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AGAIN AND AGAIN: THE PRAGMATICS OF IMITATION<sup>1</sup>  
IN CHILD LANGUAGE

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## AGAIN AND AGAIN: THE PRAGMATICS OF IMITATION IN CHILD LANGUAGE

### I. Imitations:

One of the most widely discussed topics in the literature on child language is the role of imitation in language development. Behaviorists and rationalists line up on one side or the other, claiming that imitation is or is not grammatically progressive. The expressed goal of this paper is to demonstrate that psycholinguists of both camps have turned a blind eye to the status of imitations as social events. This exclusion has affected the definition of imitation itself and the conclusions concerning its usefulness for children learning language.

Those of us interested in the pragmatics of language, in the relation of language to context of use, find it natural to specify those features of a speech situation that affect production and interpretation of utterances. Speaker, hearer, setting, topic, prior discourse and the like provide valuable clues as to what a speaker intends by his utterance, what he or she is doing with an utterance. However, in the literature on imitation, even these commonplace features of the context are not addressed. It is clear, however, that these features must be considered, as they enter into the psychologists's notion of an imitation.

Let us consider, for example, the way in which the speaker-hearer relationship as affected the definition of imitated utterances. Consider the following dialogue:

- Example 1:

A: That's a cookie monster.  
B: a cookie monster.

Imagine A and B to be two adults. Would it be natural, given this information, to treat B's utterance as an imitation of A's utterance? When one adult repeats all or part of another adult's utterances, do we see him or her as trying to imitate the other? I think not. When an adult repeats in this manner in informal conversation, we treat the repetition as having some other function. For example, B could repeat A's utterance to convey that he or she agreed with A. B could easily be nodding his (her) head in repeating A's utterance. Or B could be making A's utterance clear to himself (herself), (repeating to self-inform). Or B could be displaying his understanding to A (Forman 1974) and so on. We don't immediately see B as imitating A, because imitation implies that A and B are not on equal terms. Imitation implies that one behavior is an original and the second is a copy. The second behavior is an attempt to reproduce the first. In the case of speech, an imitation would be treated as a successful or unsuccessful attempt to reproduce a prior utterance. We usually regard adults as having a basic competence in producing sentences in their native language, however. In repeating, they don't try to reproduce one another's utterances, because they already have this competence. What is conveyed by the code is an object of knowledge but the code itself is not.

Imagine the same dialogue, where A is an adult and B a child. Such a dialogue would be considered a paradigm case of imitation in the literature. What is surprising in the

literature is that the speaker-hearer relationship is never given as a defining feature of this behavior. Generally, imitation is defined as a formal relationship between two utterances: i.e. full or partial repetition of a preceding utterance. The utterance context itself is not brought to bear.

The formal criterion of repetition, however, is difficult to assess in practice. No utterance reproduces exactly a prior utterance. Even if lexical items remain the same, the prosodic contour, voice quality and so on may differ. The problems multiply when the repetition involves only some of the initial utterance. And partial repetitions are, of course, typical of early speech behavior. Do we want to call an utterance that repeats one out of ten or twelve given lexical items an imitation? For example, if in reply to A, B has repeated the single lexical items, "that," would we say that B was imitating A, that the utterance "that" was an imitation of "that's a cookie monster"? Given that two utterances are always distinct in some respect, the linguist must make a judgement as to which differences he will count and which differences he will ignore in determining whether a repetition has occurred. Clearly, imitations are difficult to define on formal grounds alone.

Further, it is likely that repetition is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for imitation to have taken place. The sufficiency condition fails when we have a putative repetition which is not an imitation. For example, if A were to produce

his utterance with a rising intonation ("That's a cookie-monster?"), and B were to reply with a falling intonation (" a cookie monster"), would we still want to count B's utterance as an imitation? Would we want to say that B was imitating A? It seems more accurate to say that B was answering A, rather than imitating A. Similarly, if B were to repeat part or all of A's utterance with a rising intonation, we would consider his utterance as a query rather than a straightforward imitation. A good example of this is provided by Bloom (1970:98):

Example 2:

<u>Mommy:</u>	<u>Gia:</u>
(Mommy preparing to leave) Byebye. Mommy's going to give something to Roger. O.K.? Mommy'll be back soon.	
Roger.	Roger.
What, Sweetie?	back Roger Mommy?
Roger, yes. Mommy's going to give something to Roger.	Mommy Roger?

It is clear in this example that "Mommy" treats the repetition as a query rather than as an attempt to imitate.

The necessity condition fails when a non-repetition should be considered as an imitation. On the one hand, we have innumerable cases which often go unnoticed where the child tries to repeat a prior utterance but is unsuccessful. Hesitations, false starts, wild stabs, inarticulate responses, stutterings all may be attempts to repeat which fail. On the other hand, we have

cases of observable non-repeats which we do count as imitations. Thus, if a child responds "pecial" to an assertion "That's a special present," the linguist makes an allowance for the child's incapacity to produce the consonant cluster "sp."

Imitation is a social behavior and social grounds are needed in its definition as well. We need to know who is repeating an utterance and who is being being addressed. We need to know the social situation at hand and the communicative intentions of the speaker. All of these features are taken for granted in the developmental literature. It is taken for granted that speaker and hearer stand on unequal ground with respect to a certain skill, speaking. It is taken for granted that when a child repeats the utterance of an adult, that he (she) does so as learner to teacher. It is taken for granted that the language of the adult is the object of the child's understanding, and that when a child repeats the adult utterance, his motivation is mastery of the code. These assumptions are evident in the terminology used to describe x-utterance repetitions. The initial utterance is often referred to as a "model" and the subsequent repetition is of course the "imitation" of the model.

Because these assumptions are unstated, critical issues concerning the isolation of imitative behavior remain unaddressed. For example, do we want to treat all repetitions as imitations or do we want to reserve imitation for asymmetrical pedagogic

situations? Do we want to distinguish between a repetition defined on formal grounds and the social behavior "imitating?" Do we require that the speaker have the intention to imitate before we count his utterance as an imitation? Or shall we consider his motivation and intentions as irrelevant? These are interesting questions and questions that come to mind in examining repetition across a number of situational contexts. A major weakness of the imitation literature is that it restricts its observations to adult-child interaction alone. So strongly has the character of the interaction shaped the investigation that x-utterance repetition is seen as serving one and one function alone.

## II. Social Uses Of Repetition:

Having raised these issues, I would like to go on and claim that like adults, children use repetition to serve a number of communicative ends. I take issue with the assumption that a child typically repeats another utterance as an attempt to imitate that utterance. I believe such assumptions about child language arise because children are normally observed interacting with an adult. If the locus of observation turned to child-child speech interaction, then other uses of repetition come to light. Where the children are peers, the relationship is more like that of two adults talking to one another. The relationship is symmetrical with respect to language skills. Both conversational partners are equally competent (roughly).

in code production. Because of this, it is peculiar to think of one child as providing a "model utterance" that a second child attempts to reproduce.

		HEARER:	
	Child	Adult	(native speaker)
SPEAKER:	Child	Symetrical	Asymetrical
	Adult (native speaker)	Asymetrical	Symetrical

Let me substantiate this claim. From September 1973 to August 1974, I videotaped on a monthly basis the conversations of twin boys, 2 yrs. 9 mos. old at the outset of the observations. These conversations took place in the early morning hours in the children's bedroom. No adult was present. I was interested in the way in which the children conducted their conversations. Did they establish conventions for interacting verbally? If so, did these conventions match those of adult native speakers?

The answers to both of these questions turned out to be "yes." The children did establish interactional conventions. The conventions differed in degree but not in kind from those established by adults. In particular, it was clear that young children expected a certain type of response from their conversational partner, when they provided a certain type of utterance themselves. If the expected response was not



immediately forthcoming, the child would repeat his utterance or otherwise solicit the expected response from his conversational partner. In other words, the children established conventions for carrying out certain types of talk-exchanges, what Sacks and Schegloff have called "adjacency pairs."

These conventions covered not only questions, commands, songs, rhymes, warnings, instructions, apologies and the like, they applied to one of the most basic speech acts of all, the assertion. The children established a convention such that when an assertion was produced by one child, the other child was expected to acknowledge that assertion. Acknowledgement was expressed in a number of ways (Keenan: 1974, Keenan and Klein; 1974): One could acknowledge by confirming, denying, or otherwise adding relevant new information to the initial utterance. What is interesting to the discussion at hand is that by far the most common way to acknowledge assertions was to repeat all or part of the assertion. Let me provide a few examples:

Example 3: Acknowledgement by affirmation:

Child A	Child B
-some over there/	-yeah/ \some over there/

Example 4: Acknowledgement by denial:

Child A	Child B
- cradle will`rock/	
cradle`fall/	
cradle will`rock	-no cradle will rock/

Example 5: Acknowledgement by matching claim: (The addressee claims that he is performing an action similar to that described in the previous speaker's utterance) (Keenan and Klein; 1974)

Child A	Child B
-`I find feather/	
`I find feather/	
	- I yes/`I find (unclear)/`I get one/ now`I get good one/ I get`good one/ a`big one/

Example 6: Acknowledgement by query:

Child A	Child B
- its`arrows/	~ arrows/~ arrows/~ arrows/~ arrows/~ arrows/

In all of these examples, a child repeated an antecedent utterance because he wished to agree, with, disagree, with, complement, query or simply acknowledge an utterance provided by his conversational partner. To treat all of these responses as imitations obscures the real communicative work that has been accomplished in repetition. Further, I claim, it is by sorting out the "real" work that is going on that one gains insight into the role of x-utterance repetition in language development. Let me be more precise. In what way is x-utterance repetition developmentally progressive? Clearly it is progressive on the level of discourse. The child uses repetition to sustain a

dialogue. Further, he uses repetition to make responses that are relevant to the topic-at-hand. All of the repetitions provided in the examples above give evidence to the initial speaker that the subsequent speaker is attending to the topic initiated. All of these uses of language are necessary to communication and are part of the adult speaker's competence. Second, such repetitions are progressive on the level of the speech act. The child uses repetition to perform a number of different speech acts. As seen above, he may take an antecedent utterance and use it in a denial of, confirmation of, or query about that utterance. Again this type of speech behavior is part and parcel of adult linguistic competence.

Before pursuing other effects of x-utterance repetition, let me delve a bit further into the real communicative work underlying this behavior. In particular, I would like to pursue the role of acknowledgement-by-repetition in child language. I stated earlier that the conventions established by young children differ in degree but not in kind from those of adult speakers. For example, adults too solicit acknowledgement of their utterances from conversational partners. Motivation for this acknowledgement for both children and adults is social, based on ritual affirmation of "face" (Goffman 1963), on satisfying obligations relative to specific speech acts and so on. For children, however, there is an additional motivation underlying the demand for acknowledgement. Unlike competent adult

speakers, children experience enormous difficulties in making their utterances comprehensible (Ryan 1974). Their articulation is not clear; they rely heavily on non-verbal context; the words they choose may not be used in a conventional way and so on. Children can not be certain that their message has been decoded correctly by the hearer. In part for these reasons, young children have problems in getting co-conversationalists to focus on the message they wish to convey. Acknowledgement by repetition, they, serves as a "communication check" (Brown<sup>1964</sup>), letting the child know that his utterance has been deciphered appropriately and that the hearer is attending.

It is often the case that the child will convey his message in two or more steps (Keenan & Klein 1974). In the first step, he will specify an object, person, state of affairs and the like. He will, then, wait for this information to be acknowledged. Only then will he then go on to elaborate on this given information. For example:

Example 7:

Child A:

- lost/

-lost teddy bear/...

Child B:

-lost/

Example 8:

Child A:

-tractors comin'/'

-I need/

-need/tractors wheel stuck/

Example 9:

Child A:

(alarm clock rings)

-oh oh oh/ bell/

-bell/ its mommys/

-was mommys alarm clock/  
was mommys alarm clock/

-yeah/ goes ding dong  
ding dong/

Child B:

-tractors comin'

-yes

-bell/

-(unclear)

-alarm clock/

The first utterance and its repetition establish the topic to be discussed. For instance, in example 9, "bell" is established as a topic. Subsequent utterances provide one or more comments about the topic so introduced. In example 9, child A comments about the bell "its mommys," and so on. Example 9 also illustrates the recursive nature of topic-comment sequences in conversational discourse. A comment to previous topic may provide topics for future comments and so on. For example, the utterance "was mommys alarm clock" is a comment on the specified topic "bell." However, child B focussed on part of the utterance, the words "alarm clock," and this in turn served as a topic for A's next utterance "yeah/ goes ding dong/ ding dong/."

If we go back to our original question "In what way is x-utterance repetition progressive with respect to language development?" we see that it plays a major role in the child's ability to structure topic-comment sequences. The repetition establishes that both interlocutors "know" in some sense certain information. Once repeated, this information becomes "old information" for both of them. The importance of isolating topics in this way can not be overstated. It would be impossible to understand and evaluate any proposition in the language without first identifying the topic about which the proposition is being made. Presenting information for topicalization is a problem which is by no means limited to children. Adults as well experience difficulty in introducing new topics, and often carry out this operation in a two-step manner as described for the child. Children, however, communicate in this manner as a matter of course at a certain state of their development.

Information which has been established as old information through repetition then becomes eligible for future commenting. Thus far, I have discussed only those cases in which an initial speaker produced the comment; that is, where A introduced the information, B repeated, and A commented. However, once established, the topic is open to comment by either party. Thus, it is frequently the case that B will repeat a portion of A's utterance and in a subsequent utterance provide a comment himself.

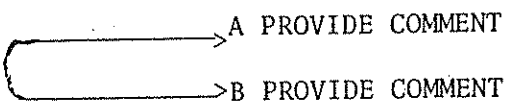
Example 10:

Child A:  
oh/ I got feathers/

Child B:  
-got feathers/ got feathers/ baby one/  
one/ feathers one/ big one/ big one/

In this example, B focuses on part of A's utterance and treats it as a topic of his own subsequent utterances. He takes A's utterance and builds on it. (See also Clark 1974).

In summary, repetition establishes topic candidates. Once established, it is appropriate for either party to offer comment on that topic.

UTTERANCE + REPETITION----->TOPIC CANDIDATE 

### III. Conclusion

This account gives some insight into the many roles repetition plays in conversational discourse. I have used child-child speech interaction to bring these roles out, but it is clear that child-adult discourse evidences such behaviors as well. The developmental literature is filled with dialogues in which a child uses repetition to express agreement, disapproval, surprise, to question or simply to evidence attentiveness. Further, it is often the case that adult and child rely on repetition to secure topics for further comment. A child may repeat part of an adult's utterance and then provide a comment in subsequent utterances. Or, the adult may introduce a referent, wait for a repetition by the child, and provide further information once mutual attentiveness is secured.

Pretheoretical judgments about what children do in repeating adult utterances have obscured important dimensions of the child's linguistic competence. Because of this, the role of repetition in language development has been insufficiently handled. Taking a broader pragmatic perspective, we see that through repetition a child learns about speech acts, speech act pairs ("adjacency pairs") and topic-comment constructions. These are notions that underlie the dynamics of discourse and ultimately affect the structuring of sentences. For example, the topic-comment distinction will be the basis of the subject-predicate distinction in adult syntax. Eventually, the distinction will be codified through sentence position, case marking, verb agreement and the like. Thus, we see the child's acquisition of syntax as derivative of the more direct goal of learning social acts.



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