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Irrelevant Repetitions: A Challenge to Relevance Theory

Andreas H. Jucker

Introduction

To repeat oneself means to say the same thing twice. At a time and age when efficiency is the battle cry in all aspects of our daily life, it seems singularly inappropriate to repeat oneself. However, even a cursory glance at any transcription of actual conversations shows that repetitions are very pervasive. They are used regularly and they seem to play an important role in conversations. Repetitions are a fairly recent topic for linguistic research, but they have already created quite a substantial body of literature. Repetitions have turned out to be not only a very rewarding topic, but also a very large and multifaceted topic which can be approached by phonologists, morphologists, syntacticians, psycholinguists, discourse analysts, and pragmatists. In fact, as they are so pervasive in language, almost all linguistic frameworks and approaches should have something to say on repetitions. One might even go a step further and argue that a linguistic framework which cannot deal with repetitions must necessarily be inadequate because it neglects one very obvious feature of presumably all human languages.

Relevance theory is a fairly recent framework within pragmatics. It is a cognitive theory in that it tries to explain human communication in terms of human cognition. Efficiency in information processing is the corner stone of the entire theory. It uses the concept of efficiency to explain the cognitive processes that underlie human communication. According to relevance theory, every utterance comes with a guarantee of its own optimal relevance that is to say the speaker believes that the utterance will yield maximal cognitive effects for a minimal processing effort.

Repetitions therefore seem to pose a considerable challenge to the

explanatory power of relevance theory because at first sight many repetitions appear to be a waste of effort. How can relevance theory explain the seemingly irrelevant repetitions of words and phrases? In this paper I want to test the explanatory power of relevance theory with examples of repetitions drawn from actual conversational data.

Before I can embark on this task, however, I have to delimit the area that I want to cover, that is to say I have to make explicit how I am going to use the term "repetition."

Deborah Tannen gives several dimensions on which repetitions can be classified. She distinguishes between self-repetitions and allo-repetitions, where self-repetition refers to cases in which a speaker repeats herself, and allo-repetition to cases in which a speaker repeats something that another speaker has said. A repetition can be exact, that is to say in the same linguistic form as the element that it repeats, or it can be a mere paraphrase of the repeated element. A repetition, furthermore, can be immediate if there is no intervening material between the first and the second occurrence, or it can be delayed if the repetition only occurs after some intervening linguistic material. There are of course more dimensions on which repetitions can be classified (cf. Frédéric, Tannen), but those just mentioned are important to delimit those cases I want to analyse.

Intuitively it seems particularly irrelevant to repeat oneself without delay and in exact form. A speaker uses a linguistic expression, a word, a phrase or even a sentence twice, and the second occurrence follows immediately or almost immediately on the first occurrence. It is on these cases that I want to concentrate. In figure 1, I have tried to visualise Tannen's dimensions for repetitions. The shaded rectangle indicates the position of those repetitions that I am primarily interested in.

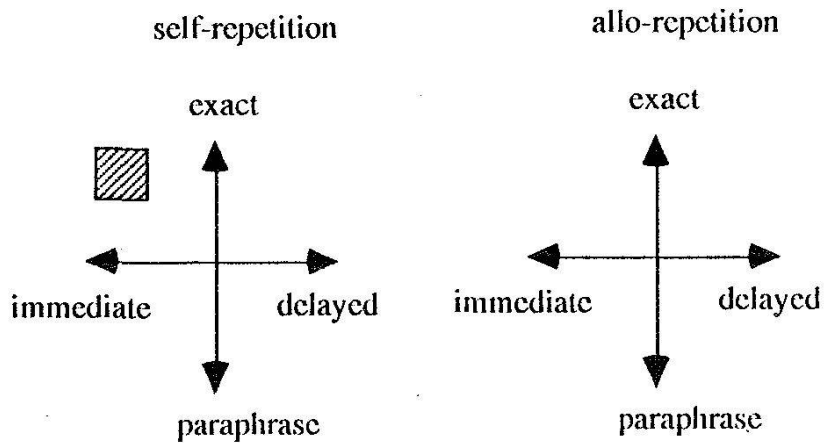

Figure 1: Dimensions of repetitions

Relevance theory

In this paper I will only give a very brief sketch of relevance theory. In the last couple of years, and in particular since the publication of Sperber and Wilson's book *Relevance* in which they gave the first more or less comprehensive account of relevance theory, the framework has been introduced in innumerable papers (see in particular Sperber and Wilson's "Précis of *Relevance*" and several papers in Kempson. There are some book-length studies (e.g. Blakemore *Semantic Constraints*, Blass, and Gutt), and there is now a good and readable textbook account of relevance theory (Blakemore *Understanding Utterances*).

First of all it must be remembered that "relevance" is a technical term which is closely related to the normal use of the word but is not exactly the same. A speaker who makes an utterance requires her audience to spend some effort on interpreting the utterance. She suggests that it is in the audience's best interest to undertake this effort. Sperber and Wilson argue that every utterance comes with a guarantee of relevance which says that every utterance is worthwhile to process. It will yield maximal effects for minimal processing efforts. In the words of Sperber and Wilson (158): "Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance."

There is of course a direct mercantile analogy. In a firm the overall productivity is a function of production cost (or input) and output. A firm is productive if and only if it has some output, but clearly, given the same input, the higher the output, the higher the productivity, and for the same output, the higher the production cost (input), the lower the productivity. In the same way speakers aim at optimal relevance, where the addressee will get a maximum of cognitive effects for a minimum of processing effort. In technical terms:

> Every act of ostensive communication comes with a guarantee of its own optimal relevance.

Relevance

a. Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effect achieved by the processing of a given piece of information, the greater its relevance for the individual who processes it.

b. Other things being equal, the greater the effort involved in the processing of a given piece of information, the smaller its relevance for the individual who processes it. (Wilson and Sperber 140)

Every linguistic element adds to the relevance of the utterance in which it occurs in one of two ways. Either it gives rise to contextual effects or it helps to reduce processing effort. There are three types of contextual effects. First, old assumptions that are already stored in the cognitive environment of the hearer, and new assumptions that are made manifest by an utterance combine to yield new assumptions via deductive processes. These are called contextual implications. Second, assumptions made manifest by an utterance may also be relevant even though they already exist in the cognitive environment of the hearer if they either strengthen or weaken existing assumptions, that is to say the confirmation value of existing assumptions is changed. In the extreme cases of a contradiction between an old and a new assumption, the processing may lead to the erasure of the existing assumption. Finally, an assumption may be relevant by making an old assumption that is not immediately accessible more manifest to the hearer. In this case it is not the confirmation value that changes but the degree of manifestness.

Every linguistic element is produced by the speaker with the claim that it will add to the relevance of the utterance either directly by adding to the contextual effects, or indirectly by reducing the processing effort required. The crucial question is therefore whether repetitions can also be argued to add contextual effects or to reduce processing effort.

Sperber and Wilson treat repetitions as examples of poetic language. They give the following artificial examples (219):

(1) Here's a red sock, here's a red sock, here's a blue sock.
(2) We went for a long, long walk.
(3) There were houses, houses everywhere.
(4) I shall never, never smoke again.
(5) There's a fox, a fox in the garden.
(6) My childhood days are gone, gone.

Utterance (1) refers to two different red socks, utterance (2) to a very long walk and utterance (3) to a great many houses. In all these cases, the repetition adds to the explicature of the utterance. The explicit content of these utterances is in clearly specifiable ways different from the equivalent

utterances without the repetition. (1) would refer to one red sock only, (2) would refer to a long walk but not necessarily a very long walk, and (3) would refer to houses without saying anything about the great number.

The utterances (4) to (6) cannot be analysed in the same way. The repetition of *never* does not change the explicature of the utterance. However, it says something about the degree of commitment of the speaker. The speaker wants to stress that she will definitely never smoke again. In utterance (5) the speaker does not refer to two different foxes in the garden but expresses her excitement about the news, and in (6) she expresses her sorrow about the fact that her childhood days are gone. Thus the repetitions in the utterances (4) to (6) do not add to the explicature of the utterance but to the implicature by saying something about the attitude of the speaker.

Sperber and Wilson use these artificial examples to support their argument that a simple semantic process cannot account for repetitions. A semanticist might perhaps like to argue that the repetition of a gradable adjective as, for instance, *long* in sentence (2) indicates a higher degree than the unrepeated adjective and is more or less equivalent in meaning to the unrepeated adjective preceded by the intensifier *very*. But the six repetitions in the sentences (1) to (6) would require six different semantic mechanisms, whereas relevance theory can account for them with one single principle that accounts not just for repetitions in conversations but for human communication in general.

In the following I will present a range of actual repetitions in the context in which they occurred. As outlined above I will restrict this discussion to cases of immediate or almost immediate exact self-repetitions. The examples are drawn from a dinner table conversation between two sisters and their respective husbands in their late fifties or early sixties. Marion and her husband Bill have just returned from a visit to Australia. They have invited Sue and Derek to dinner to tell them about their trip.[1]

[1] All names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the speakers. My thanks go to Richard Watts for making the recording available to me and to Annegret Gick for converting the transcription according to the du Bois transcription conventions (see appendix).

Immediate and exact self-repetitions can be classified into three groups. First those repetitions that add to the explicature of the utterance, second those that add to the implicature of the utterance, and third those that add neither to the explicature nor to the implicature of the utterance but reduce processing effort. This third type is the most problematic category, which is not considered by Sperber and Wilson.

Additions to the explicature

Examples (7) to (10) illustrate repetitions that are relevant by adding directly to the explicature of an utterance. In (7), the conversation turns around the problem of going through customs at an international airport where you have to have several different documents ready; passport, tickets, boarding card and so on. Marion reassures Sue, who plans to go to Australia in the near future, that the whole procedure is easy and that she need not worry. It is *easy as pie, easy as pie.* The repetition of this phrase in lines 294 and 295 stresses the ease of the whole process. The utterance expresses a greater degree of ease than it would without the repetition. As in Sperber and Wilson's example (2) above, the repetition here serves as an intensifier.

(7)	0286		so you slip the boarding cards into then they're &
	0287		& easily pulled out [. .].
	0288	Bill:	[yeah]
	0289	Marion:	otherwise I just have to hold them in my hand . . . (1.1),
	0290		because er . . (0.8),
	0291		you don't want to go fumbling for those &
	0292		& when you're going through [. . (0.9)].
	0293	Sue:	[no]
-->	0294	Marion:	but anyway you'll find that it's as easy as pie . . . (1.1),
-->	0295		easy as pie [dear].

The repetition in extract (8) is a borderline case. It is not really an immediate repetition because the two instances of *chokes* are separated by the conjunction *and*. Here the most plausible interpretation assigns the two instances of *chokes* different references as in example (1) above. The second instance of *chokes* refers to a repetition of the choking in the real world. Derek, who apparently suffers from smoker's cough in the

mornings, chokes repeatedly. He does it again and again. The utterance by his wife Sue picks out two instances to stress the repetition.

(8) 0388 Derek: Sue always reckons it's gonna be the death of me.
--> 0389 Sue: well I do sometimes he chokes [and chokes],

In (9), it is not the adjective that is repeated but the intensifier itself. The effect is a further intensification. In (10) it is again a gradable adjective that is repeated with an intensifying effect.

(9) 0429 Jane was . . (0.7),
--> 0430 very very keen on going to the beach,
(10)-->0463 and then we had this lovely lovely cold lunch &

In all these examples, the repetition has a direct bearing on the explicature of the utterance. The explicit content of the utterance differs from the content of the equivalent utterance without the repetition. In the following range of repetitions this is not the case. The repetition in sentences (11) to (13) are not relevant on the explicit level; they are relevant at the level of implicatures.

Additions to the implicature

Marion has just produced a present for Sue from a relative in Australia. The present is some kind of wallet with partitions for various kinds of documents. In extract (11), Marion advises Sue to use the wallet on the trip and to let the Australian relative see her using the wallet. Sue agrees emphatically by saying *oh yes I will I will I will*. The double repetition of *I will* does not add anything to the explicature. It does not express that she is going to use it three times or that she is going to use it to a larger degree. The repetition of the phrase *I will* rather indicates the degree of the speaker's commitment. This example is therefore directly parallel to Sperber and Wilson's example (4) above, in which the repetition likewise does not change the explicature but is relevant because it reveals something about the speaker's attitude. Both speakers express themselves as very committed to the promised course of action.

(11) 0241 Marion: you'll have to let her see you using [it].

	0242	Sue:		[oh] yes
-->	0243		I will I will I will . . (0.7),	

The repetition in extract (12) also indicates the speaker's attitude but here it is his uncertainty about whether or not somebody is Australian-born or not. He starts by saying *I don't know* and wants to continue but he breaks off and says *I don't think so*, and repeats this sentence after a brief pause. This repetition is actually more difficult to interpret. Is it just a further expression of his uncertainty or does he express his growing conviction that John is not Australian-born?

(12)	0753	Marion:	was John Australian-born Bill? or did - -,
-->	0754	Bill:	I don't know I do- I don't think so . . (0.6),
-->	0755		[don't think so].

In (13), finally, Marion, the hostess, offers more food to her guests and encourages them to eat some more. The repetition of *come* in this case does not add to the explicature. It expresses something about the speaker's attitude. It comes out as a friendly encouragement while the unrepeated *come* would sound like a command. If this intuition is correct, it is an interesting case of a repetition which has a weakening effect rather than the more usual intensifying effect (Richard Waswo, personal communication).

(13)	0787	Sue:	that was delicious I picked that one Bill [no more].	
	0788	Marion:		[it's a] &
-->	0789		& potato left [come come]	
	0790	Sue:	[a=h . .]	I couldn't eat any more,
	0791		. . . (2.6),	
	0792		got to think of my weight.	

Reduction of processing effort

The repetitions that are illustrated by extracts (14) to (17) neither add to the explicature of the utterance nor to its implicature. This is the most problematic category. I distinguish between two subtypes; the recycles after overlap and the false starts. First there are repetitions that occur immediately after an overlap and recycle material that occurred within the overlap. Such recycles after overlaps have often been noted in the relevant

literature.

(14)	0132	Marion:	I've got,
	0133		s- sent you a little present.
	0134		[I've got it somewhere].
-->	0135	Bill:	[her- her prezzie-] her prezzie is on the= . . (1.1),
	0136		by- by the telephone there [Marion].
	0137	Sue:	[a prezzie who from].
(15)	0163	Sue:	[oh what's she sent me a present for?]
-->	0164	Derek:	[per- perhaps it's a tape],
-->	0165		a tape.
	0166	Marion:	@@ it's not a tape I'll,
(16)	0018	Sue:	does Lesley play the organ Marion?
	0019	Marion:	yes she has a- -
	0020		I really don't know very much about organs,
	0021		[but she's got a magn-]
	0022	Bill:	[oh she's had a] song accepted,
	0023		and [they're making] a record of it.
	0024	Sue:	[oh yeah]
-->	0025	Marion:	[and she's got a] - -
-->	0026		[she's got] a magnificent organ,
	0027	Sue:	[really?]
	0028	Marion:	it's it's a . . great big one, [. .]
(17)	0324	Marion:	and [Bobby does too].
	0325	Sue:	[((mumbling))]
	0326	Bill:	and Bobby,
-->	0327		[John - -] John doesn't smoke.
	0328	Marion:	[Bobby does too].

In all these cases, the speaker cannot be sure that the material spoken in overlap with another speaker was properly heard by his or her addressees. It is therefore recycled immediately after the end of the overlap.

The other category are what might be termed false starts. There is no overlap, and there is no recognisable addition to either the explicature or implicature of the utterance. The extracts (18) to (22) contain relevant examples.

(18)	0025	Marion:	[and she's got a] - -
	0026		[she's got] a magnificent organ,
	0027	Sue:	[really?]
-->	0028	Marion:	it's it's a . . great big one, [. .]
	0029	Sue:	[yeah]
(19)->	0045	Marion:	oh yes she,
-->	0046		she [amuses] herself v- vastly on that and,
	0047	Sue:	[mm]
	0048	Marion:	and <X if she has had a X>,
	0049		she's going to have a song . . published &
(20)	0105	Sue:	and er,
-->	0106		so she's she's written a . . (1.0),
	0107		I knew she'd had it accepted but I didn't know . . (0.8),
	0108		she wrote me a letter once saying that erm,
	0109		somebody had sabotaged the tape or - -,
(21)->	0146	Marion:	well I didn't search for too long cos I didn't have any,
-->	0147		any time to spare this afternoon but . . . (2.6),
(22)	0206	Marion:	((comes back)) now,
-->	0207		you can take these these brochures and things . . (0.6),

The repetition of such phrases as *it's it's*, *she's she's* or *these these* seems particularly irrelevant, and many researchers might be tempted to ignore such repetitions as mere performance errors without any significance. However, all these examples share three characteristic features. First, they always occur at the beginning of a syntactic frame, either at the beginning of a sentence or at the beginning of a noun phrase. The name "false start" relates to this feature. Second, it is striking that in these false starts only expressions with a low informational content are repeated such as pronouns, articles, prepositions and the like. These elements do not add significantly to the explicature or the implicature of the utterance. They do not give rise to contextual effects. However, they open up a syntactic frame and thus allow the addressee to formulate a slightly more specific anticipatory hypothesis.

Finally, the repetition of such elements typically occurs just before an element with a relatively high informational load. The magnificent organ in (18), for instance, is the main piece of information that is conveyed by the

utterance. In (19) and in (20) the repetition occurs just before the predicate of the sentence. There is some evidence that these repetitions are performance-related in the sense that they indicate some hesitation by the speaker. The speaker seems to be trying to find the right word, as in (22) where Marion wants to refer to some items that she wants to give to Sue. Apparently she is looking for a word that encompasses everything she wants to give her, but succeeds only partially. Some of them can be referred to as *brochures* while the rest is subsumed under *and things*.

Thus these repetitions are not primarily produced to add to the relevance of the utterance in which they occur. But given that the speaker hesitates briefly in a situation in which an expression with a fairly high informational load is to be produced, the repetition of the frame-opener appears to be a relevant strategy. The addressee can deduce that the frame is still relevant, and that it is relevant enough for him to wait for the continuation. In terms of turn-taking theory, the speaker makes it clear that she does not want to yield the turn yet, she has got more to say. The repetition of the opening of the syntactic frame serves the purpose of claiming continued rights to the floor and to reiterate the syntactic frame just opened.

Conclusion

To summarise briefly, I have restricted my analysis of repetitions to a very small subset of all repetitions, that is to say to immediate and direct self-repetitions. Nevertheless, in terms of relevance theory I had to distinguish between three types. There are repetitions that add to the explicature of the utterance in which they occur. They change the explicit content of the utterance. The second type of repetition adds to the implicature of the utterance. Typically they make manifest the attitude of the speaker to the utterance. The third and most interesting category adds neither to the explicature nor to the implicatures of an utterance. These repetitions work as repair mechanisms in that they recycle material that was obscured by an overlap or they keep a syntactic frame open while the speaker searches for a lexical item with a fairly high informational load. As a repair mechanism, these repetitions reduce the processing effort required from the addressee. The hearer does not have to rely on guesswork in order to figure out the obscured passage in an overlap, and he knows that the speaker is going to

continue the syntactic frame that was opened with a false start.

Thus relevance theory stands up quite well to the challenge posed by these seemingly irrelevant repetitions. On the basis of a close analysis of actual examples, it turns out that what I have called "irrelevant repetitions" in the title of this paper are not, after all, irrelevant. They serve very specific purposes and add to the relevance of the utterance in which they occur.

The categories developed above are sufficient to account for all the immediate and direct repetitions in my corpus. However, it is clear that some speakers use false starts so often that it is irritating for the listeners. An extreme form of this is pathological speech (cf. Aitchison, this volume). In these instances the repetitions become increasingly more difficult or even impossible to interpret as strategies that help the addressee in the processing of the utterance. It is an empirical question at what stage relevance theory ceases to be a useful theory.

Appendix

Transcription conventions based on du Bois

UNITS	
Intonation unit	{carriage return}
Truncated intonation unit	- -
Truncated word	-
SPEAKERS	
Speech overlap	[ ]
TRANSITIONAL CONTINUITY	
Final	.
Continuing	,
Appeal	?
LENGTHENING	
Lengthening	=
PAUSE	
Long	. . . (N)
Medium	. . .
Short	. .
VOCAL NOISES	
Laughter	@
TRANSCRIBER'S PERSPECTIVE	
Researcher's comment	(( ))
Uncertain hearing	<X X>
Indecipherable syllable	X
SPECIALISED NOTATIONS	
Duration	(N)
Intonation unit continued	&

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