skilled and willing conversationalist. One clear example of self-paraphrase used in this way is (3), which is from a personal-experience narrative.

(3) I wouldn't walk into a henhouse or anything with chickens in it to save my life; I mean, that would be the last place you'd ever find me.

In this case, the linking phrase "I mean" and the paraphrase itself do not carry a minimal semantic load. They slow the conversation down, making the speaker's turn longer and giving hearers more time to process what is being said. The paraphrase also points up the humorlessness of what the speaker is saying. As Joel Sherzer (1983:140-41) has pointed out in his discussions of highly repetitive kuna speaking and chanting, the length at which a person talks, as well as the elegance of what he or she says, can itself be a sign of power, semantic considerations aside.

Paraphrases like (3) shade into ones in which the second statement of an idea serves to clarify or even define the first, as in these examples:

(4) ... and I always felt threwed away; you know, still — like I wasn't loved at all.
(5) I mean he's got [route] 24 blocked; he's sitting there right in the middle of the highway. Got it blocked.
(6) Gender stereotypes are universally prevalent; they exist all over the world.

Paraphrases in lectures, like (6), often serve this sort of purpose: a lecturer can use paraphrase to interpolate a definition without having to announce that a new term or concept is about to be defined (thereby creating a shuffle of sudden note-taking). Here we are looking at the second way in which paraphrase can be rhetorical, at how paraphrase can create knowledge. At the risk of drawing an arbitrary boundary in what is really a continuum, one might call this aspect of the rhetorical force of self-paraphrase "content rhetorical," as opposed to the "interaction rhetorical" paraphrases I discussed earlier.

In the next section, I will look in more detail at the semantic workings of paraphrases of this content-rhetorical type. For now, let me just say generally that repetition is a very widely used rhetorical strategy. In everyday interaction in English, and, in some languages, even in highly formal written genres, people persuade each other of things by repeating them. I have discussed repetition and persuasion in earlier work on Arabic prose (Koch 1955a; 1955b). Because Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian logical models of persuasion treat repetition as an optional stylistic device, English-speakers tend to be unaware of what repetition really does.

3. Paraphrase as perspective-shifting

In this section I will take a closer look at the internal structure of self-paraphrases. By definition, all paraphrases involve two parts. How, then, are the two parts related to each other, and what is the overall effect of the relationship? Close examination of a corpus of about sixty self-paraphrases reveals that the parts, or phrases, as I will call them, of a paraphrase can be related in a number of different ways. In the majority of cases, the second phrase of a self-paraphrase creates a shift in perspective; the same action or event is being viewed in a different way. This perspective shift is sometimes pragmatic and sometimes more strictly semantic.

3.1. Pragmatic shifts

In many self-paraphrases, the perspective shift has to do with a redefinition of the speech situation. The second phrase can be more, or less, direct than the first, the implicit relationship between speaker and addressee can be altered in other ways, or the speaker's or hearer's implied stance with regard to the event being talked about can change. In (7), for example, the first phrase is a direct request for information, the second a softened, indirect one:

(7) What would qualify? I don't think I know what would qualify.

In (8), the first perspective is an external comment about the event, the second a comment about how the event was for the speaker.

(8) I was competing; I was riding myself.

In (9), the focus shifts from the event seen as something in which the hearer was passively involved to a more active perspective: getting divorced versus getting a divorce.

(9) Did you get divorced or did you get a divorce from your husband?

The perspective can also shift from the event to the hearer, as in (10), or from the hearer to the event, as in (11):

(10) When does this job start? Surely you know when the job starts.
(11) No, you may not have friends over tonight. None of your friends may come over.

In many paraphrases, the linguistic code changes from a less elaborated form, in which speaker and hearer are presumed to share more contextual information, to a more elaborated, formal form in which more is spelled out verbally. We see this in example (12):

(12) Things were going up all over the place. There were a lot of developments springing up everywhere.

In (13), the first phrase involves a less elaborated gesture, whereas the second uses more elaborated words:

(13) They were crushed about that flat [gesture with thumb and forefinger]. They were about an inch big; they were all expanded and flattened out.

The same process can also work the other way. In (14), the first phrase is a standard student-to-student greeting. The second, according to the addressee, is an inside joke. The speaker was misreading the addressee, who often says "I've been keeping busy" in answer to questions like "Been working hard?"

(14) Been working hard? Been keeping busy?

Closely related to self-paraphrases like (12) – (14) are ones which involve a slightly different kind of redefinition of the relationship between speaker and addressee. In these, the linguistic register shifts from less to more formal as the speaker attempts to symbolize his or her status relative to the immediate or reported audience. Example (15) is from an academic committee meeting, a speech situation in which there are often two conflicting sources of constraint on a speaker: the need to be frank and to sound sincere, and the need to demonstrate that one is articulate and has a sophisticated command of language.

(15) It just won't work. It's not feasible.

Example (16) reports an interchange between the speaker and a police officer:

(16) And I says yeah I know; I said ah I know.

In his choice of an introductory verb (says/said), as well as in the substitution of ah for yeah, the speaker is making his utterance reflect both his relationship with his audience of peers and his relationship with a figure of authority.

3.2. Logical shifts

The self-paraphrases in the preceding section can be called "pragmatic shifts," because they have to do with redefinitions of the speech situation as the speaker is talking. Another large category consists of paraphrases in which the logical perspective on the event is what changes.

A strikingly large number of paraphrases in the corpus (thirteen out of sixty) involve one positive phrasing of an idea and one negative. The direction of the shift seems more often to be from positive to negative, as we see in (17) – (19):

(17) There was a lack of clarity as to why we were there. People didn't know why we were there.
(18) They'll shut up; they won't talk.
(19) They're two different things; they're not the same at all.

The shift can also go the other way, as in these examples:

(20) It's not automatic; you have to do it yourself.
(21) I can't stand him; I hate him.
(22) My boyfriend and I can't see eye to eye; we have differing viewpoints.

In all these cases, it is as if the speaker were forcing the hearer to pick up the linguistic object, turn it around, and look at it from the other direction. Rhetorically, this works in the same way as a package of bacon with windows on both sides or a fashion show in which models twirl around. Things are more impressive if you see them more ways.

Another category of logical perspective shifts in self-paraphrases is from cause to effect or effect to cause. In (23) and (24), for example, the second phrase can be seen as the effect of the first:

(23) I'm hungry. I'm ready to eat.
(24) He wanted to keep me; he wanted to marry me.

The next two examples work the opposite way. Here, the second phrase is the cause.

(25) You know her; you met her.
(26) I can't stand doing mathematics; I hate working with numbers.

Examples of this cause-effect type fall on the boundary between paraphrase, strictly speaking (saying the same thing two ways) and another large category of sets of paratactically adjoined utterances, ones in which the semantic effect is clearly modificational. Example (27) is one such set:

(27) I can't come. I've got a paper to write.

While (27) is semantically quite similar to (25) or (26), it is slightly easier, I think, to imagine (27) in a filled-out form, with a subordinating conjunction like because:
learning, the grammatical and semantic categories of a language must somehow be made overt. I claim that this happens by means of strategies of repetition-with-variation, of which paraphrase is one. Since no two speakers have precisely the same previous input of repetitions, no two speakers share exactly the same linguistic paradigms; paradigmatic structure must continually be made overt in discourse. Repetition thus serves the same function in adults' discourse as it does in caretakers' speech to children: the necessity for interlocutors to create a shared language as they talk accounts for the presence in discourse of all sorts of repetition. Conversational coherence is created as interlocutors create a shared linguistic world via repetitions and variations, as experience is classified and reclassified in mutual discourse. Ideas are modified through the process of reclassification which is the result of perspective-shiftings.

All of the functions of paraphrase discussed above are really reflexes of this most general function of repetition. Paraphrase is absolutely essential for the continual organization, reorganization, and creation of language in discourse.

FOOTNOTES

1. I would like to thank Pete Becker and Deborah Tannen for their ongoing help with the project of which this paper is a part. Colleagues at ESCOL '84 and at Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne, have also contributed useful insights. Alan Sandstrom has been especially helpful in this capacity, and I also appreciate his generosity with his word-processing equipment. Any factual, interpretive, or editorial errors are of course my responsibility.

2. It is in fact very difficult to remember the exact wording of what one has just said. Perhaps this has to do with the space limitations of short-term memory (Ilse Leniste, personal communication).

3. At least in contexts like this one, "I mean" is interpreted as "This is how I want you to interpret what I just said," not as "This is what I really mean and that wasn't."

4. Mohammad Fazel has pointed out to me that in the psychoanalytic process, self-paraphrase is often a clue to the therapist that a patient is achieving a new insight, a reorganization or his or her mental structure.

REFERENCES

(27a) I can't come because I've got a paper to write.

I do not think that it should be at all distressing to find that it is impossible to draw a clear formal boundary between paraphrase and non-paraphrastic parataxis. In interpreting sets of utterances which follow each other with no overt signal (like because) of their semantic relationship, hearers may well look first for modification. Perspective-shifts of the kind I have examined in this section may in fact be seen as a sort of modification.

4. Paraphrase in language acquisition

One of the examples of self-paraphrase used above had as its addressee a nine-year-old girl.

(11) No, you may not have friends over. None of your friends may come over.

As Catherine Snow (1972) and others have pointed out, much younger children are also exposed to a great deal of paraphrase. Self-paraphrase is in fact a very salient feature of what has been called "caretaker speech." Here is one example, from Snow's findings (1972:363). A mother is instructing her two-year-old to perform a simple task.

(26) Pick up the red one. Find the red one. Not the green one. I want the red one. Can you find the red one?

The child is being exposed, in utterances like these, to a number of alternate ways of saying the same thing; an underlying category of items which in adult speech would usually not be listed in actual discourse is being laid out for the child (the red one/not the green one; pick up/find/I want). Paraphrase and other kinds of repetition seem to be crucial mechanisms in language learning, because they provide data about possible choices, or, to use a familiar term for the structure of choices in language, about the paradigmatic axis.

In the final and most speculative section of this paper, I will use this insight—that paraphrase provides overt, actual information about linguistic paradigms—to propose a hypothesis about the linguistic-dynamic function of paraphrase in adults' talk.

5. Discourse paraphrase and linguistic paradigms

By approach to repetition in general, and to paraphrase in particular, as is a springboard Roman Jakobson's observations about parallelism and the poetic function of language (1950; 1960; 1966).

For Jakobson, a linguistic message can serve one or more of six functions, each focused on one of the six components of communication: addressor, addressee, context, code, context, and message (1960:353). A message is poetic in function if it focuses on its own language; if the actual words and grammatical structures of the message are foregrounded, instead of (or in addition to) the context to which the message refers, the phatic contact between speaker and hearer, or any of the remaining three elements of the communication. The linguistic structure of a message is foregrounded when the speaker juxtaposes in sequence items which are phonologically, grammatically, or semantically related, or, in other words, combines items among which, in other kinds of discourse, speakers normally select. In Jakobson's best-known formulation, "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination" (1960:358). The underlying linguistic structure of choices—paradigmatic structure, in the broad Saussurean sense—is revealed in the syntactic structuring of discourse.

Jakobson's ideas are significant not only because they provide a linguistic explanation of how poetry works; they also show how poetic texts provide clues about the underlying, usually hidden structure of language (1960:605). The poetic function is by no means confined to poetry, as Jakobson points out; it is always to some extent at play, in semi-poetic genres like chants, songs, and skip-ropes rhymes, and, as Sherzer (1977) notes, in everyday conversational exchanges as well, when speakers respond to hearers' requests for clarification by citing another member of the same paradigm, couched in the same grammatical form. Sherzer's analysis of Xuna Ikarkuna, or curing chants, shows how whole semantic taxonomies can be made overt in long parallelistic structures.

Jakobson's work, and subsequent uses of it, are confined to fairly clear examples of parallelistic discourse. It is my contention, however, that Jakobson's ideas apply equally to all sorts of repetition in discourse. This is because all repetition can be seen as parallelism. Repetition is never exact; even if words and structures are identical, contexts are different. Thus, every repetition involves a difference (which is what Jakobson's difference as a repetition) and a difference (which makes repetition different from mental déjà vu phenomena). The sameness might be syntactic, the difference lexical, as in classic cases of grammatical parallelism. Or the sameness can be phonological, the difference lexical (rhyme, assonance, etc.). Or the sameness can be semantic, the difference syntactic, as in paraphrase. All repetition involves, then, by definition, two or more items which are different but the same—two or more members of the same class. This is precisely the poetic function, the reflection of paradigmatic classes in syntactic discourse.

Jakobson is clearly right in saying that in parallelistic discourse (and, by extension, in all cases of repetition, including paraphrase), discourse reflects paradigmatic structure. Even more importantly, however, repetition is as true of pre-paradigmatic classes as of paradigmatic classes. Paradigmatic structure is often visualized as a set of knowledge which speakers draw upon in implicit ways as they create discourse. The question of where this structure comes from, in an individual or in the history of a language, is seldom asked. Clearly, the paradigmatic structure of a language, however it is specifically described, is not innate. It follows that in the process of language