

Repetition in Social Interaction: A Case Study on Mandarin Conversations

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Abstract

Repetition or imitation is important in human evolution in that it is a safe way to secure entities from stepping into any danger caused by uncertainty. By repeating or imitating the behavior of other group members, one may survive in many situations. Repetition is also of pedagogical significance in that it is a fast way to acquire a skill or a language. Moreover, it is a pervasive type of spontaneous prepatterning in human social interaction. This significantly pervasive phenomenon in social interaction is nonetheless rather neglected by the scholars in the fields of discourse analysis and conversation analysis in Mandarin. It is therefore the main purpose of this study to seek to examine repetitions in social interaction by investigating data collected from Mandarin conversations in Taiwan. It is hoped that such a study may help piece together the communicative functions of repetition used by the social interactants to meet their various interactional needs in conversations. It is also hoped that such a study may contribute to natural language processing and information processing by providing a detailed analysis of the patterns and functions of repetition in social interaction.

Keywords

Repetition, self-repeats, other-repeats, illocutionary force, social interaction

1. Introduction

Repetition, ways that meaning is created by the recurrence and recontextualization of words and phrases in discourse (Tannen 2007), is a pervasive type of spontaneous prepatterning in human social interaction. As pointed out in Tannen (1987), repetition or imitation is essential to evolution, as entities may secure themselves by repeating or imitating the behavior of other group members. Moreover, repetition is of great significance to learning and pedagogy, since repetition or imitation is a fast way to acquire a skill or a language, including the lexicon and the structures (Tannen 1987). This paper is aimed at investigating repetitions in social interaction, varying in types and functions, by examining data collected from Mandarin conversations in Taiwan, including face-to-face conversations, radio call-in programs and telephone conversations. It is hoped that such a detailed analysis of the patterns and functions of repetition in social interaction may contribute to natural language processing and information processing.

2. Types and Functions of Repetition

Tannen (2007) distinguishes two types of repetition: synchronic repetition, i.e., the recurrence of words and collocations of words in the same discourse, and diachronic

repetition, i.e., the recurrence of words in discourse which occurs at a later time (ibid:2). In this paper, we will focus on synchronic repetition only, that is, repetition in social interaction. In terms of sequential organizations and functions, there are two types of repetition: self-repeats and other-repeats, which will be discussed in turn with concrete examples in the following sections.

2.1 Self-repeats

Self-repeats in conversations can be further classified into two sub-types. One is a set of consecutive repeats without interference from the other party, which usually occurs in a trio-set, viz. three-partedness listing (Jefferson 1991), which can be diagrammed as in (1):

(1) Sub-type I

1. A: XXX
2. XXX
3. XXX

This type of self-repetition is often of emphasizing function, which can be illustrated by Excerpts (2) and (3).

(2) Radio1

790 A:.. suo3yi3,_
therefore

791 ..shi4mian4-shang4 de leng3yin3-cha2,_
market on DE cold.drink-tea

792 .. ta1 ye3shi4 xian1 yung4 re4shui3
it also first use hot.water

chung1pao4 de?\
brew DE

‘So, all the cold tea sold on the market is in fact brewed with hot water first (, right)?’

793 C:.. **shi4.**\
yes

794 .. **shi4.**\
yes

795 .. **shi4.**\
yes

‘Yes, yes, yes.’

796 A:.. oh,_
DM

797 .. yuan2lai2 shi4 zhe4yang4.\
so is this.way

‘Oh, so, that is the way (they make cold tea).’

(3) Unmarried Mother

349 A: na4 ni3 zen3mo gen1 peng2you3 jie3shi4,_
then you how with friend explain

350 .. ni3 zhe4ge hai2zi shi4 na2li3 lai2de ne?\
you this child is where from Q

‘Then, how do you explain it to your friends where this child came from?’

351 B: ...(1.3) um,_
DM

352 ... **wo3 cong2lai2 bu4 jie3shi4.**\
 I never NEG explain
 'I've never explained (it).'

353 ...(2.2) **wo3 cong2lai2 bu4 jie3shi4.**\
 I never NEG explain
 'I've never explained (it).'

354 .. **wo3 cong2lai2 bu4 jie3shi4.**\
 I never NEG explain
 'I've never explained (it).'

It is of particular interest to note that self-repeat of emphasizing function often occurs in the same discursive environment as listing (Jefferson 1991), viz., both often occur in a trio-set sequence. Such intriguing behavior may mirror human cognitive structure and processing of languages. This issue is of course out of the scope of this study, but deserves further study.

The second sub-type of self-repeat is the one with a reactive turn from the other party in the social interaction, which can be diagrammed as in (4):

- (4) Sub-type II
1. A: XXX
 2. B: YYY
 3. A: XXX

This sub-type is of multi-function. First, it is used for clarification when an overlap occurs, as in (5).

(5) Movie

157 H: dui4.\
 yes

158 (0) dao zui4hou
 arrive the.end
 zhe4ge dong1xi1 bei4 tao1kong1 le.\
 this thing PASS empty CRS
 'At the end, it was emptied.'

160 T: shao1you3.\
 a.little.bit
 'A little bit.'

161 T: a ah.\
 INT INT

162 H: [bei4 tao1kong1 le.]
 PASS empty CRS
 '(It) was emptied.'

163 T: [bei4 tao1kong1 le.]
 PASS empty CRS
 '(It) was emptied.'

164 H: **bei4 tao1kong1 le.**\
 PASS empty CRS
 '(It) was emptied.'

overlap

Moreover, it can be used when the social interactant does not catch up what the speaker says in the previous turn, as in (6).

(6) Schema

353. H: .. xing1yan4,_
person.name
354. .. ni3 you3mei2you3 shu1jia2?\
you have-NEG-have book.mark
'Do you have a book mark?'
355. Y:.. haN?/
Q
'What?'
- 356. H:.. ni3 you3mei2you3 shu1jia2?\
you have-NEG-have book.mark
'Do you have a book mark?'

Furthermore, when disagreed or retorted by the partner, the speaker may choose to do a self-repeat right after the disagreeing turn as a means of self-defense, as in (7).

(7) Actor

- 319M: ... ta1 shuo1,_
he say
- 320M: ... ta1 shuo1 zhe4-li3bai4 mei2 ban4fa3 a.\
he say this-week NEG way PART
- 321M: ... ni3 kan4.\
you see
'He said she had no time this week. You see.'
- 322F: na4 jiu4 xia4-li3bai4 de yi4si4 a.\
that is next-week DE meaning PART
- 323F: .. ni3 zen3mo na4mo ben4 na.\
you how that stupid PART
- 324F: zhen1shi4de.\
you.really.are
'That means next week. How could you be that stupid? You really are.'
- 325M: ...(1.28) wo3 wo3 wo3,_
I I I
- 326M: wo3 yi3wei2 bu2shi4 zhe4ge yi4si4.\
I thought NEG this meaning
'I thought it did not mean this.'
- 327F: zhen1shi4 mu4tou2.\
really dumb
- 328 ah.\
INT
- 'You are so dumb. Gosh!'
- 329M: (0) <@ wo3 yi3wei2 bu2shi4 zhe4ge yi4si4@>.\ ←
I thought NEG this meaning
'I thought it did not mean this.'

disagreeing

self-defense

In addition, this type of self-repetition can be used as a pivot for topic-continuity, as in (8).

(8) Movie

058 xin dian4ying3-yun4dong4
 new movie- movement

059 da4gai4,_
 about

060 wei2--
 FS

061 **wei2chi2 le shi2-nian2.**
 keep CRS ten-year
 ‘The new movie movement has lasted for about ten years.’

062 T: m m.\
 BC

063 **H: wei2chi2 le shi2-nian2.** ← pivot for topic-continuity
 keep CRS ten-year

064 ran2hou4,_
 then

065 dang1ran2,_
 of.course

066 wo3men ke3yi3 kan4.\
 we can see
 ‘It has lasted for ten years. Then, of course, we can see that...’

Finally, speakers may also choose to do a self-repeat to urge his/her partner to take on some action when his/her first utterance is not uptaken in an expected way, as in (9).

(9) RAD 1

510 L:... na4 yi3xia4 hao3-bu4-hao3,_
 then below ok-NEG-ok

511 .. ni3men chang4 shou-ge1 zen3moyang4,_
 you sing CL-song how.is.that

512 .. **yao4-bu2-yao4 wen4wen4 da4jia1?**
 want-NEG-want ask all
 ‘Then, do you want to sing a song in the following time? Would you like to ask all (the audience)?’

513 C1:... hao3.\
 ok
 ‘O.K.’

514 L:... **yao4-bu2-yao4 wen4wen4 da4jia1?**
 want- NEG-want ask all
 ‘Do you want to ask all (the audience)?’

515 C1:... wo3men chang4 yi4-shou-ge1
 we sing one-CL-song
 xian4gei3 ting1zhong4 peng2you3,_
 dedicate audience friend

516 .. hao3-bu4-hao3?\
 ok-NEG-ok

‘We sing a song and dedicate it to all our friends. Is it alright?’
 517 Cs:... hao3.\
 ok
 ‘Alright.’

In Excerpt (9), Speaker L’s question in Line 512 is actually up-taken by C1 without confronting any argument or disagreement but a confirmative *yes*. Nonetheless, Speaker L repeats his question right after this *yes* in Line 514. Note that Speaker L’s question is indeed an indirect speech act, viz., a request; Speaker L therefore repeats his question to urge C1 to ask the audience whether they want to hear C1 singing. This time, this indirect request is uptaken in the way as desired.

2.2 Other-repeats

On the other hand, other-repeats, accompanied with or without confirmative markers, such as *dui* 對 ‘yes’ or *shi* 是 ‘yes’, are used to confirm or agree with his/her social interactant. Excerpt (10) is an example of confirming, and Excerpt (11) is an agreeing example.

(10) Company

65.H: ...(1.8) ah, ni3 xian4zai4 shi4 zai4,_
 DM you now is at
 66. .. gong1si1 shang4ban1?\
 company work
 ‘Well, then you are now working at (which) company?’
 67. J: .. **dong1yun2.**\
 PN
 ‘Dong Yun (Company).’
 68. H: . dong1yun2.\
 PN
 ‘Dong Yun (Company).’
 69. J: .. **dong1yun2.**\ ← confirming
 PN
 ‘Dong Yun (Company).’
 70. .. dong1di4shi4 de guan1xi4-qi4ye4.\
 PN DE related-company
 ‘Yes, *DongYun* Company. It is one of the associated companies of *DongDiShi* Company.’

(11) Election

76 L: .. dui4 a,_
 yes PART
 77 .. <@ zhe4 bu4-zhi3 yi2-kai4-qian2 @>.\
 this NEG-only one-CL-dollar
 ‘Yes, this is more than one dollar.’
 78 C: . [oh].\
 DM
 ‘Oh.’
 79 L: [ke3neng2] shi4 ta1men jia1 zi4ji3 de la.\
 probably is their family own DE PART

- 'It's probably (made by) their family.'
- 80 C: ... mei2cha1 a\
 make.no.difference PART
 'It makes no difference at all.'
- 81 L: .. mei2cha1 a\
 make.no.difference PART ← agreeing
- 82 C: .. yao4 wo3 lao3ba4 xin1xui2you3 wo3 jiu4 yung4\
 shall my father PN (book store name) I would use
 'If my father were (the boss of) the *XinXuiYou* Bookstore, I would use it.'
- 83 L: dui4 a\
 yes PART
 'Yes, that's right.'

Sometimes, doing repetition can be more than an act of agreeing or confirming, as shown in (12).

(12) Exam

- 222 b: xian4zai4 yi3jing1 san1yue4 di3 le ye\
 now already March end CRS PART
 'Now, it's already the end of March.'
- 223 c: haN?/
 Q
 'What?'
- 224 b: xian4zai4 yi3jing1 san1yue4 di3 le ye\
 now already March end CRS PART
 'Now, it's already the end of March.'
- 225 c: m\
 DM
- 226 b: dui4 a\
 yes PART
 'Yes, it is.'
- 227 c: ay\
 DM
- 228 b: ay\
 DM
- 229 c: hao3 ke3pa4 oh\
 very.awful PART
 'It's really awful.'

In Excerpt (12), Speaker b repeats a sigh after his partner's sigh in Line 227. What Speaker b is doing here is more than showing his agreement with his interactant. Speaker b, like Speaker c, is in the last year of his college life and will soon graduate from the school. He therefore deeply feels that time flies and that both of them are facing the big change in their lives, viz., they have to make a choice: to find a job or to go to graduate school. Therefore, what Speaker b's repetition of the sigh does here is in fact to identify himself with his interactant: I know what you mean, and I totally agree with you because I am in the same situation as you are.

Other-repeats can also be used as various strategies to help social interactants manipulate and make sure the social interaction they are engaged in to move in the course they desire. For example, they may use a repetition to evade an unwelcome question or an undesired topic proffered by his social interactants, as in (13).

(13) Show

- 325 Y: .. bi4feng1gang3.\
Harbor.of.Refuge (song's name)
- 326 L: .. m,_
DM
- 327 .. jiu4shi4 zhe4shou3 bi4feng1gang3.\
this.is this-CL song's.name
'Yes, this is it. This song *BiFengGang* (Harbor of Refuge).'
- 328 Y: .. dui4.\
yes
'Yes.'
- 329 L: .. yang2cai3ni2 zhao3-dao4 le ni3de bi4feng1gang3 le mei2?\
person.name find-DAO CRS your harbor.of.refuge CRS Q
'*Yang Caini*, have you found your harbor of refuge yet?'
- 330 Y: (0) hai2mei2you3.\
not.yet
'Not yet.'
- 331 @@@
- 332 L: ... que4ding4 ma1?\
sure Q
'Are you sure?'
- 333 Y: ... que4ding4 ma1?\
sure Q
'Am I sure?'
- 334 @@@@
- 335 L: .. hai2shi4 you3 bu4ke3gao4ren2 de di4xia4qing2 ne1?\
or have secret DE secret.love.affair Q
'Or, are you having a secret love affair?'
- 336 Y: (0) oh= you.\
PART PART
'Oh, my god. (Leave me alone.)'

Repetition can also be used as a scaffolding act to help the speaker to recall an eluding memory or to think (and meanwhile to hold the floor), as in (14) and (15).

(14) Salesman

- 014 S: (0) you-mei-you3 ren2 tui1jian4 guo4?\
ASP -NEG- ASP people recommend EXP
'Has anyone recommended (this book to you)?'
- 015 F: shi4 you3-mai3-guo4 yi2-tao4.\
yes ASP-buy-EXP one-set
- 016 ge3luo2li3-de.\
person.name-DE
'Yes, I did ever buy one set, Grolier's.'

- 017 S: <@ L2 The-New-Book-of-KnowledgeL2 @>.\
The-New-Book-of-Knowledge
- 018 ...dui4 la.\
yes, PART
'The New Book of Knowledge. Yes, that is it.'
- 019 F: bu2shi4.\
it.is.not
'No, it is not.'
- 020 S: [1 uh 1]./
DM
- 021 F: <L2 [1 The 1] Art L2>--.,
The Art
- 022 S: Oh,-
DM
- 023 S: <L2 The-Book-of-Art L2>.\
The-Book-of-Art
- 024 F: <L2 The-Book-of-Art L2>.\
The-Book-of-Art
- 025 F: dui4.\
yes
'Yes, that's it.'

(15) Noel

190. A .. mei3qiao2,_
American
191. .. ju4le4bu4- de <@ na4ge bi3jiao4@> bu4hao3 ma?\
club DE that COMP no.good Q
'Is the one made by American Club less good?'
192. B: .. dui4, bi3jiao4 dan4.\
yes, COMP insipid
'Yes, it is more insipid.'
193. A: . bi3jiao4 dan4,_
more insipid
194. . oh, bi3jiao4 mei2you3 na4mo nong2.\
DM COMP NEG that strong
'More insipid. Oh, you mean the taste is not that strong.'
195. B .. dui4.\
yes
'Yes.'

Moreover, we often see repetition be used to ask for an elaboration or explanation, sometimes followed by a question, as shown in (16) to (18).

(16) Company

166. J: ..ah, qi2shi2 ta1 zai4 zhi2wei4 lai2shuo1,_
DM, in.fact, he at position in.term.of
167. .. ta1 shi4 jiang4,_
he is down
168. .. **jiang4zhi2.**

down-graded
 ‘Actually, he was down-graded in his position.’

→ 169. H:.. **jiang4zhi2?**\ ← question
 down.graded
 ‘Down-graded?’

170. J: .. dui4 ah.\

171. ... ta1 shi4 jiang4zhi2.\ explanation
 he is downgraded
 ‘Yes, he was down-graded.’

(17) Basketball

223 T: .. you3 shi2hou4 hui4 you3 an4hao4 ma,_
 ASP sometimes ASP-have secret.sign PART

224 .. you3 ma?\
 have Q

‘Sometimes, (you) use some secret signs, don’t you?’

225 B: @@

225 B: .. **bu2yung4 an4hao4 a.**\
 not.use secret.sign PART

‘It’s not necessary to use a secret sign.’

→ 226 T:.. **bu2yung4 an4hao4.**\
 not.use secret.sign
 ‘It’s not necessary to use a secret sign.’

227 B: .. jiu4shi4,_
 that’s

228 ... zhi1dao4 ta1 xi2guan4 zen3mo da3,_
 know he habitual how play

229 ... ta1 xi2guan4 xian1 chuan2-qiu,_
 he used.to first pass-ball

231 ..huo4shi4,_
 or

232 ..xian1 tou2lan2.\
 first shoot

‘Yes, we just know his habit. Is he habitual to pass the ball first or shoot the ball first?’

(18) MCON2

143 M:... a,_
 DM

144 .. ni3 shi4,_
 you are

145 ... <T ni3 shi4 an4zen3 T>?/
 you are why

‘What happened to you?’

146 W:... ^ **duan4shi2.**\
 diet.suspension
 ‘Why do you want to go on a diet suspension?’

always repeat

'I can't stand it anymore. They always do the same thing. (They) always repeat the same thing. (They) always repeat the same thing.'

(21) Match

- 551.H: ran2hou4 ta1 jiu4,_
then she would
552. ...(0.7) ta1 jiu4-hui4 shui4bu4zhao2,_
she would can't.sleep

553. . **jiu4 yi4zhi2 deng3 ta1,_**
then keep wait he

554. .. **jiu4 yi4zhi2 deng3 ta1,_**
then keep wait he

555. . **yi4zhi2 deng3 ta1,_**
keep wait he

556. . ta jiu4 sheng1qi4 le ma hoN\
she then angry CRS PART PART

'Then, she couldn't sleep. (She) kept waiting for him. (She) kept waiting for him. (She) kept waiting for him. Then, she got angry.'

557.I: [dui4 dui4 dui4.\
yes yes yes
'Yes, yes, yes.'

558.H: .. jiu4 yi4zhi2 yao4 deng3 ta1 hui2lai2.\
then keep ASP wait he come.back

'(She) just kept waiting for him to come back.'

(22) Church

332. J: .. yi2ci4 liang3ci4 san1ci4,_
once two.time three.time

333. .. yi3jing3 san1ci4 jian4-tan2 wei3yuan2hui4 jian4li4.\
already three.time build-church committee set.up

334. .. **jiang4li4,_**
set.up

335. .. **^kua3diao4.\
collapse**

336. .. **jiang4li4,_**
set.up

337. .. **kua3diao4.\
collapse**

338. .. **jiang4li4,_**
set.up

339. .. **kua3diao4.\
collapse**

'Once, twice, three times. The committee of the church reconstruction has been set up for three times. (The committee) was set up and collapsed, set up and collapsed, and set up and collapsed.'

340. L: (0) oh, zhe4yang4zi.\
DM this.way

- ‘Oh.’
341. J: .. san1ci4,_
three.times
342. .. yi3jing1 san1ci4\
already three.times
- ‘Three times. It has already been three times.’

4. Repetition in Greeting and Closing Ritual

At last, I would like to address myself to the issue of the repetition in the greeting and closing rituals. Greeting, which often involves a combination of the two social interactants, is an act of communication in which human beings intentionally make their presence known to each other (Firth 1972). In other words, greeting often comes in pairs and functions to establish a social relationship, viz., the recognition of the other interactant as a social entity. Reciprocity is important in greetings; an expectation in greeting is that it will elicit social recognition in return. A greeting scheme is therefore composed of two parts: an initiating part and a responding part. Excerpt (23) below is used to illustrate this point.

(23) Corpus 1

9. A .. ha1luo,_
hello
10. .. xiao3tong1,_
PN
11. .. ni3hao3\
how.are.you
- ‘Hello, *Xiaotong*, how are you?’
12. B: .. hai4,_
Hi,
13. .. shen3-jie3,_
PN-sister
14. .. ni3hao3\
how.are.you
- ‘Hi, *Shen-Jie*, how are you?’

It is of particular interest to note that repetition can occur in the ritual format rather than in the content. As shown in Excerpt (23), the initiating part A starts her greeting in a three-set format, viz., hello + addressing form + greeting, which is greeted by a repeated format from the responding part, also, hello + addressing form + greeting. The same pattern also occurs in the closing ritual, as in (24).

(24) Exam

- 335 b: na4 wo3 ke3neng2 shi4 wan3shang4 oh jiu4shi4
then I probably is night PART that.is
chi1-wan2 wan3cang1 yi3hou4 cai2hui4 guo4qu4\
eat-finish dinner after then come.over
‘Then, I will probably come over in the evening, after I finish my dinner.’
- 337 c: hao3\
ok
- 338 b: ho?\
ho?

- PART
'Is this alright?'
- 339 c: m.\
DM
'Alright.'
- 340 b: hao3 ho?\
ok PART
'That's it, alright?'
- 341 c: hao3.\
ok
'No problem.'
- 342 b: hao3.\
alright
- 343 hao3,_
ok
- 344 na4,_
then
- 345 bye-bye.\
bye-bye
'Then, ok, bye-bye.'
- (17 turns omitted)
- 367 c: shu3jia4 yao4 kai1shi3 kao3shi4 le.\
summer will begin exam CRS
'We will start taking exams in summer.'
- 368 b: m,_
DM
- 369 hao3.\
ok
- 370 c: hao3.\
ok
'Ok.'
- 371 b: hao3.\
ok
- 372 c: bye-bye.\
bye-bye
- 373 b: m.\
DM
- 374 ok,_
ok
- 375 bye-bye.\
bye-bye
'Ok, then, bye-bye.'
- 376 c: bye-bye.\
bye-bye
'Bye-bye.'

In the closing ritual, Mandarin speakers usually come up with many *hao*'s 好 'good; ok' and then close up the conversation with a farewell *bye-bye*. We may wonder how many

hao's 好 'good; ok' will be enough to be counted as a closing ritual. As shown in the two sets of closing ritual in Excerpt (24), we can see that closing ritual also comes in pairs: an initiating party and a responding party; therefore, in the first closing set in (24), we see [cb]-[cb]-[cb] pairs, and [bc]-[bc]-[bc] pairs in the second set. Such a series of repeats can only be understood if we understand it is the greeting and closing ritual, instead of the linguistic form, that is repeated.

5. Conclusion

Such a study may contribute to help piece together the communicative functions of repetition used by the social interactants to meet their communicative needs in conversations. This study is also of significance in that recent studies have pointed to the importance of second language learners' use of repetition for conversational participation and language learning. This study researching a wide range of repetition, which varies in type and function, may help better understand the communicative function of repetition in children interaction (Chang 2006) and the research on second language learning children's verbal and discourse participation (Rydland and Aukrust 2005; Tomlin 1994). Moreover, such a study is of diagnostic significance for the research on sentence repetition of the language impaired children (Bery-Luterman and Bar 1971). Ultimately, it may contribute to research on natural language processing and information processing by providing a detailed analysis of the patterns and functions of repetition in social interactions.

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