REPETITION IN THE ORAL AND WRITTEN NARRATIVES OF MEXICAN TEENAGERS*

by

Denize Elena Garcia da Silva

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1. Introduction

The prime aim of this paper is to show the connection between orality and written discourse by examining repetition as a linguistic phenomenon. The specific objectives are to demonstrate that repetition performs relevant functions in both the oral and written discourse of teenagers and, at the same time, to corroborate the idea that repetition is a key resource in developing grammatical and discursive skills in both modes. The underlying intention is to unveil new perspectives in teaching practices, given the incidence of this linguistic resource in written texts produced by teenagers.

From a broader theoretical standpoint, repetition is a device for organizing discourse. In this respect, recent studies underpinning discourse analysis have sought to explain this linguistic phenomenon, associating its effects in both speech and writing with cognitive and social aspects of language. These studies, pertaining to the analysis of conversation (Norrick, 1987; Tannen, 1987) or to sociolinguistics (Johnstone, 1991), have probed the cognitive and interactional motivations behind the use of repetition. They have examined not only the production of speakers/writers in their endeavour to create coherent, accessible discourse but, above all, the strategies employed to influence interlocutors (listeners/readers) and to accomplish interpersonal involvement.

Since it was originally associated with the formulaic nature of speech (Ong, 1982) and owing to its customary functions in face-to-face interaction, repetition has long been regarded as a central strategy of oral discourse. It is, however, a linguistic phenomenon frequently employed in writing also. The regularity with which it appears in texts produced in school environments raises the following questions: (i) What types and functions of repetition occur in oral and written discourse? (ii) Do speech and writing share procedures, implying that repetition performs the same functions in both modes of discourse? (iii) If the incidence of repetition in written discourse diminishes, do its functions disappear or are they obtained by resorting to other linguistic resources? What follows is an attempt to address these questions.

The term ‘repetition’ refers to the presence in a single text of one or more linguistic segments following an initial occurrence, be the text oral or written. It should be stated that in this paper it is also used to designate and distinguish a device that enables speakers/writers to add information to or supply further details in their discourse by employing identical or similar linguistic forms.

* This paper is based on my PhD dissertation (Garcia da Silva, 1996).
2. Data and methodological procedures

The corpus on which this research is based consists of one hundred and forty oral and written texts produced by Mexican teenagers in two distinct age groups: pre-adolescents (aged 11 to 14) and adolescents (aged 15 to 19). The informants are from three different school environments: two primary schools (one private, the other public) in the town of Puebla and a secondary school in Mexico City. Reference to the school environment means circumscribing repetition as a linguistic phenomenon to a social microcosm representative of a particular community. The use of age groups, on the other hand, allows one to relate repetition to individuals as members of a given social group (pre-adolescents and adolescents). Using these two frames of reference, repetition can be examined in a broader context since they encompass and extend beyond the immediate contexts in which it occurs, i.e. speech and writing. Chart 1 displays statistical information about the 140 narrative texts gathered from the three groups of informants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School (social class)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of information units in the 70 ON &amp; 70 WN</th>
<th>No. of cases of Repetition</th>
<th>Average Inform. Units/ Repetition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>oral written</td>
<td>oral written</td>
<td>oral written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A (middle/lower)</td>
<td>6th primary</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11 to 14</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (middle/upper)</td>
<td>6th primary</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11 to 12</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C (middle)</td>
<td>1st secondary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15 to 19</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,864</td>
<td>1,453</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information displayed in Chart 1 is divided into social and linguistic (structural) categories that serve as groups of factors or variables for quantitative analysis. The first column on the left refers to the three distinct school environments, besides indicating the different social classes of the schools’ clientèle. This has provided a more representative cross-section of types of repetition in teenagers’ discourse while also allowing for spatial and social “triangulation” in terms of methodological approach. The information about the year and academic level of the informants as well as their age and number is thus related to each school environment (A, B and C). The age factor provides a reference to two chosen groups (pre-adolescents and adolescents) besides making it easier to compare the two.

The data recorded in the columns for linguistic factors are the result of a global quantitative survey. The 70 pairs of narratives selected for analysis are spontaneous linguistic productions elicited in compliance with the proposal made by Labov (1972) for obtaining
narratives of personal experience. In order to analyze the types and functions of repetition in the oral narratives (ON) and the written narratives (WN), each text was divided into discursive units recognized as “units of information,” in other words, a chunk of discourse that implies interaction of two complementary parts: the given’ and the new’ (Halliday, 1989). It should also be stated that syntactic, semantic and discursive criteria were employed to identify and mark off each information unit in the texts. Even phonetic criteria and rhythm were used to analyze oral discourse since certain paralinguistic features, such as pauses and intonation, were also considered.

The 140 oral and written texts contain a total of 3,317 information units (IUs). Of these, 1,864 are oral accounts featuring 353 cases of repetition, making for an average of 5.28 IUs per occurrence. The remaining 1,453 information units were encountered in the written texts, in which 244 cases of repetition were recorded in all, producing an average of 5.95 IUs. The column on the far right of Chart 1 shows that the average ratio encountered (unit of information/repetition) is roughly the same for oral and written texts, with each group of five to six information units containing one type of repetition.

Using the models proposed by Bessa Neto (1991) and Marcuschi (1992), both of whom have described the types and functions of repetition in Portuguese, I have demonstrated that the repeated segments, at lexical, syntagmatic or clause level, perform functions essentially related to textual connexion and are an integral part of interaction and processing (production and comprehension) not only in oral narratives but also in written narrative discourse. One section deals with the components that encompass the specific traits of repetition. It should be said that although this study concentrates on one functional typology, it must be acknowledged that other structural features of repetition deserve attention. The following section focuses on the plurifunctional nature of the repeated segments empirically marked off in the oral and written narrative texts produced by the Mexican teenagers.

3. The presence of repetition (R) in oral and written narratives

Connexion, interaction and processing are the cornerstones of an analytical framework suited to both oral and written texts. Connexion comprises two categories - cohesion and formulation - that combine with repetition mechanisms observable in the surface linguistic structure, whereas interaction and processing operate at a deeper level underlying the specific occurrences of repetition. In the case of interaction, the categories selected - involvement and evaluation - reflect the state of mind of the speaker/writer and his/her personal attitudes, especially with regard to his/her ability to interact with an interlocutor. As for processing, repetition highlights cognitive categories - production and comprehension - that imply viewing language from the speaker’s/writer’s standpoint. All these categories thus correspond to the functional components of repetition in the scope of this study. Another point
that should be made is that the functional components in themselves constitute macro-functions comprising micro-functions that reveal more specific uses of repetition depending on their ultimate purpose in either oral or written texts. The functional components displayed in Table 1 below serve to illustrate the macro- and micro-functions of repetition (R), empirically delineated in the formal types identified in the 140 texts used as the corpus for research.

**TABLE 1: General description of the macro- and micro-functions of repetition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro-functions and micro-functions of R</th>
<th>oral narratives</th>
<th>written narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(number of occurrences &amp; approx. %)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONNEXION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>cohesion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. referential linkage</td>
<td>25 7%</td>
<td>16 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. sequential linkage</td>
<td>43 12%</td>
<td>74 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>formulation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. expansion</td>
<td>14 4%</td>
<td>4 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. reformulation</td>
<td>7 2%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. framing</td>
<td>82 23%</td>
<td>44 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td>171 48%</td>
<td>138 57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTERACTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. specification of detail</td>
<td>8 2%</td>
<td>10 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. broadening of meaning</td>
<td>12 3%</td>
<td>4 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>evaluation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. intensif. of narrative action</td>
<td>6 2%</td>
<td>1 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. suspension of narrative action</td>
<td>5 1%</td>
<td>1 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. emphasis</td>
<td>73 20%</td>
<td>60 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. reinforcement</td>
<td>30 8%</td>
<td>60 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td>134 36%</td>
<td>86 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROCESSING</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>production</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. discursive simplification</td>
<td>2 1%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. support for filling pauses</td>
<td>6 2%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. bridging</td>
<td>3 1%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. rectification</td>
<td>6 2%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>comprehension</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. updating of scene</td>
<td>18 6%</td>
<td>17 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. metacommentary</td>
<td>6 2%</td>
<td>3 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. adjustment of meaning</td>
<td>7 2%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td>48 16%</td>
<td>20 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>353 100%</td>
<td>244 100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The quantitative analysis of the functions of R reveals a strong concentration in the domain of connexion in both oral (48%) and written (57%) texts. This clearly confirms the importance of repeated segments in textual organization and at the same time underscores the fact that the basic function of an R is to associate ideas.

It should be stressed, on the one hand, that the fields in which R operates are not mutually exclusive but rather overlap and dovetail with each other. On the other hand, despite its basic or primary function, a repeated segment can perform secondary functions associated with (an)other field(s). In this respect, the figures displayed in Table 1 reflect the basic functions, which generally stand out from the remainder in each repeated segment examined in the context in which it occurs.

The figures relating to the most prevalent functions in the field of interaction are concentrated on emphatic repetitions, i.e. those recorded under the emphasis micro-function in both oral (20%) and written (25%) accounts. This can be explained by the textual genre: narratives of personal experience in which the evaluation component is a constant. It is worth recalling that, in defining the two functions of a narration (referential and evaluative), Labov and Waletzky (1967) observe that a narrative that performs an exclusively referential function is considered “empty” and uninteresting. Developing this idea, Labov (1972: 378) states that any deviation from the basic syntax of a narrative is a marked sign of evaluative force. It should be said that a repetition that serves as emphasis is a deviation since it performs a more paradigmatic than syntagmatic function.

As for the figures relating to processing, the frequency of Rs used to meet the immediate demands of production diminishes when the requirement depends on the situational context in face-to-face interactions. The Rs caused by the production component tend to occur exclusively in oral discourse contexts because their possible occurrence in writing is obviously cancelled out by the prosaic act of erasing repetitions.

However objective the figures in Table 1 may be, the results can only be deemed truly representative to the extent that examples of empirically identified types of repetition can be scrutinized very closely. Let us examine a few examples.

(1) referential linkage

18 - *Pero tocó la casualidad*  
[But it happened by chance]

19 - *de que nada más había una puerta abierta . . .*  
[that there was one *door* open . . .]

20 - *y, en la siguiente estación, la puerta estaba cerrada.* (ON 22)
[and, at the next station, the *door* was closed.]

\(^1\) The fragments quoted in the examples are preceded by a number indicating the position of each “information unit” in the linear sequence of the text, be it an oral narrative (ON) or a written one (WN). The number in brackets after each quotation (e.g. ON 22) refers to the catalogue number of a particular narrative within the corpus.
(2) sequential linkage

14 - pero ya no podía pasar del río al campo
[but now I couldn’t get to the field from the river]
15 - y empecé a brincar sobre la piedra.
[and I began to play on the rock.]
16 - La piedra estaba tan húmeda /.../
[The rock was so moist /.../]

The micro-functions of the repeated segments underlined in examples (1) and (2) are related to cohesion, the main characteristic of which emphasizes the linkage feature peculiar to connexion.

(3) expansion

1 - El otro día me enojé
[The other day I got really narked]
2 - porque mi hermana me agarró mis cosas de mi mochila
[because my sister took my things out of my satchel]
3 - y lo que más me enojó
[and what narked me most]
4 - es que rompió mi diccionario.
[is that she tore my dictionary.]

(4) framing

3 - Entonces no quería prender el carbón,
[Then the charcoal wouldn’t burn]
4 - entonces él empezó a echar alcohol mi papá varias veces
[so my dad, he started to pour alcohol on it several times]
5 - y no prendía.
[and it still wouldn’t burn.]

Besides illustrating the expansion and framing micro-functions, respectively, examples (3) and (4) make it possible to explain the formulation component, which comprises the linguistic procedures speakers or writers employ to order their textual composition and, at the same time, enhance the association of ideas between the various information units. Repetition performing an expansion function consists of opportune retrieval of a linguistic segment to facilitate the insertion of some new piece of information or commentary in the narrator’s discursive composition, as illustrated in example (3). Framing, on the other hand, combines repetition with a matrix segment to serve as a frame around an evaluative commentary, an episode, a structural section of the narrative or, as in the case of example (4), to act as a kind of frame to which the narrator spontaneously refers in his account to highlight a detail. Let us now examine the following examples:
(5) specification of detail

21 - Y al otro día fueron mis primos y la niña
[And another day off went my cousins and the girl]

22 - que le había pegado al niño
[who had hit the boy]

23 - que le había pegado con la cuchara.
[who had hit him with the spoon]

(6) broadening the meaning of a form

25 - Entonces todos, todos y todos se empezaron a reir.
[Then everyone, but everyone began to laugh.]

Note that in examples (5) and (6) the micro-functions present cases in which repetition evinces the narrator’s commitment or endeavour toward the interlocutor (listener/reader), thus reflecting a state of involvement that depends on the narrator’s ability to interact with the other. This clearly evokes the interactive nature of language. Repetitions resulting from involvement help set the “scene” in which the events narrated take place (Tannen, 1989). In this context, besides helping to set the scene, specification of detail enhances interpersonal involvement and so promotes interaction. We shall now proceed to examine fragments in which the occurrence of repetition illustrates the evaluation component.

(7) suspension of narrative action

27 - Y pues, estuvo todo muy divertido . . . muy divertido.
[Well, it was all very funny . . . very funny.]

(8) emphasis

18 - y mi mamá notó
[and my mum noticed]

19 - que hacían falta muchas cosas: la cámara, losa, juguetes, etc.
[that many things were missing: camera, crockery, games, etc.]

20 - y desesperada a mi papá le dijo:
[and in desperation she said to my dad:]

21 - Hector, la cámara y los demás faltan.
[Hector, the camera and the rest are missing]

The micro-functions illustrated in (7) and (8) are associated with evaluation and clearly reflect the speaker’s/writer’s intention of highlighting points in the narration that he/she wants the listener/reader to take heed of.

Functions associated with processing are visible in repeated segments that reflect the speaker’s/writer’s perception of his/her own discursive production. In this sphere, repetitions strictly associated with production serve the requirements of face-to-face communication and
are therefore nonexistent in writing. In the field of processing, the most prevalent micro-functions are those bearing on comprehension. Besides lending the information greater precision or adjusting its meaning through metacommentary or clarification, repetitions connected with comprehension tend to serve to update the scene. Take the following example:

(9) **updating of scene**

1 - Resulta que me subí al Metro,
   [I happened to get on the tube train]
2 - entonces un muchacho me cedió el asiento,
   [then a lad gave up his seat for me]
   ((insertion of new elements in the discourse topic))
14 - y de repente antes de bajarse
   [and suddenly, before he got off,]
15 - el muchacho que me dice
   [the lad said to me] (WN 13)

In this example, the repeated segment reintroduces to the scene an element that the narrator reckons will help the reader resume the narrative thread. Besides fulfilling this specific function in the narrative, the repeated segment enhances the textual structure’s connexion. This confirms the superimposing of functions.

4. Final remarks

The quantitative treatment combined with the descriptive and interpretative analysis of the oral and written data comprising the corpus researched confirms the idea that repetition performs highly significant functions in both language modes. The oral and written texts examined share repetition procedures that denote regular, relatively analogous functions, especially in terms of textual connexion and interaction. Repetition does not disappear when teenagers take to writing, suggesting that it is a necessary linguistic resource. In actual fact, when we use written language, we formulate texts in which repetition is as fundamental as variation.

Far from impoverishing or breaking the smooth flow of language, repetition expands the possibilities of discourse construction. In this respect, as Michael Hoey suggests (1991: 243), it should be stressed that “the traditional advice to avoid repetition needs to be couched with special care if it is not to interfere actively with the development of mature writing skills.” This raises a crucial point for the teaching of the mother tongue, especially when it comes to learning how to write compositions and essays at school.

This study has led to conclusions that can be viewed as a contribution to the work of those engaged in first and even second language teaching. Firstly, the presence of repetition in speech and in writing, besides facilitating textual organization, is designed to reinforce particular discursive meanings and to enhance interaction. Secondly, repetition should be seen
as the bedrock of substitution, which undeniably incorporates the act of repeating, either by means of synonymy or referential semantics or pronominalization, ranging across the spectrum of what is now being admitted as grammaticalization. Finally, those teaching composition or essay writing should adopt a more reflexive attitude with regard to teaching practices. By doing so, they would come to see forms of repetition not merely as a trait of spoken language, much less as a linguistic defect, but rather as a resource to which learners can resort in developing their discursive skills in written language. The recommendations I have made are not intended to be pedagogical guidelines or hard and fast didactic proposals on how to deal with repetition in teaching writing skills. Nevertheless, the principal objective of this study will have been attained if what has been discussed effectively contributes to bringing about a change of attitude, especially in the way oral and written language are dealt with in the classroom. By altering one’s approach to a phenomenon, especially one that tends to be considered an insubstantial manifestation, one produces a complete rethinking. The habitual presence of repetition in teenagers’ discourse ceases to be viewed as a negative feature or as a device that impoverishes their language. Besides serving as a useful bridge between oral and written language, repetition can be valued as a factor promoting cohesion and textual formulation in the sphere of connexion, as an appropriate resource for enhancing interpersonal involvement and communicative evaluation in the domain of verbal interaction and, at the same time, as a standard of semantic and pragmatic effect in the cognitive processes of production and comprehension that operate in the realm of processing.

REFERENCES


