

IN DEFENCE OF REPETITION ¹

By

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It seems that most learners of English have a morbid fear of repeating words in creative writing and regard this repetition as the greatest sin against the rules of good style. Repetition is not always bad, for Rudolf Flesch ⁽²⁾ cites the following passage:

Clifton Fadiman, who has written some of the best essays on wine and food once noted that if a cheese was well and truly made, there was for the dedicated cheese lover, no such thing as a bad cheese. The cheese might be disappointing : it might be dull, naive or oversophisticated, but it remained cheese "milk's leap toward immortality". and then asks : Did the repetition of the word *cheese* bother you ?

I can assure the writer that the repetition of contextual lexical items is necessary. The frequency of these words is due to the subject-matter rather than to any deep-rooted stylistic or psychological tendency. Spitzer has pointed out that the high frequency of terms like *love, heat, soul* or *god* in poetry is hardly more surprising than that of *car* in a report on motor racing or that of penicillin in a medical journal. ⁽³⁾

Writers who avoid the repetition of such key-words will not fare better because they will in their turn be guilty of another vice: elegance variation. To Sir Arthur Quiller Quoch, this vice is not due to laziness, but to timidity which is even worse. He goes on to relate the story of an under graduate student who, in the course of writing a term-paper on Lord Byron, used the following avatars :(4)

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the joint seminar of University College, Cardiff and the Institute of Science and Technology in November, 1974. I am grateful to Dr. G. Thomas and Mr. D. Y. Young for their helpful comments.

(2) R. Flesch, *The ABC of Style*, Harper and Row, 1964.

(3) Quoted by "Stephen Ullmann," *Style and personality, A Review of English Literature* VI (1965), pp. 21-31.

(4) A. Quiller-Quoch, *On the Art of Writing*, C. U. P., 1925, P 82.

That great but unequal poet.

- the gloomy master of Newstead
- this arch-rebel
- the author of Childe Harold
- the apôstle of scan
- the meteoric darling of society
- the ex-Harrovia, but abnormally sensitive of his clubfoot
- the martyr of Missolonghi
- the pageant monger of a bleeding heart

You can imagine what our writer on cheese would have said if he followed the good example of this Oxonian essayist!

I am not, however, concerned with this type of repetition, but it is important to refer to the categories of repetition established by the Fowlers in *The king's English* where we have two categories. The first category is that of rhetorical or significant repetition which is a valuable element in modern styl; This rhetorical repetition is attributed to one of two motives: impressiveness and the business-like one of lucidity; the latter is far likely to seem justifiable in the reader's eyes. The second category is that of careless repetition where it proves only that the writer did not read over what he had written. Most of the examples illustrating careless repetition were taken from *The Times*.¹

The type of repetition that I intend to deal with is called *polypototon* which is defined as "an example of less regular repetition, and is the use of a word in different grammatical forms."² Thus, *polypototon* is a rhetorical figure consisting in the repetition of a word in different cases or inflexions in the same sentence. This kind of repetition became popular in the 1960's. David Frost, the broadcaster, can be regarded as a trend-setter in this respect especially in his interviews on British and American television.³

The Fowlers would not approve of this kind of repetition, but their approach to repetition on the whole is not sympathetic. They are adamant that even when repetition is a part of the writer's original plan, consideration is necessary before it is allowed to pass. They are of the opinion that repetition is more or less abnormal and they add that whatever is abnormal may be objectionable in a single instance, and is likely to become so if it occurs frequently. Again,

1. H. W. Fowler and F. W. Fowler, *The king's English*, O. Y. P., 1906.
 2. C. T. Onions (ed.), *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, O. U. P., 1932.
 3. Dr. D. T. Crawford, University College, Cardiff, personal communication

this type of repetition has been tarred by the same brush by Lionel Ruby in his paper on ambiguity in 1962. He calls in equivocation and stresses that it should be avoided in our discussions because a word, Ruby believes, should be used in the same sense throughout a unit of discourse. He also adds that if we do not use our words consistently there can be no communication or reasoning.

This is a recipe for people who want to pass into oblivion, but it should be clear from the very beginning that I am not again to such ideals of communication as clarity, simplicity and precision. The point that I want to make is that we should not be dogmatic in our approach to repetition because it is a feature to be encountered in the writings of well-known authors like Macaulay and Dickens the linguist as Professor Quirk calls him because of his dexterity in the use of the 'appropriate language'.¹ N D.H.Lawrence appears to support my line of thought when he says in his preface to the American edition of *Women in Love* (1920) :

Fault is often found with the continual, slightly modified repetition. The only answer is that it is natural to the author, and that every natural crisis in emotion or passion or understanding comes from this pulsing, frictional to-and from which works up to culmination.

This slightly modified repetition is important because it is several ends ; some of which are :

It infuses some wit and humour into the communication process. It is one thing to devise mathematical models of communication theory, but face-to-face communication calls for some humour. We can achieve our ends by expressing our thoughts in a lighthearted manner. Humour has a greater effect than down-to-earth communication, for it is known that Cervantes used a smile to poke fun at pretentious chivlary in Spain. Thus, when Benjamin Franklin wants to impress upon his countrymen that they should unite to face their common enemy he says :

If we don't hang together, we'll hang separately. Franklin makes good use of the resources of the English language to drive the idea home that disunity would be fatal.

In a like - manner, you can silence a colleague in the course of a discussion by saying :

What you say is sound, nothing but sound. This retort or pun would be more effective in discussions where feelings and emotions are used to judge issues.

1. Quoted by M. Gregory, "Old Baily speech in *A Tale of Two Cities*," *A Review of English Literature* VI (1965), pp.42-55.

During the election campaign of 1974, the Liberal spokesman on economic affairs, Mr. John Pardoe, said while commenting on Mrs. Thatcher's proposal for reducing the mortgage rate to 9½ %:

What Mrs. Thatcher promises to do by Christmas, and it is

a christmasy thing, will not help the poor. We find Mr. Pardoe dismissing the whole thing by using the adjective christmasy which implies : This lady does not know much about economics and her suggestions should not be taken seriously. These measures are not sedatives, but the fantasies of someone, so forget about these proposals which are made in a holiday mood.

Secondly, this type of repetition creates more cohesion within the group. In an ordinary conversation, it seems that when a word is introduced it is seized on until every possible meaning is squeezed out of it. On the other hand, Wendall Johnson argues that we do not listen carefully to what others say, but we are interested in the cadences of our own voice-¹ I am inclined to agree with him because I have a feeling that none but the hard of hearing try to listen carefully. The Indian proverb "we are all gurus and nobody is willing to learn sums up this situation;

The following situation clarifies the meaning of group cohesion. Alastair Burnett, who answers a question on whether the programme "Any Questions" should be broadcast on Good Friday, winds up by saying :

This is the way in which work and what used to be a serious religious festival are mixed up and I'm afraid I'm one of those who are mixed up too.

(Notice the two uses of *mixed up*: once as a phrasal verb and then as an adjective to underline the speaker's inability to pass the final word in this controversy.)

Marghnetta Laski, who sat on the same panel, answers him, "I'm not mixed up because as a Jew and as a theist Good Friday to me is for those of you who are Christians."

The use of the adjective mixed up by Miss Laski is an apt one here. The reader is aware of the fact that English, of all languages is rich in synonyms and, consequently, the use of the adjective *mixed up* is far from being compulsory. She could have used any of the hundred and one adjectives meaning confused or bewildered, but she decides on *mixed up* which implies :

i) Look Alastair, I'm listening carefully to you, and

ii) I am using the same adjective you have just introduced. This is a sort of compliment among people taking part in a debate or discussion which could mean that they may differ but they have something in common.

(1) W. Johnson, *The Verbal Man*.

It could be argued that I am reading too much into this answer but careful listening to spoken English will hopefully confirm my observation,

Another example is attested in Lord Reuben's answer to the question:

Is there such a thing as spring fever? If so, how are members of the team affected by it?

Lord Reuben says :

"Oh, definitely. I have an enormous garden and you should see when the spring comes round. The first thing I do is I try to spring away from it as far as I possibly can".

The use of *to spring away from* in lieu of *postpone, defer, delay, run away from* etc. supports my viewpoint that this kind of repetition makes for more cohesion in group discussions and brings me to the third point, viz., repetition helps to enrich language by putting one and the same item into different uses in order to develop ideas. In other words, it seems that the persistence of lexical items is conducive to innovation :

spring fever——spring——spring away from. In fact, the phrasal - prepositional combination *spring away from* is all the more effective if we remember that Lord Reuben is an old man.

The following examples illustrate the same tendency :

a) The Iron Curtain is also a semantic curtain, meanings as well as people find it difficult to pass. (Hjelmselev)

b) The Argentine boxer has difficulty in seeing and Conteh sees the world title. (Sportshight, B.B.C., T.V., 2nd October, 1974)

Another function of repetition, which is related in a way to group cohesion, is that of continuity. This is especially true of what may be called "cutain lines" at the end of programmes. The broadcaster or chairman of the panel takes his cue from the last speaker or item in order to strike a note of 'continuity in finality'. Thus, Brain Redhead ends his programme "A Word in Edgeways" one night in the following way :

And to be profound you have to go deeper than the guy before you, but we have gone as deep as we can because we must stop ... and I will surface out in new profundity and start again next Saturday evening.

Sometimes the newscaster makes a comment and of the newsrec- on television. These newsreaders do not want to impress upon viewers that they are witty, but they want to give a feeling of continuity. In many cases, the weatherman takes the thread that agrees or disagrees with the newscaster before enlarging on the weather forecast. These comments may be taken

to signal a desire on the part of the newsreader to stress the fact that he is not just reading a certain assignment, but that he is a human being who is capable of reacting to the news items in the same way as his viewers.

From the utilitarian point of view, especially that of nonnative users of the language, this type of repetition may be useful in two ways :

- a) It could be said that this repetition reduces the vocabulary load of utterances, but this is a vexed problem which reminds us of the controversy whether idiomatic structures are easy for foreigners or not. ¹
- b) Such repetition provides foreigners with statements that can be easily committed to memory. J.R. Firth, for instance, sums up the difference between speech and writing by saying :

“However systematically you may talk, you do not talk systematically.” ²

The previous example underlines the fact that this type of association may be regarded as the result of association on the part of language users. Association, it is true, has acquired a nasty or an unsavoury reputation nowadays and G.I. Joe, the typical U.S. soldier during World War II may be responsible for this because he tended to associate everything with sex. There are, Clark believes, two main categories of rules which control the process of association : paradigmatic and syntagmatic. To put it simply, when the stimulus *tree* gives the response *flower* we have paradigmatic association, whereas when *tree* evokes *green* we have syntagmatic association. ³

Now the point that I want to make here is that when Firth wanted to bring the distinction between speech and writing into focus, he said : „However . . .”. The noun *systematics* seems to be associated with the adverb *systematically* in Firth’s mind. Again Firth was preoccupied with the systematic nature of language and this explains the repetition of the words.

Thus it could be argued that this type of repetition is natural and reflects the user’s occupation with a certain concept. Such preoccupation manifests itself in the natural process of slightly modified repetition. If this explanation holds water, then we can argue that there is a third category of association besides those paradigmatic and syntagmatic suggested by Clark. This third type of association may be called conceptual or catenative.

¹ For further details, see the introduction of *The Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* vol. 1, edited by A.P. Cowie and R. Mackin, O. U. P., 1975.

² J.R. Firth, Personality and language in society, “*The Sociological Review* 42 (1950), pp. 37—52.

³ H.H. Clark, Word association and linguistic theory in J. Lyons (ed.) *New Horizons in Linguistics*, Penguin Books, 1970, pp. 274—5.

In short, we should not dismiss repetition off hand, because repetition may be good or bad and each speech act should be judged on its own merits :

Judge prose by the scientific precision with which it transmits concepts, since most prose transmits feelings and attitudes, unstated assumptions and embarrassing implications, as well as concepts.

The previous discussion should have made it clear that repetition may be used in order to infuse fun, to impress, to create cohesion among groups and to ensure continuity. This type of repetition is regarded here as type of association - some people think that it has its roots in laziness - but how can we know what goes on inside the human mind whose footsteps are so light and fleeting !