

# What was that again?

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A: I didn't leave it in the car. Did I leave it in the car? How could I have left it in the car? I ask you!

B: I didn't say you did leave it in the car. I said you *might* have left it in the car, that's all.

This is not an extract from an English teaching drill for foreigners. It is taken from a recording of a real argument between a husband and wife. What is immediately striking is the amount of repetition it contains. Basically the same sentence turns up five times in quick succession.

Here's another example:

A: (Having just pulled a Christmas cracker, reads the riddle inside) Oh this one's awful. You won't want to hear this one. It's terrible.

B: Go on, let's hear it.

C: Yeah, let's hear it.

A: No, you won't want to hear it. I tell you, it'll make you ill.

B: I don't mind being ill.

C: Come one, let's all be ill together.

B: Yeah, let's hear it.

A: You really mean that. You want to hear it?

This time, there are two repetition sequences, one (about being ill) inside the other (about hearing it).

In the latest (at the time of writing) issue of *Language*, Deborah Tannen, a linguist from Georgetown University, Washington, has published a long and detailed analysis of repetitions in everyday conversation. In her corpus these features turn out to be one of the most important characteristics. Her paper sent me scurrying to my own collection of recorded conversation, to see whether the same pattern was present. It was. The above are my examples.

It is remarkable how often we repeat ourselves, or each other, in conversation. We imitate sounds, intonation patterns, rhythm

patterns, grammatical constructions, words and idioms with extraordinary frequency. Sometimes the repetition is just a single instance. At other times, it might go on for half a dozen or more exchanges.

It is even possible to conceive of holding your own in a conversation in which all you do is repeat aspects of what the other person has just said, or repeat a sentence or two of your own. You may recall this strategy being the focus of the irony in the novel *Being there* (by Jerzy Kosinski): in the film version, Peter Sellers played the role of the simpleton gardener who repeats (in a slow, almost meditative style) what other people say to him, and is thereby thought to be highly intelligent. And I'm sure I am not the only reader of *ET* who has found himself out of his depth in a conversation, and yet who manages to keep his end up by repeating what the other people are saying. Indeed, once I was congratulated by a local town councillor for having such sensible ideas, when all I had done was repeat, at irregular intervals, fragments of what had emerged in the councillor's own monologue.

Tannen thinks that there are several different reasons for repeating ourselves in conversation. It enables speakers to produce language in a more efficient way, so that they use up less mental energy, and speak more fluently – perhaps even more emphatically and persuasively. One of her examples is taken from someone talking about a man in her office: 'And he knows Spanish. And he knows French. And he knows English. And he knows German. And he is a gentleman.' The speaker could have said 'And he knows Spanish, French, English and German, and he is a gentleman.' This more compressed style is more likely in the more carefully constructed world of literary expression, but it lacks the dynamic punch of the conversational sequence. The repetition intensifies the meaning. It helps the speech to hang

together, and may help listeners to follow it more easily.

But repetition helps conversationalists hang together too. It establishes rapport between the speakers. It shows that they accept each other's utterances (even if they disagree with them) and it indicates their willingness to interact and to keep on interacting. It helps the conversation become familiar, so that everyone feels at home in it, and feels able to contribute to it, without fear of being thought inadequate.

We generally fail to appreciate the value of repetition. One reason is that, from an early age, we are taught that repetition is a bad thing. 'Don't repeat yourself' is an injunction placed upon us when we assemble our first stories and essays, and make our first public utterances. Repetition is considered to be deadening, boring, thoughtless. We are not told about the masterly effects of Winston Churchill in his speeches, who used repetition to such advantage ('We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender'). Nor are Shakespeare's repetitions much in the minds of these critics (such as the fourfold 'In such a night . . .' sequence in *The Merchant of Venice*, V.i.3).

Ah, but that's a different sort of repetition, you might be thinking. That's dramatic parallelism, or rhetorical balance, or some such. Indeed. But I see no essential difference between the parallelisms which occur in poetry or dramatic prose, and those which

occur in conversation. The subject matter of conversation is obviously not so profound, but are the techniques so different? This is a point made by Tannen, and also by several others. Indeed, conversation, to one of her linguist sources (Paul Friedrich), can be viewed as 'rough drafts for poetry'. And (to turn this point around) Wordsworth was just one of many poets who felt that there was a peculiarly close relationship between the language of poetry and that of everyday speech.

As with all things, too much repetition can have a crippling effect. I know a man who always repeats the ends of his interlocutor's sentences – often anticipating what the other person is about to say. It is a highly irritating mannerism. But used flexibly and sensitively, it has an important role in enabling conversation to proceed smoothly. In the Tannen study, it turned out to be pervasive, unconscious behaviour, used for a variety of specific functions – to support another person, to stall them, to emphasise a point, to expand a point, to express sarcasm or humour (A: He's from Birmingham. B: Birmingham?!), and much more. It emerges very clearly that the use of repeated forms is a neglected, undervalued feature of conversational speech – or, for that matter, of writing. It deserves to be taken seriously. It deserves further study. It really does.

Deborah Tannen, 'Repetition in conversation: towards a poetic of talk'. *Language* (63.3), 1987, 574–605.

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## A new original Roget

In *ET*12, Oct 87, we featured a detailed review of the new Longman *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (ed. Betty Kirkpatrick), set within a general description of Peter Mark Roget's work. The new British publisher Bloomsbury has now brought out a facsimile edition of the original 1852 *Thesaurus* (as published by Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans). With an introduction by Laurence Urdang, it costs £19.95 (ISBN 0-7475-0105-X).