

Repetition in Mandarin Chinese: An Exploration of Functions, Types, and Interactional Function

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doi:10.56397/JLCS.2025.02.09

Abstract

Repetition is a common feature in everyday spoken discourse and serves various communicative functions beyond simple reiteration. This study categorizes repetition into two main types based on its position in a turn: (1) repetition at the beginning of a turn, which combines with other elements to form a complete turn, and (2) repetition forming an independent turn, where the repeated content stands alone. The study employs conversation analysis (CA) to examine naturally occurring data from telephone conversations between family members, friends, and some institutional talk. Through a bottom-up approach, the study explores the dual functions of repetition in conversation.

The findings reveal that repetition serves several social and communicative functions, including linking turns, initiating corrections, expressing attitudes or emotions, and seeking explanations. For example, repetition at the beginning of a turn often facilitates the smooth continuation of a conversation, while repetition in an independent turn can initiate a correction or invite clarification. Additionally, repetition can signal the speaker's stance or emotional response to prior content, influencing the course of the interaction. This study highlights the complexity of repetition as a conversational tool and emphasizes the importance of context in interpreting its function. The research suggests that future studies should further investigate the diverse roles of repetition in communication, requiring comprehensive corpus data for deeper analysis.

Keywords: conversation analysis, repetition, interactional function, dual function

1. Introduction

Repetition frequently occurs in everyday spoken discourse. Based on the relationship between the speaker of the repetition and the original utterance, repetition can be categorized into self-repetition and other-repetition. Additionally, based on the relationship between the repeated content and the original content, repetition can be further classified into exact repetition and partial repetition. This study categorizes

instances of repetition observed in corpus analysis classes according to their position within a turn, distinguishing two main types:

- (1) Repetition occurring at the beginning of a turn, where it combines with other elements to form a complete turn.
- (2) Repetition forming an independent turn, where the repeated content stands alone as a full turn.

Building on this classification, the study

explores the various communicative functions that repetition serves in conversation.

This study employs conversation analysis as its research methodology, drawing on naturally occurring data contributed by analysts during corpus analysis classes. Through a bottom-up approach, it systematically identifies, compares, and analyzes instances of repetition and evaluative behavior involving “so” (“zheme”) that emerged in classroom discussions.

2. Research Methodology and Data Collection

2.1 Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is a research methodology pioneered in the 1970s in the United States by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. Fundamentally, it is considered a branch of ethnomethodology (Liu Yuntong, 2002).

Conversation analysis follows a bottom-up inductive and comparative approach, emphasizing the study of naturally occurring authentic discourse. A key characteristic of CA is its meticulous transcription of conversational details, as it upholds the principle that all analytical findings should emerge directly from the data (Wu Yaxin & Yu Guodong, 2017). In contrast to traditional scientific research methodologies that often rely on experiments and surveys, CA excludes such approaches. Moreover, authentic CA research avoids using scripted dialogues from television, films, or interview recordings, as these sources may compromise the authenticity and objectivity of interactional analysis. Consequently, the advancement of audio and video recording technology has been crucial to the development of CA—without recording equipment, there would be no conversation analysis.

CA does not focus on syntactic structures or semantic truth conditions; rather, it investigates the social actions that participants perform through interaction (Schegloff, 1996). Unlike other linguistic disciplines that treat certain categories as explanatory resources, CA treats them as objects of study. For instance, instead of using “gender” as a pre-established explanatory factor in conversation, CA examines how specific structures and components of interaction contribute to a speaker constructing themselves as female within the conversation.

In this study, in addition to adopting the three key analytical perspectives commonly used in

conversation analysis—social action, turn design, and sequential position—two additional approaches are employed to enhance the scientific rigor of the analysis. First, when examining the specific function of a structure within a given turn and sequential position, a comparative approach is used. This involves analyzing the impact of retaining versus removing the structure to determine its communicative function within that specific context. Second, the study takes the perspective of the interactants, focusing on how participants themselves recognize and interpret the social actions of others in conversation (Wu, 2022).

2.2 Data Collection and Transcription

Conversation analysis is a fine-grained study of naturally occurring authentic discourse. All data used in this study come from naturally occurring telephone recordings. The total duration of the recorded conversations is approximately 100 minutes. The dialogues primarily take place between family members and friends, with some instances of institutional talk. All transcriptions follow the Gail Jefferson (1984) transcription conventions to ensure accuracy and consistency in the analysis.

3. The Dual Functions of Repetition and Evaluative Behavior

3.1 Turn-Initial Repetition and Turn Continuation

Example (1) is an instance of institutional talk. In this conversation, Lu had successfully purchased a ticket home through an online platform but was unexpectedly dropped off at a bus station midway. Mei is a customer service representative from the platform. Given that the platform’s negligence left Lu stranded and unable to return home, it is understandable that Lu was feeling frustrated and upset.

(1) [OUC-LMQ_回不了家_0000-0202]

09 美: 那 ne 个, 咱们, 您>刚刚<说有个五点半的车, >这边的话<

10 让咱们上车了吗?

11 (.)

12 鹿: 没啊:, .hh 都没有车站<的人>来联系我,

13 我一个电话也没有接到, 刚才.

14 (1.8)

15 美: >没有接到电话<, 您,

16 那您之前说 ne 个, ((车鸣声))

17 说五点多>这边有车<过来,

18 这个车也没有来是吗?

- 19 (0.6) ((车鸣声))
 20 鹿: 我::, 现在是没, 没看见车:.
 21 (0.8)
 22 美: 现在没有看到车.
 23 (.)
 24 鹿: 啊::, [他,
 25 美: [额::

Since this is an institutional talk, it is purpose-driven. In our analysis of the naturally occurring discourse, we found that the repetition here serves more than just a repetitive function—it also fulfills other communicative purposes. From the context of the conversation in Example (1), we can see that the platform's severe negligence led to Lu's difficult situation.

By combining the background and the data, we can infer that the customer service representative Mei had two main objectives in making the call: first, to help Lu resolve the issue of not being able to get home, and second, to calm Lu's emotions. In line 12, Lu answers Mei's inquiry in line 10 with a simple "No" ("没啊"), which would be sufficient to fulfill the communicative function. However, Lu provides more information than necessary in line 12. For the platform, receiving a call comes before the arrival of the vehicle, so when Lu mentions that not only is there no vehicle, but also that no one answered the phone, this highlights the platform's negligence and expresses Lu's strong dissatisfaction.

Thus, in this instance, the information inquiry is necessary to address the problem, and emotional reassurance is equally important. Mei's repetition in line 15 does more than just repeat; it responds to the additional information Lu provided and helps link the upcoming conversation. This shows that Mei's repetition in line 15 not only repeats the information but also serves the communicative function of linking turns.

We can further analyze this by comparing with and without the repetition. If we remove the phrase "didn't receive a call" ("没有接到电话") from line 15, it only repeats the previous question, without addressing Lu's new information about not receiving the call. Clearly, this would be detrimental in an institutional talk context, where resolving the issue and calming the customer's emotions are key.

From this, we conclude that in Example (1), the

interlocutors used repetition to link turns and achieve effective communication, enhancing both the resolution of the issue and the emotional reassurance.

In Example (2), Lu and Ya had agreed to go swimming together at the swimming pool after class. However, after attending the class, Lu realizes that she forgot her swim goggles and needs Ya to find them in their dorm room and bring them to the swimming pool. In line 14, Lu repeats Ya's response from line 13 and continues the turn. Here, the repetition serves a turn-continuation function, as Lu not only reiterates Y's reply but also keeps the conversation going, showing how repetition helps maintain the flow of the interaction. This instance of repetition is part of the routine of turn-taking in casual conversation, helping to ensure clarity and mutual understanding.

(2) [OUC-ZHY_泳镜_0000-0243]

- 07 绿: [=你在哪呢?
 08 雅: 咋啦,
 09 绿: 在宿舍吗?
 10 雅: ° 我在° .
 11 绿: 不在, [你今天中午回去吗?
 12 雅: [我在.
 13 我在宿舍.
 14 绿: 你在宿舍. [那个啥, 我忘拿那个泳镜了=
 15 雅: [嗯,

In line 13, Ya's response is in reply to Lu's question in line 7, "你在哪呢?" ("Where are you?"). This question not only performs the social action of inquiry but, more importantly, sets the stage for the request that follows. The purpose of Lu's call is to ask Ya to help find her swim goggles. However, for Ya to fulfill this request, a key condition must be met: Ya must be in the dormitory. Therefore, Lu's inquiry about Ya's location is not aimed at gaining information about her whereabouts but rather at initiating the request.

In line 14, Lu repeats the crucial condition for making the request—"You're in the dorm" ("你在宿舍")—at the beginning of her turn. She then uses a difficulty-narrative to frame the request. The repetition in line 14 appears within the request sequence, specifically between the pre-request sequence and the request itself. It thus plays a key role in linking turns and ensuring the smooth progression of the

interaction.

In this case, the repetition not only reinforces the contextual condition needed for the request but also facilitates the continuity of the conversation. It serves as a conversational device that strengthens the logical connection between the initial inquiry and the subsequent request.

Thus, we can conclude that when repetition occurs at the beginning of a turn, and the turn does not end immediately after the repetition, it often functions as a linking device between turns. The repetition serves to connect the previous turn while also initiating a new turn, helping to maintain the continuity and flow of the conversation.

3.2 Repetition as an Independent Turn: Initiating a Correction

In some instances, repetition forms a standalone turn, where it not only repeats the previous content but also serves to initiate a correction. This type of repetition typically occurs when the speaker reconsiders or rephrases their prior statement, signaling an intention to rectify or clarify their previous utterance.

In such cases, the repetition functions as both a repetition and a correction-initiation, creating a smooth transition from the speaker's initial message to the corrected or clarified version. This allows for the recalibration of the conversation, helping to ensure that misunderstandings are addressed and the communication is more accurate.

In addition to serving the communicative function of linking turns, repetition, when expressed with an interrogative tone, often performs the social action of initiating a correction.

In this case, the repeated phrase or statement is not only a reiteration but also signals the speaker's intention to reassess or clarify the previous communication. The questioning tone indicates a shift in the speaker's stance, prompting either a correction or an invitation for the listener to provide additional clarification or verification, thus maintaining the interaction's accuracy and flow.

(3) [OUC-ZXW_那个宽带_0000-0303]

05 信: 电信的, 你宽带怎么了?

06 君: .hhh 呃:::(.) 他-. hh

07 刚才来装宽带的时候他说我电-

08 <那(ne)个>光纤,

09 可能有点问题:.

10 (0.6)

11 信: 光纤没问题. 你是不光猫断电了,

12 (0.8)

13 君: 光猫[断电?]

14 信: [你拍照片我看看.

15 对, 你拍个照片我看, 我, 我加,

16 我刚才加你微信, [我有你微信

17 君: [不是, 不是, 我还

18 宽, 宽带(.) 宽带还没装上,

19 (1.6)

In line 11, the response stating that there is no issue with the fiber-optic connection has already fulfilled the communicative function, making the follow-up question "Is it that the optical modem lost power?" ("你是不是光猫断电") unnecessary. However, the additional information provided goes beyond what is required because institutional talk is task-oriented—its primary goal is to solve problems. Thus, in line 11, the phrase "modem lost power" ("光猫断电") is a hypothesis about the potential cause of the broadband issue.

In line 13, the partial repetition serves as a way to initiate a correction. The repetition, spoken with an interrogative tone, signals that the speaker (in this case, Jun) has encountered a misunderstanding or is unsure about the issue. However, in response to Jun's correction initiation in line 13, Customer Service Representative Xin does not accept the correction but instead responds with "Yes" ("对"), confirming that the issue with the optical modem losing power is not the problem, effectively canceling the basis for the correction.

This interaction also provides evidence that Customer Service Representative Xin recognizes Jun's repetition as an attempt to initiate a correction. Furthermore, the interrogative repetition in line 13 performs a social action of resistance. We can find evidence of this resistance in the conversation: when Xin does not respond as Jun expected, Jun interrupts Xin in line 17, reflecting an attempt to reassert control over the conversation.

In summary, the repetition in line 13 functions not only as a means of initiating correction but also as a form of resistance, as Jun challenges the conversation's direction when their expectations are not met.

(4) [OUC-ZHY_泳镜_0000-0243]

71 绿: 诶, 不在那个橱子里吗?

72 不在那个最左边那 g 最左边上面

73 那个橱子里吗?

74 雅: 左边上边? 你不能放特别往里吧.

75 噢, %我看见了, 我靠, %=

76 绿: =是不是, [我就扔进去了, hehehe.

77 雅: 被袜子压住了 hehehe.

In Example (4), Lu uses a rhetorical question to suggest that her swim goggles should be in the upper left cupboard. In this instance, Lu possesses some knowledge about the location of the goggles. In line 74, Ya repeats “upper left,” indicating that Ya, after searching, has developed some doubts about the goggles being in that specific cupboard. However, after the repetition, Lu does not take the turn, and Ya continues with the conversation.

The phrase “You didn’t put them too far inside, right?” (“你不能放特别往里吧?”) is an attempt to cancel the initiation of correction. This occurs when a correction attempt by the other party fails, and the speaker seeks to maintain face in the interaction. We find evidence of Lu’s lack of response to Ya’s repetition in line 74. The question “Isn’t it?” (“是不是”) is a seeking of agreement, specifically asking Ya to confirm that the goggles should indeed be in the “upper left cupboard”. This search for agreement is prompted by Ya’s doubt, as revealed by the repetition in line 74, where Ya expresses disagreement with Lu’s initial suggestion.

From this, we can infer that Ya’s repetition in line 74, uttered in an interrogative tone, is actually an initiation of correction. There are two pieces of evidence to support this interpretation:

1) When Lu does not complete the correction, Ya attempts to cancel it.

2) After Ya finds the goggles, Lu uses “Isn’t it?” to seek confirmation from Ya.

Thus, the repetition in line 74, although it might seem like a simple inquiry, is actually a correction initiation, which sets the stage for further negotiation and clarification in the conversation.

Thus, we can conclude that when repetition appears as an independent turn in a conversation, it often reflects a misunderstanding or uncertainty regarding the repeated content. In such cases, repetition

typically functions as part of a conversation routine for initiating corrections by the other speaker. This indicates that repetition is not just a simple reiteration, but often a means to signal and address comprehension issues, prompting a potential clarification or correction in the interaction.

3.3 Repetition at the Beginning of a Turn: Demonstrating the Speaker’s Stance or Attitude

When repetition occurs at the beginning of a turn, it can serve not only as a mechanism for linking turns but also as a way for the speaker to express their stance or attitude. The act of repeating something at the start of a turn often signals the speaker’s emotional or evaluative response to the prior content. It can emphasize agreement, surprise, disbelief, or dissatisfaction, depending on the context and tone.

For example, a speaker might repeat a previous statement at the beginning of their turn to express agreement or disagreement, reinforcing their stance in relation to the ongoing conversation. The repetition in this position draws attention to the content, making it clear that the speaker is reacting to it in a specific way, thus shaping the conversational dynamics and revealing their personal perspective on the matter at hand.

(5) [OUC-ZHY-耽误唱歌_0000-0047]

10 雅: =哎:: 哟:: 我天, 咱们:: 在学校吃::?

11 还是(.) 那个(0.3)>去那再找地儿吃<?

12 (.)

13 木: >都行<=看你们饿不饿.

14 (.)

15 雅: >倒不是<很饿, 我就怕耽误唱歌\$的时间\$.

16 木: 耽误唱歌的时间? hehehe.

17 雅: 不怕? \$那不怕那就出去啊\$, hehehe.

In Example (5), Ya suggests in line 10 that they eat at school. In order to reduce the imposition of the suggestion, Ya provides a second option: eating out. The reason given for the suggestion is that eating at school would “delay singing time” (“耽误唱歌时间”). If Mu accepts the reason and the suggestion, the expected response would be a positive affirmation or an acceptance of the suggestion. However, instead of directly agreeing or disagreeing, Mu repeats Ya’s phrase “delay singing time” in the following turn, accompanied by laughter.

In this case, the repetition serves a different

communicative function. It is not an attempt to initiate a correction or to link turns, but rather a way for Mu to express their stance or attitude—likely indicating surprise or skepticism regarding the concern about delaying singing time.

We can find evidence for this interpretation in Ya's response. Ya perceives Mu's repetition as signaling that Mu either isn't worried about the potential delay in singing time or believes that eating out won't actually interfere with their singing plans. As a result, Ya cancels the original suggestion to eat at school.

Thus, the repetition in this instance functions as a means of expressing Mu's reaction to the suggestion, reflecting their attitude and ultimately influencing the course of the conversation.

(6) [OUC-ZHY_泳镜_0000-0243]

- 51 雅: 你: 想想还可能放哪啊=
- 52 绿: =就-还可能放在那一竖溜儿,
- 53 >就是<我放:e 乱七八糟的各种东西那儿,
- 54 就是, [那个竖的那一块儿,
- 55 雅: [嗯:
- 56 就是[靠近你的桌的那块儿-
- 57 雅: [竖着?
- 58 我看见了[这块儿, 有你的喷雾什么的.=
- 59 绿: [靠近
- 60 =噢:: 对, [在那吗? 如果不在那边儿-
- 61 雅: [可是, 怎么, 怎么一眼看不到呢?
- 62 绿: [第二层上头还有一层, 上面还有一层,
- 63 雅: [应该放在明显的地方吧.
- 64 上面, 还有一层,
- 65 绿: 嗯.
- 66 雅: 盒子里有没有.
- 67 绿: 没在盒子里, 没在盒子里头.
- 68 雅: 你会不会晾阳台上了?
- 69 (.)
- 70 绿: . hhh, <晾阳台上>? . hhh
- 71 雅: 我看一眼啊.
- 72 绿: 嗯. 你看看哈, 嗯.
- 73 雅: hehehe. \$好像也没有. \$
- 74 绿: 诶, 不在那个橱子里吗?
- 75 不在那个最左边那 g 最左边上面那个橱子里吗?

In Example (6), from the first half of the conversation, we can see that Ya has not found the swim goggles at the location Lu provided. As a result, Ya makes a speculation about where the goggles might be. In line 68, Ya suggests that the goggles might be on the balcony (“阳台上”). In response to Ya's question, “Could they be drying on the balcony?” (“会不会晾阳台上?”), Lu does not immediately answer with “yes” or “no”. Instead, after a 0.2-second pause in line 69, Lu takes two deep breaths and then repeats Ya's question with an interrogative tone in line 70.

The pause and the deep breaths suggest Lu's skepticism about the idea of the goggles being on the balcony. In line 74-75, Lu further expresses doubt in the form of a rhetorical question, suggesting that they still believe the goggles should be in the “upper left cupboard”.

From this, we can conclude that when a speaker repeats all or part of the previous speaker's content, it can serve various social functions, such as:

- 1) Linking turns—keeping the conversation flowing smoothly.
- 2) Initiating a correction—challenging or re-evaluating the previous statement.
- 3) Expressing the speaker's stance or attitude—in this case, Lu's skepticism about the suggestion of the goggles being on the balcony.

Therefore, repetition is a flexible tool in conversation, serving multiple communicative purposes depending on the context.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, language in everyday communication often performs additional communicative functions or social actions beyond its literal meaning. Repetition, as a common language behavior in daily interactions, frequently serve functions such as linking turns, initiating corrections. Future research should focus on thoroughly exploring the varied communicative functions of repetition, which would require the collection of extensive corpus data for analysis.

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