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# “Say, Say It Again Sam”: The Treatment of Repetition in Linguistics

Jean Aitchison

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. What is Repetition?

*repetition* n. the act or an instance of repeating or being repeated.

*repeat* v. to say or state again.

Dictionary definitions provide a useful starting point. But these definitions do not help with a major problem, that repetition skulks under numerous different names, one might almost say aliases, depending on who is repeating what where:

When parrots do it, it's parrotting.

When advertisers do it, it's reinforcement.

When children do it, it's imitation.

When brain-damaged people do it, it's perseveration or echolalia.

When dis-fluent people do it, it's stuttering or stammering.

When orators do it, it's epizeuxis, plocé, anadiplosis, polyptoton or antimetabole.

When novelists do it, it's cohesion.

When poets do it, it's alliteration, chiming, rhyme, or parallelism.

When priests do it, it's ritual.

When sounds do it, it's gemination.

When morphemes do it, it's reduplication.

When phrases do it, it's copying.

When conversations do it, it's reiteration.

In sum, the following alphabetical list of 27 terms covers repetition's

commonest guises, though there are undoubtedly more to be found in specialized areas such as classical rhetoric:

Alliteration, anadiplosis, antimetabole, assonance, battology, chiming, cohesion, copying, doubling, echolalia, epizeuxis, gemination, imitation, iteration, parallelism, parroting, perseveration, plocce, polyptoton, reduplication, reinforcement, reiteration, rhyme, ritual, shadowing, stammering, stuttering.

As the numerous names suggest, repetition covers an enormous area. In one sense, the whole of linguistics can be regarded as the study of repetition, in that language depends on repeated patterns. In this paper, repeated patterns have been omitted, alongside rhythm and metre (a type of repeated pattern), in order to make the topic manageable. Even so, actual repeated items cover a very wide range, from exact repetition to repetitious speech. Here are some examples from across the board and across the centuries:

- (1) O horror, horror, horror! (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*).
- (2) "He's dead," said Frances . . . "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," said the man. (Margaret Drabble, *Realms of Gold*).
- (3) Hello, widdle wubber plant. Would widdle wubber plant like a widdy-biddy dwinka wadda? (Peter Plant, "Bogart" in *Sunday Times*).
- (4) Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the poor in heart; for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers. . . (St. Matthew, *Gospel*).
- (5) Look, I have seen people surprised in my time. I have seen people very surprised. I have, on occasions, seen very, very, very surprised people. But I have never seen anything like the expression on the face of Albert Roger Quigley that evening. (Nigel Williams, *They came from SW19*).
- (6) With Nutrasome, your hair will look thicker, feel thicker, be thicker. If you don't have as much hair as you want, you can now make the most of the hair you have, thanks to Nutrasome Shampoo and Supplement. Nutrasome is a breakthrough in the treatment of thinning hair. . . (ad, in *Sunday Times*).
- (7) It is all wood-panelled; so wood-panelled, in fact, that even the wood-panels look wood-panelled. (Craig Brown, in *Sunday Times*).
- (8) Fog everywhere. Fog up the river where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping. (Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*).

- (9) Wouldn't it make more sense to house people in these properties, people who are desperate for a place to live, people who would then pay rent? (Hackney Liberal Democrats, *Focus*).
- (10) He respects Owl, because you can't help respecting anybody who can spell TUESDAY, even if he doesn't spell it right: but spelling isn't everything. There are days when spelling Tuesday simply doesn't count. (A.A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*).

## 1.2. Repetition: Good or Bad?

No-one is quite sure whether repetition is good or bad, either in literature or linguistics. Shakespeare's Falstaff is angry with Prince Hal when Hal repeats some of Falstaff's repetitious speech:

- (11) O! thou hast damnable iteration, and art indeed able to corrupt a saint! (William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part 1*).

On the other hand, Milton praises echo, the ultimate in repetition:

- (12) Sweet Echo, Sweetest nymph that liv'st unseen  
Within thy airy shell. (John Milton, *Comus*).

The same confusion is found in linguistics, where repetition is alternatively censored or applauded:

- (13) We tend to avoid lexical repetition in dialogue. (Quirk *et al.* 1441).
- (14) Repetition is a resource by which conversationalists together create a discourse, a relationship, and a world. (Tannen 97).

A few writers recognize the paradoxical nature of repetition:

- (15) The languages of the world frequently show evidence of conspiracies to avoid “accidental” repetition of phoneme strings across morphs. These conspiracies are intriguing, since many languages also use the contrary strategy of reduplication – which deliberately repeats material within morphs. (Menn and MacWhinney 519).

Linguists are therefore faced with the paradox that repetition is widely used, yet also widely avoided. It spans the “competence-performance” dichotomy, in that some repetition is an intrinsic part of the linguistic system (competence), while a large other portion is dictated by the needs of the particular utterance (performance).

### 1.3. Aim

The aim of this paper is to provide a linguist’s overview of repetition. After a brief discussion of the problems surrounding the topic (above), the main linguistic variables are outlined, with particular attention to three of them: function, intentionality, and optionality. The paper then points out the value of repetition as a methodological tool for diagnosing similarities and differences between types of linguistic output, exemplified by self-repetition in the utterances of chimps, children and pidgin speakers.

## 2. Variables

### 2.1. Straightforward Variables

Teasing-out the variables is tricky, because they interact. Some of them are relatively straightforward (medium, participants, scale of fixity, temporal scale, size of unit), others less so (function, intentionality, optionality).

#### 2.1.1. Medium

The utterance may be spoken, signed or written, with more repetition in spoken than written language.

#### 2.1.2. Participants

*Self-repetition* can usually be distinguished from *other-repetition* (also known as *allo-repetition*) – though it is not always possible to make a neat divide, as shown by twins Toby and David, age 2;9 (2 years, 9 months):

(16) David: You SILLY/ you SILLY/ you SILLY/ you SILLY/ you SILLY

Toby: YOU/ YOU silly/ YOU silly/ YOU silly/ NO YOU silly (Ochs Keenan 131).

### 2.1.3. Scale of fixity

The degree of repetition or “scale of fixity” (Tannen 38) covers a wide range. It may be *exact* or *partial* – also sometimes referred to as “repetition with variation” and as “repetitious speech.” The possible variants have been well covered by classical rhetoric (Vickers, Nash). It is unclear whether repetition should include the case of *paraphrase*, where propositions are repeated, but exact words are not.

### 2.1.4. Temporal scale

Repetition may be *immediate* or *delayed*, when there is a gap between repeated items. Classical rhetoric has dealt with this also.

### 2.1.5. Size of unit

Repeated units may be of almost any size, the main ones being the *phoneme*, the *morpheme*, the *word*, the *phrase*, the *sentence*.

## 2.2. Function

The functions of repetition have been studied above all by stylisticians and sociolinguists. The former have concentrated on self-repetition, and the latter on other-repetition. Three broad, overlapping functions can be identified: first, repetition may extend existing language resources (usually self-repetition); second, it promotes textual cohesion and comprehensibility, with “text” used in its widest sense to include spoken speech (again, usually self-repetition); third, it facilitates conversational interaction (usually other-repetition). Examples of these are given below:

### 2.2.1. Extending resources

Repetition is primarily used iconically for *intensification*, and also for *iteration* and *continuation*. Intensification involves an increase in quantity

or quality, and includes superlatives and “augmentative” uses. It also covers Macbeth’s “O horror, horror, horror.” All such uses are sometimes referred to as “expressive repetition” (Quirk *et al.*).

- (17) It was a very very good wine.  
 The car went slower and slower.  
 “Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice.
- (18) The phone rang and rang.  
 I do it again and again.  
 Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end?

### 2.2.2. Cohesion and comprehensibility

Repeated lexical items promote textual cohesion: “Repetition serves to show the relatedness of sentences in much the same way that a bibliographical reference shows the relatedness of academic papers” (Hoey 35). Repetition also aids comprehension, since information is dripped across to the hearer more slowly, as in Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*:

- (19) Dark behind it rose the forest,  
 Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
 Rose the firs with cones upon them.

In certain types of text, repetition is used as a device to avoid misunderstanding. This is common in legal documents:

- (20) If at the time of any loss, destruction, or damage arising under this Policy there is any other insurance covering such loss, destruction, or damage, the Company shall not be liable for more than its ratable proportion of such loss, destruction, or damage. (Quirk *et al.* 1441).

### 2.2.3. Conversational interaction

A major use of repetition is to maintain conversation, a function also claimed to exist in chimp signing (Greenfield and Savage-Rumbaugh). It is found frequently in interactions between patient and doctor, child and parent (Ochs Keenan), and pupil and teacher:

- (21) Patient: Well I had’m er a week last Wednesday.

Doctor: A week last Wednesday. How many attacks have you had?  
(Coulthard 136, 1st edn.).

(22) Child: Me want to read that.

Parent: Okay let's read that.

Child: Read that. (Fletcher 62).

(23) Teacher: Can you tell me why do you eat all that food?

Pupil: To keep you strong.

Teacher: To keep you strong, yes, to keep you strong. Why do you want to be strong? (Coulthard 8, 1st edn.).

Extensive repetition is also found in co-operative conversational exchanges:

(24) Marge: Can I have one of the Tabs?

Do you want to split it?

Do you want to split a tab?

Kate: Do you want to split MY Tab?

Vivian: No.

Marge: Kate, do you want to split my Tab?

Kate: No, I don't want to split your Tab. (Tannen 57).

### 2.3. Intentionality

A distinction is quite frequently made between *intentional* and *unintentional* repetition, the latter having been studied mainly by psycholinguists and neurolinguists. However, the distinction oversimplifies the situation, and a further category of “covert controlled” repetition possibly needs to be included between these two. In spoken speech, it is often unclear whether repetition is a consciously-used device or not. Tannen has argued that in conversation, a certain amount of repetition is “automatic shadowing,” and so is unintentional. But many psycholinguists distinguish first between automatic and controlled processes, and secondly, between conscious controlled and veiled controlled, the latter referring to situations in which the mind is not consciously aware of making a choice, as in word selection (Tanenhaus *et al.* 368). Tannen's “automatic shadowing” seems more likely to be a case of a veiled controlled process, referred to here as “covert controlled.”



### 2.3.1. Intentional

Intentional repetition is easiest to recognize in written language, especially poetry:

- (25) Break, break, break,  
 On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!  
 (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Break, break, break").

### 2.3.2. Covert controlled ("Automatic shadowing")

This occurs above all in co-operative conversation between friends:

- (26) Steve: Port is very sweet. Port is very rich.  
 Chad: Port is very sweet. Very rich. (Tannen 88).

### 2.3.3. Unintentional

Unintentional repetition is in its simplest form known as *perseveration*, and occurs in slips of the tongue such as:

- (27) Chew chew tablets (chew two tablets).

Unintentional repetitions are of more interest than might appear at first sight. In normal speakers, perseverations are considerably less common than anticipations, cases when a sound or word comes in too early. There appears to be an efficient wipe-clean mechanism, in which sounds or larger units are "wiped off" an internal mental slate as they are uttered, which breaks down only occasionally. Perseveration is however common in aphasia (serious speech disorder):

- (28) And that's the trouble I'm forgetting names that I forget, you know.  
 (Buckingham *et al.* 344).
- (29) (Patient had been talking about rhubarb)  
 T: Now then what's this a picture of?  
 P: Ra..ra..rabbit.  
 T: Not a rabbit, no. It's an apple.  
 P: Apple, yes.  
 T: Can you name any other kinds of fruit?

P: O well, rhubarb.

T: Perhaps, yes.

P: Or rhubarb. (Aitchison 247).

Aphasic speech suggests that perseveration is not a unitary phenomenon: it covers not only involuntary repetition, but also gap-filling – the insertion of a substitute word as a stop-gap – as well as cases of impaired short-term memory, where the patient has forgotten what s/he has previously said.

In addition, perseveration can be artificially produced when the cortex is stimulated in certain areas, notably in the inferior frontal lobe. For example, if a patient has correctly named a butterfly, then is subjected to cortical stimulation in this area, s/he is liable to call a table a butterfly, but can revert to correct naming when the electrode is removed (Caplan 420).

An extreme form of perseveration is *echolalia*, when patients cannot initiate spontaneous speech, or at best can respond only to questions where there is relative similarity between the question and answer, as in “Were you drinking tea?” Answer: “Yes I was drinking tea.” Echolalia often indicates injury to the frontal lobes. Such damage primarily impairs the ability to initiate voluntary action. However, in the case of echolalic patients, there is some disagreement as to whether a general alerting mechanism has gone awry, with echolalia as a symptom of a hyper-attentive state, or whether there may be some specifically linguistic problem (Caplan).

In general, repetition is treated as a lowly skill, something which may be preserved when all other speech is impaired. But this may be a mistake. There is a controversial type of aphasia, *conduction aphasia*, in which a patient is typically unable to repeat speech. It is traditionally attributed to damage to the arcuate fasciculus, the tract of fibres which link Broca’s area (controlling motor movement) and Wernicke’s area (which affects speech comprehension). However, this disconnection diagnosis has for a long time been regarded as too simplistic. For example, in one study, six patients were able to repeat digits, but not sentences (Damasio and Damasio). Consequently, repetition may be a more complex function than is generally recognized, as the great Russian neurologist Luria maintained. Furthermore, shadowing is a highly skilled affair, a task which involves wearing headphones, and repeating speech back as it is spoken.

## 2.4. Optionality

Optionality is a variable which has received relatively little attention. Yet it may be one of the most interesting, since this is where the competence-performance gap is bridged, and where the borderline cases may have implications for theoretical linguistics. Repetition is obligatory at one end of the scale, and forbidden at the other. In between are cases when it is preferred or dispreferred – though sometimes it is genuinely optional.

### 2.4.1. Obligatory repetition

Repetition is obligatory in cases where it has been grammaticalized, mainly in the process known as reduplication, which is particularly prevalent in Philippine languages (Spencer):

- (30) Tagalog *sulat* “write,” future *susulat*.  
*magsulatsulat* “write intermittently.”  
*magpasulat* “make someone write,” future *magpapasulat*.
- (31) Agta *ulu* “head,” *ululu* “heads.”  
*takki* “leg,” *taktakki* “legs.”

Moravcsik comments on the correlation between reduplicative constructions and meanings having to do with increased quantity in the world's languages: the iconicity of this is obvious. However, Bybee (151) points out that reduplication occurs in relatively few languages: reduplication of the stem for iteration occurs in only five out of the fifteen languages identified as having an iterative in her survey. Bybee also claims that reduplication is more often found as a derivational process than in inflection.

In English, repetition is mostly optional, but is occasionally obligatory when an intensifier is intensified:

- (31) \* He ran extremely very fast.

must be changed to:

- (32) He ran very very fast.

Again in English, repetition is strongly preferred (if not obligatory)

when the normal deletion of a repeated word or phrase would cause unacceptable ambiguity (Hankamer), as in:

- (33) \*Peter bathed the dog on Tuesday and Mary on Wednesday.

If the deleted phrase is *bathed the dog*, the sentence has to be retained in its undeleted form, as:

- (34) Peter bathed the dog on Tuesday and Mary bathed the dog on Wednesday.

#### 2.4.2. Optional repetition

Repetition is sometimes genuinely optional, as in the following examples of optional gapping, alteration of words in a conversation, and haplogy:

- (35) Peter bathed the dog and Angela bathed the cat.  
       Peter bathed the dog and Angela the cat.
- (36) Isn't it a lovely day? Yes, isn't it?  
       Isn't it a lovely day? Yes, gorgeous.
- (37) Morphophonology - morphonology.

#### 2.4.3. Repetition dispreferred

Repetition sounds clumsy in several situations. A strong preference for conjunction reduction is perhaps the most obvious case:

- (38) Peter bathed the dog and Mary bathed the dog.  
       Preferably: Peter and Mary bathed the dog.  
       Or: Peter bathed the dog and so did Mary.

In addition, pronominalization is a routine way of avoiding repetition of nouns and noun phrases, and its failure to occur sounds “odd,” as in the child’s narrative below:

- (39) One day the hare and the tortoise [were] going to have a race and the hare was going very fast then the hare stoped to have a rest and the tortoise went past the hare then the hare woke up and went past the tortoise then the hare stoped and the tortoise went past the hare and the tortoise was near the finish line and the hare was going fast but the tortoise wun (Lowe).

Repeated verbs also tend to be avoided if they would cause parsing difficulties:

(40) The bus the car hit hit the van.

Preferably: The bus the car hit crashed into the van.

#### 2.4.4. Repetition impossible or strongly dispreferred

Repetition is avoided in cases where parsing would be impossible, as in the well known example:

(41) The bus the car the tram hit hit hit the van.

(The tram hit the car, the car hit the bus, the bus hit the van).

Sentences such as (41) are normally regarded as well-formed but unacceptable, since similarly formed sentences without the repeated verbs are possible, as in: "The vase the maid her employer sacked dropped smashed to pieces." But they cause immense parsing problems. Even after practice, subjects tend to interpret a sentence such as the one with three *hits* as "The bus, the car and the tram kept hitting the van" (Blumenthal). The line of *hads* well-known to British schoolchildren is another example of comprehension problems caused by repeated lexical items:

(42) John whereas Charles had had had had had had had. Had had had had the examiner's approval.

(Whereas Charles had written "had", John had written "had had." "Had had" pleased the examiner).

Parsing difficulties are also likely to be at the root of the "repeated morph constraint" reported on by Menn and MacWhinney, which works intermittently in English. For example, *-ly* can normally be added to English adjectives, as in *pretty*, *prettily*, but this is not possible when the adjective itself ends in *-ly*:

(43) ugly \*uglily; womanly \*womanlyly (in a womanly way).

Similarly, *un-* is normally the negative prefix for adjectives, as *happy*, *unhappy*. But if the adjective already has an *un-*prefix, then *not* has to be used:

- (44) \*An un-unhappy man arrived → A not unhappy man arrived (Aitchison and Bailey).

A further case which may be due to trouble with parsing has been pointed out by Cruttenden and Faber. In order to avoid an exact repetition of *London*, the stress has been moved to the previous preposition:

- (45) This poem describes London and the journey TO London.

## 2.5. Provisional Assessment of Variables

Repetition is therefore a complex matter, with numerous interacting variables. A provisional assessment suggests that immediate self-repetitions of syllables, morphemes, and words can mostly be regarded as bad, since they cause comprehension problems: they tend to be filtered out as mistakes, or else treated as iteratives. On the other hand, partial self-repetitions and other-repetitions are good, since they aid comprehension and help conversational interchanges. However, this assessment is over-simple, and goodness or badness of repetition depends crucially on the circumstances in which it occurred.

Above all, it is difficult to make reliable generalizations about repetition. It might therefore be unproductive to continue seeking generalizations. Instead, because of its very diversity, repetition should be regarded as a useful diagnostic tool. This is the topic of the next section.

## 3. Repetition as a Diagnostic Tool

The diversity found in repetition makes it a valuable methodological tool to assess the similarity and dissimilarity of language systems and language varieties (e.g. Greenfield and Savage-Rumbaugh).

Its value is demonstrated here by a brief overview of self-repetitions in ape signing, child language, and pidgins – varieties of language (or pseudo-language) which are sometimes claimed to be similar.

### 3.1. Ape Signing

In most analyses of chimp signing, self-repetitions have simply been ignored. Even now, the output of only one chimp, Nim Chimpsky, has been fully analysed (Terrace). Most of Nim's speech consisted of fairly short utterances, and his MLU (Mean Length of Utterance) was consistently under two signs. Longer sequences were rare, and he showed no increase in his average utterance length in the last two years of training. When he did produce longer utterances, these were often partial or total repeats of shorter ones: 8 out of his 26 most frequent 3-sign combinations contained repeated items, and 8 of his 21 most frequent 4-sign combinations involved exact repetitions of two-word utterances. (Figures in brackets after the utterances show the number of times each sequence was found in the corpus):

(46) eat Nim eat (46)	eat drink eat drink (15)
eat me eat (22)	eat Nim eat Nim (7)
Nim eat Nim (17)	banana Nim banana Nim (5)
tickle me tickle (17)	Nim eat Nim eat (4)
nut Nim nut (15)	banana me eat banana (4)
hug Nim hug (14)	banana me Nim me (4)
play me play (14)	grape eat Nim eat (4)
sweet Nim sweet (14)	drink eat drink eat (3)

These repetitions suggest that Nim's output lacks structure. It has been suggested that "repetitive, inconsistently structured strings are in fact characteristic of ape signing" (Pettito and Seidenberg 186), a claim which seems to be borne out by Nim's longest utterance:

(47) Give orange me give eat orange me eat orange give me eat orange give me you.

Nim's repetitions may have been produced partly in order to please the trainers: Nim and the other apes could have adopted a strategy "the more signs the better," and analyses of other-repetition by two more chimps suggest that: "The chimpanzees use the various pragmatic functions of repetition as a tool to co-ordinate joint action" (Greenfield and Savage-Rumbaugh 23).

In conclusion, Nim's repetitions show no signs of structure, though may

be symptomatic of a desire to please or co-operate with the other participant in the conversation.

### 3.2. Child Language

Most studies of repetition in child language have dealt with other-repetition (e.g. Ochs Keenan, Casby), where it is often labeled “imitation.” However, there are a number of different types of self-repetition, some phonetic/phonological, others syntactic, which will be outlined below:

#### 3.2.1. Babbles

Natural “babbles,” *babababa*, *mamama*, and so on, occur from around six months onward, and are often seized on by adults and reinforced as words such as *mama*, *dada*, *papa* (Jakobson). The role of babbling is disputed. Possibly, it enables the child to exercise its vocal organs, and to begin to approximate the sounds it hears around him/her, since there appears to be a “babbling drift” as babbles gradually move closer to the target language.

#### 3.2.2. Harmony

A number of characteristic phonological processes occur in the speech of young children (Ingram). Some lead to reduplication, in particular when consonant and vowel harmony are combined, as in *gugu* “Dougal,” *lili* “really.” Such reduplications are primarily due to the child’s immature phonetic/phonological system, often when there is a discrepancy between a stored representation and the ability to reproduce this accurately (Vihmann, Aitchison *Words*).

#### 3.2.3. Baby-talk

A further source of reduplication occurs in adult baby-talk. “Words” such as *gee-gee*, *quack-quack*, *itty-bitty*, *choo-choo*, *wow-wow* are learnt from English-speaking adults, who often encourage such repeats.



### 3.2.4. Preface to build-ups

Whole word repetitions occur as a preface to “build-ups”, cases in which a child appears to be assembling the components of a longer utterance:

- (48) Mister Small. Mister Smallie. Mister Small. Why’s he called Mister Small?  
(Fletcher 94).

### 3.2.5. Experiment

A further type of repetition occurs when a child experiments with alternative sequences:

- (49) Her...her got blankie; her want a blankie; where’s a blankie? (Fletcher 67).

In conclusion, children’s self-repetitions are mainly due either to phonological reduplication, or to an inability to programme syntactic patterns with speed: these latter are intrinsically structured.

## 3.3. Pidgin

Self-repetition in pidgins occurs for two main reasons: extension of resources within a limited system, and the need to maintain clarity. Also, pidgins are by definition subsidiary linguistic systems spoken by non-native speakers: such users often prefer “full sentences,” leading to increased repetition. The following examples are from pidgin Tok Pisin, spoken in Papua New Guinea.

### 3.3.1. Intensification

- (50) bikpela bikpela pis, “huge fish.”

### 3.3.2. Iteration, duration

- (51) em i ron i ron i ron, “he kept running.”

### 3.3.3. Distributive

(52) ol i go wanpela wanpela, “they went one by one.”

### 3.3.4. Avoidance of homonymy

(53) pis, “fish”, pispis, “urinate.”  
sip, “ship”, sipsip, “sheep.”

### 3.3.5. Need for clarity

The following passage shows the use of repetition to maintain clarity, as well as the other types.

(54) Orait mipela i slip i stap i stap i stap inap samting olsem ten klok mipela i kirap. Mipela i kirap wokabout i kam i kam i kam i kam i kam i kam kamap lusim bus bilong yumi nau mipela kamap long bus bilong Duaituk, mipela i bin sindaun . . . (Dutton 253).

“Alright, we slept and slept until about ten o’clock we got up. We got up and walked on and on and left behind our [part of the ] bush and came to the Duaituk bush, we sat down . . .”

## 3.4. Assessment

Self-repetitions are therefore dissimilar in the three types of data.

In ape signing, they are random and unstructured iterations, which at most indicate conversational co-operativeness and a desire to please.

In child language, perhaps only the early babbles are comparable to the ape repetitions. Other phonetic/phonological repetitions are due to processes such as consonant and vowel harmony typically found in immature sound systems. Some reduplication is due to imitation of adult “baby-talk.” In syntax, repetitions show awareness of structure, but also reveal an immature speaker trying to cope with programming difficulties.

In pidgins, repetitions enrich an impoverished system, or are used to clarify the utterance, and avoid misunderstandings. They may also be due to the limited ability of speakers for whom the pidgin is a second language. But in any event, they are intrinsically structured.

It is therefore unwise to base arguments about (for example) the origin of language on such diverse phenomena (Aitchison "Chimps").

#### 4. Conclusion

Repetition is a widespread, fascinating and heterogeneous phenomenon, which because of its diversity can be used by linguists as a valuable diagnostic tool: it can pinpoint whether language (or language-like) systems are similar or dissimilar.

But a final note:<sup>1</sup> the Greeks had a word for it, as they are reputed always to have. The word is *battologeo*, an eponym after a stuttering Greek named Battos. It originally meant "to stutter," and came to mean "repeat mindlessly." It was borrowed into English to form the words *battologize* "to utter pointless repetitions," and *battology* "a needless and tiresome repetition in speaking and writing" (OED). So, while making full use of the cohesive and interactive power of repetitions, let us also in the words of a seventeenth century writer avoid "battologies and loathsome repetitions" (1603).

<sup>1</sup> My own final note: I am very grateful to all those who made useful suggestions and provided me with extra interesting examples, especially Prof. Dr. Ernst Leisi, and Prof. Peter Trudgill. I regret that owing to limits on space and time, I was unable to incorporate all of them into the current paper.

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