A cross-cultural view of repetitions and formulaic diction in spoken discourse

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Abstract

Taking its empirical point of departure in videorecordings of negotiation simulations conducted in Danish and English, this pilot study examines the ways in which verbal repetition and formulaic diction are employed in the two linguistic contexts. For analytical purposes a distinction is drawn between instances of intertextual repetition and intratextual repetition, and the article offers an overview of the types of phrases characteristic of either category. It is argued that intertextual repetitions – which are used extensively in the Danish sample – function as explicit evasion of potentially threatening acts, as a vehicle for non-commitment by evocation of common linguistic ground, whereas the instances of intra-textual repetition – which are more typical of the British data – serve as implicit evasion and as argument support.

Introduction

'Repetition is ... the hallmark of folk poetry' (Richmond 1972: 88) is a famous dictum in the field of oral literature, which is where repetition phenomena have been most ardently investigated. In the wake of the concern with repetition structures came the interest in *formulaic diction* in particular, and the study of formulas and formulaic phraseology has been an ongoing activity in a large number of fields since the pioneering work of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord, and the subsequent development of the oral–formulaic theory of improvisational composition (cf. Lord 1960; for a comprehensive bibliography, see Foley 1985).

In due course the analytic concern with formulaic diction also found its way into the area of *spoken discourse* (cf. for example, Coulmas 1979; Kuiper and Haggo 1984). As is always the case when a particular approach is applied to new areas and other genres, the study will need to be modified in various ways.[1]

Two particular points have attracted interest in relation to the transference of formula scholarship to this new field. On the one hand, there is a concern for characterizing the formula phrase within the theoretical framework of gen-