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Repetition, Again

Cross-Disciplinary Approaches to Practices and Forms of Repeating

We propose that repetition holds exciting new avenues for cross-disciplinary dialogue between linguistics, literary and narrative studies, cultural studies, and media studies. 'Repetition' as a phenomenon is located on a scale that ranges from micro-levels of linguistic expression to the macro-level 'grammar' of narratives, including novels, films, and other media. Repetition is a key component of meaning-making in spoken and written contexts and allows for a nuanced re-configuration and cross-fertilization of research into linguistic practices and narrative forms and functions. In order to explore this cross-disciplinary potential, we approach repetition through five conceptual frames: (1) tradition/transformation, (2) prediction, (3) seriality, (4) orality, and (5) social interaction. In exploring repetition through these touchpoints, we return time and again to what makes repetitions "meaningful re-enactments" (Brown) in dependence of context, and relating to questions of spatial and temporal scale.

> *Repetition is […] fundamental to the definition of all cultured objects: of the phoneme, of particular kinds of act, of chunks of ritual, art, music, and performance, all of which involve meaningful re-enactments in some sense.*
>
> (Brown 1999, 223)

1. Introduction

Repetition is one, if not *the*, basic figure of human action. In Deborah Tannen's (1987, 574) words, "repetition is a resource by which speakers create a discourse, a relationality, and a world." In a paper published posthumously in 2006, Reinhart Koselleck argued that structures of repetition permeate our experience as beings in the world, from the cycle of the seasons and birth and death to the regularity of events that happen in a diachronic trajectory. He singles out repetition in language as the one place in which all the other kinds of repetition are generated and recognized (4f.). While repetition phenomena have been researched in many guises in linguistics, literary studies, and media studies – as imitation, cohesion, reduplication, ritual, routinization, parallelism, motifs and topoi, retellings, serialization etc. – the respective research traditions remain in large part separated. In addition, the dynamics of repetition itself often remain implicit and underresearched. In literary and cultural studies, 'repetition' has not always been valued as a concept, in part due to its connotations as the old, the

non-original, the non-intellectual, the non-rational.[1] When associated with popular culture, the term repetition is associated with a lack of creativity; the repetition of avant-garde cultural artefacts, in contrast, tends to paradoxically be either glossed over or emphasized as an experimental method (see Kelleter 2012). Our article aims, among other things, to consolidate overlooked, diverse considerations undertaken by different scholars and theorists, some of which have been only sparingly addressed. We explore potentials of cross-fertilization between repetition-focussed research traditions across the humanities, with special attention on literary studies, cultural studies, and linguistics.[2] In doing so, we demonstrate that the analysis of repetition is especially suited to bridge the gap between the different fields and enable exciting cross-disciplinary research.

Our work is based on the following observations:

1. The production and perception conditions of repetition phenomena are context-specific and depend on cultural, social, and historical milieus. As we are going to elaborate on below, repetition requires a contextually and historically sensitive approach. For example, repetition in narrative practices of storytelling vary considerably with regard to modern and premodern times. In modernity and especially from the nineteenth century onward, repetition has become a mass-phenomenon in cultural productions. These were not or no longer reserved for small cultural elites but addressed a mass-market of consumers and thus often extended the highly localized production and reception contexts that were characteristic of communities in premodern times.

2. Identification of repetition in language is not objective but emerges from users' categorization of an item or structure as belonging to the same category as a previously produced item or structure. This recognition as 'the same' is facilitated by an appropriate context in the widest sense. We recognize that there is no objective way of stating whether or not a certain linguistic term, structure or communicative performance counts as a repetition of a previously produced one. In fact, the shift in time and possibly also space between the original or prior and the repeated means that perfect identity never holds, due to changes in history and context. It is human interactants who, through their recognition of something as repeated, assign a history and grant a semiotic role as tied back to prior occurrence(s).

3. Repetition is a highly effective means of communication confirming, creating and negotiating shared knowledge, stance taking, meaning, social connection, and identity. The functional realm fulfilled by repetition actions in language is vast, and we will review some of these functions in this paper. There is no simple way of summarizing what repetition does, as this depends largely on what exactly is repeated in what domain or context, and by and between whom. Beyond the vexed question of context, however, repetition is a hugely effective resource that is constantly tapped into across all kinds of language use and communication. Between individuals,

(approximate) repetition of another's linguistic features, as for example in dialectal accommodation, particularly allows for immediate mutual recognition through one's reference to a shared semiotic pool of indexicals.

4. Repetition phenomena exist along a spectrum of linguistic (and/or semiotic) complexity and abstraction, from the simple to the very complex, and from the concrete to the schematic. A simple repetition phenomenon includes the repeated use of single phonemes in alliterations. When believers repeat the Lord's Prayer or the Hail Mary in the praying of the rosary, they engage in a more complex, ritualized repetition. An idiom ('to kick the bucket') is an example of a once concrete linguistic description that makes sense because of its repeated use over time, whereas a literary motif (e.g., the *locus amoenus*) or a genre (e.g., the mock epic) is based on processes of repetition that lead to a more abstract and schematic rendering of meaning.

5. Repetition phenomena vary between those where repetition itself is semiotically constitutive, and those where it is not (and there may be grey areas). This fifth observation is a main starting point for this paper. We argue that there is a fundamental distinction between cases where repetition itself *makes* a semiotic sign and those where it does not. Repetition itself is constitutive, for example, in Indonesian plural formation, where *orang* means 'person' and *orang-orang* means 'people' or 'person' in the plural. If repetition here was not constitutive, *orang-orang* would just be translated as the repetition of the word *person*. Instead, the repetition of the noun creates a new linguistic sign: a plural formation. This distinction cross-cuts repetition phenomena through scales of size and abstraction. It also cross-cuts phenomena that are traditionally studied in linguistics in contrast to those traditionally researched in literature, media, and cultural studies. It thus opens up new avenues and potentials for reaching a novel and deeper understanding of repetition phenomena through interdisciplinary perspective-taking.

The form of the list is another example of how the abstract concept of 'repetition' is realized in a different discursive context. The list has a very long tradition especially in premodern literatures. It harks back to the earliest occurrences of writing (Veldhuis 2014) and gained special prominence due to Homer's Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad*, which laid the foundation for a long tradition of catalogues in epic poetry and beyond, through medieval and early modern writing to modern examples such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (von Contzen 2022, Barton et al. 2023). A list, however, is more than the enunciation of nouns (or verbs or adjectives or sentences etc.) in succession. The list as a whole is recognized as more than a concatenation of its parts (von Contzen 2017, 2020). As with Indonesian plural formation, repetition itself creates the semiotic sign of the list.

In other cases, the use of a word, sentence, motif, topos, etc. can be read as a repetition in the sense that this term or structure was used previously, but where the repetition itself does not make a new sign. Thus, I can recognize the use of a 3rd person singular marker in English (e.g., in *she write-s*) as the re-use, and thus repetition, of previous uses of this marker. I am aware of the plural formation *orang-orang* as a re-use of plural formation in Indonesian. I identify an

author's re-telling of the King Arthur myth as a repetition of previous (re-)tellings. I comprehend a list of trees as the repetition of previous lists of trees in previous works of literature or oral art. In all of these cases, however, an individual or token is recognized as belonging to a category or type. The repetition itself, however, does not create a new linguistic sign or literary type in itself.

Evidently, repetition is a basic and at the same time extremely productive and versatile means of meaning-making. We thus explore in this paper the phenomenon of repetition as a human *Grundfigur* through the lens of five concepts in order to find new points of connection as well as departure among repetition phenomena in language. We begin by exploring the tension between repetition as (1) *tradition* as opposed to as *transformation* in social and cultural contexts. We subsequently delve into more structural aspects of repetition phenomena in order to reach a clearer understanding of specific repetition phenomena, addressing the relation between (2) repetition and *prediction*, as well as between (3) repetition and *seriality*. We then return to social dimensions of repetition by shedding light on its privileged, while controversial association with (4) *orality*, and its fundamental roles in (5) *interaction* and the creation of (individual and communal) identities.

2. Repetition and Tradition/Transformation

The term *repetition* may at first invoke a sense of the old, established, or traditional (that is, when not semiotically constitutive); however, across disciplines, it has always also been conceived of as transformative and innovative. It is this tension between the traditional and the new which we choose as our first lens through which we explore repetition across literary studies, cultural and media studies, and linguistics.

In his famous 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot discusses the role of temporality in relation to how great poetry can come into existence. Discussing the tension that arises between an existing whole (of poetic invention) and new things (poems) added to it, he notes in passing that "novelty is better than repetition" (1980, 14). Eliot evidently writes in the spirit of the post-Romantic paradigm according to which great art is autonomous and 'new,' a paradigm which Roland Barthes (1975, 40) called "the erotics of the New." Barthes, however, was aware of what he designated as "precisely the opposite…: repetition itself creates bliss" (40). Discussing the desire for novelty from the Romantics onwards, Umberto Eco (1985, 161f.), too, acknowledges that premodern European cultures in particular followed an aesthetic of repetition. Classical and medieval literature was arguably extremely repetitive. New texts were not invented, that is, made up from scratch, but they were 'found' (in the original sense of *inventio*) among existing material. Symptomatically, the poet Sedulius, writing in the fifth century, stresses that his rewriting of the gospels "is not pure

repetition, but supplementing and recasting" (qtd. in Curtius 1953, 461). Premodern poets and authors had a range of methods at their disposal to ensure that they were not 'simply' or 'merely' repeating, but using existing material to create something new: among other techniques, classical and medieval handbooks of poetry and rhetoric stress the importance of addition and amplification – both of which work with repetitions. Medieval literature is brimming with repetitions. Most of these are either structural (repetitions of plot structures/elements or character constellations) or formal (from alliteration and anaphora to repetitions of syntactical structures; repetitions of words or phrases; formulae; lists). The power of repetitions is also particularly striking in cases of fairy tales and folk tales, many of which go back to premodern oral storytelling: the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index) provides an impressive list of shared motifs and topoi in folk literature across Europe.

In medieval studies in particular, the concept of 'retelling' (*Wiedererzählen*) has gained currency in recent decades. Based on the fundamental work by Frank J. Worstbrock (1999), medievalists such as Joachim Bumke and Ursula Peters (2005), Friedrich M. Dimpel (2013, 2015), Peter Glasner and Birgit Zacke (2020), Beate Kellner (2006), and Ludger Lieb (2005) have considered a broad range of textual phenomena that in one way or another re-work or re-write the literary material of their predecessors. In French scholarship, retellings have been discussed under the heading of 're-écriture' (e.g., Goullet 2005), whereas in English, the term *rewriting* is often used (e.g., Kelly 1999). There exists of course some overlap with the concepts of 'mouvance' (Zumthor 1972) and 'variance' (Cerquiglini 1989), which highlight the mobility and flexibility especially of vernacular medieval texts that are situated between oral and written traditions. Especially in the context of postcolonial studies, the storytelling practice of rewriting or "writing back" (following the title of Ashcroft et al.'s foundational *The Empire Writes Back* [1989]) challenges dominant colonial narratives and counters the silencing or marginalizing of formerly colonialized people. Examples are Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848) or Percival Everett's *James* (2024) as a retelling of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

In antiquity, writers were used to situating themselves – and in the course of reception, were then being situated – in the trajectory of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. The genre of the *cento*, for instance, consisted entirely of lines and words stitched together from a previous work (or works). The *longue durée* of the *imitation* / *aemulatio* distinction can still be seen in the field of Classical Reception Studies today, where repetition does not feature as a concept (and where scholars tend to privilege the source text over the revised/repeated text).

Repetition in form and theme long served to demonstrate mechanisms of cultural distinction between different cultural fields (see Kelleter 2012). From the twentieth century onwards repetition in art, music, performance, or literary texts associated with modernism was celebrated as elite avant-garde cultural production. For instance, Ulla Haselstein (2019) demonstrates how central "serial repetition," including that of speech rhythms, is to the writing of modernist

author Gertrude Stein. In postmodernism, repetition, along with practices of reusing and recycling, also gained prominence, primarily as highly experimental, avant-garde phenomena (see, e.g., Hutcheon 1988, McHale 1987, Moraru 2001), but also in the context of popular culture and across a wide range of media. In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon maintains that "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (7). What makes adaptations – that is, artworks such as books that are reused in other media, be it film, opera, or graphic novels – so attractive is "repetition with variation, […] the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (4). Quoting Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1985), in which Said argues that literature is "an order of repetition, not of originality – but an eccentric order of repetition, not one of sameness," Hutcheon adds: "So too is adaptation. Despite being temporally second, it is both an interpretive and a creative act; it is storytelling as both rereading and rerelating" (2006, 111).

From the perspective of linguistics, repetition as traditional as well as transformative is at the heart of the study of language variation and change, including in language acquisition research. The crucial insight here builds on the fact that tradition in language – language history – only exists in transformation, i.e. there is no history without variation. This presupposes the identification of a linguistic term or pattern as a variant of the same type, i.e., as repetition-with-variation (Weinreich et al. 1968). Tradition as repetition-with-variation extends to speech communities that are closed off due to, for example, extreme geographic remoteness, i.e., societies that can be called "traditional" in a strong sense, where language contact-derived innovation cannot account for change. Thus, Stephen C. Levinson (2022) describes how Yélî Dnye, a language spoken on Rossel Island, east of New Guinea, has over time undergone morphological change typical of isolation, accruing greater complexity and syntheticity over time.

3. Repetition and Prediction

As communication participants, whatever our interactional role, we all expect, and predict, what comes next. The traditional division between speaker and hearer, or author and reader, dissolves, in the sense that we all, irrespective of our specific role, engage in forward prediction. Our predictions are based on probabilistic modelling given previous experiences, and they save effort, as they guide interpretation of semantic, pragmatic and social meaning (i.e., 'Is this interaction harmonious or contrarian?', 'Do we like each other?', 'Are we like each other?', 'Was this meant as a question? Or as a rhetorical question?', etc.). Any deviation from what we predict feeds back into, and improves our predictions in a constant adaptive process (e.g., Pickering / Garrod 2004).

It appears characteristic for some repetition structures in language – especially those where repetition is semiotically constitutive – that they come with an inherent signal that a certain semantic or formal item or structure will be repeated,

with or without variation. Thus, list intonation already signals on the first item that it will be repeated, whether identically and/or or according to its type (e.g., grammatical category, semantic field, etc.). It is characterized by "the repetition of the chosen contour for at least some or even all of the list items. [...] Intonation is indeed one of the methodically used constitutive cues that makes the production and structuring of lists recognizable for recipients." (Selting 2007, 483)[3]

In some cases, syntactic or phrasal structures themselves come in pairs, such as in "either . . . or"- or "on the one hand, . . . on the other hand"-constructions, and the utterance of the first element lets us predict the other. On an interactional level, the return of greetings is highly expectable. A response does not need to be realized as a precise repetition of the same linguistic structure (e.g., 'Hi!' > 'Hi!'). However, the possibilities for linguistic variation are rather limited ('Hi, how are you?' > 'Good, how are you?'). In Conversation Analysis, greetings and their replies are conceived as pair sequences that exert strong conditional relevance, which could also be called expectability.[4] In all of these cases, the repetition itself is necessary to constitute the linguistic sign or type of interaction.

Moreover, in complex everyday interaction designs, such as assessments (e.g., claiming that something is good or bad) or praise, the response is strongly primed. Here, repetition is not only expected, but what is more, speakers can even predict whether slight changes in the repetition turn tend towards an upgrade or downgrade of the prior speech act (Auer / Lindström 2021, Pomerantz 1984). Whereas in the case of praise, the addressed speaker is expected to downgrade the claim (A: 'You really know how to cook spicy food.' B: 'Thank you, I cook spicy food everyday, though.'), in the case of the positive evaluation of yesterday's concert, on the contrary, we expect an upgrade of the evaluation (A: 'Yesterday's jazz concert was great!' B: 'It was really great!').

Repetitions can also show up as explicit manifestations of understanding. Within Conversation Analysis, such repetitions can be conceptualized as repair initiations by speaker B. Ratification follows in the form of A's repetition of the verbal structure that B foregrounded, as in this example:

> A: 'We were then still at the jazz house last night.'
>
> B: 'What, still at the Jazzhaus?'
>
> A: 'Yes, at the Jazzhaus . . . with Johannes and Cornelius.'

Similar examples are found with greetings or manifestations of understanding in mediation and psychotherapy (Knol et al. 2020).

Evidently, there are types of repetition that are expected and even obligatory in order to carry the intended meaning, as, for example, in requests for verification. Consider the following scenario: Speakers A and B are 'jogging mates' and tell their neighbour the details about their morning run. Speaker A says: 'We ran 6 miles today, right?' This request for verification is directed to speaker B, the jogging mate, who confirms by repeating the assertion under question: (nodding) '6 miles, yes.' In other cases, however, the repetition of a word, phrase, structure, intonation contour etc. is not obligatory or strongly expected, but adds or alters

information, if for example, an assertion by speaker A – 'We are a big family, see, I have 40 cousins' – is challenged by speaker B who cannot believe that and not only expresses his surprise, but adds an alternative account, supposing that Speaker A might have erroneously uttered 40 instead of 14: '40? You mean 14, right?' In fact, corpus-based approaches to information theory work with predictability in order to measure how informative a certain linguistic contribution is – in dependency of how much it deviates from the expected. A question that arises from these examples is whether expectation and prediction divide linguistic repetition events into two camps: one in which a repetition is necessary (which is then strongly primed), and one in which it is not necessary and therefore not (strongly) predicted.

In literary studies, prediction and expectation have traditionally been linked to readers' assumptions prior to the actual reading process: Peter J. Rabinowitz (1987, 2), for instance, stresses that reading a text is always already "limited by decisions made before the book is even begun." Robert Jauss's (1979) concept of 'horizons of expectations' also pertains to pre-reading contexts and readers' knowledge about, for example, a genre or a about a particular work. However, Rabinowitz acknowledges that readers make sense of texts by reacting to "aspects of noticeability" (1987, 53) – and one such rule of notice he singles out is repetition (of words, phrases, and plot elements):

> One of the most elementary rules is that it is reasonable to assume that repetitions will be continued until they are in some way blocked. Even very young readers get a sense of delight – of anticipation fulfilled – when the wolf phrases his request the same way ("Little pig, little pig, let me come in") for the third time. On a less literal level, the authorial audience expects the narrator's father in Sherwood Anderson's "Egg" to fail as an 'entertainer' in part because he has failed at everything else he has tried to do. (132)

Thus, similar to how prediction and expectation are used in spoken conversation, readers and writers, too, engage in conventions of repetitive forms that are linked to the action and plot and their development.

Structuralists such as Vladimir Propp (1968) famously posited the existence of certain general sequences of action, abstracted from individual stories: in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp stresses repetition as a driving force for the structural patterns (i.e., thirty-one functions of the fairy tale) he identifies. He closes by quoting Aleksander N. Veselovskij, who envisages that the study of literature will eventually recognize the pervasiveness of "the phenomena of schematism and repetition" across all literary production (qtd. in Propp 1968, 116).[5] For Gérard Genette (1980, 113), repetition is central in his treatment of what he calls "*narrative frequency*, that is, the relations of frequency (or, more simply, of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis" (italics in the original). Genette stresses that even if the same sentence is repeated three times, the three instances are not identical but different "solely by virtue of their co-presence and their succession" (114).

In more recent, cognitive-inspired approaches to how readers make sense of narrative texts (so called second-generation cognitive literary studies), scholars have pointed out the intertwining of cognition and embodiment as key aspects

of sense-making in reading processes. Predictive processing in relation to reading a novel "resembles a learning process of the probabilities of the narrative" (Kukkonen 2020, 149). This learning process is based on repetition: by repeatedly making (in feedback loops) inferences about the text and its progression. Whereas older approaches to reading strategies, such as Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (1978), stressed the interplay of "anticipation and retrospection" (281) as a primarily temporal and detached activity, second-generation cognitive scholars highlight the embodied dimension of reading as an additional and crucial feature that also informs the feedback loops of cognition (see Kukkonen 2014, drawing on Clark 2013, 2016). Making inferences about the unfolding of the action, plot events, or characters' behaviour and development is thus based on the capacity of the human mind to make sense of repetitions. A special case in this context concerns beginnings and endings, which involve predictions and expectations. How and when does a recipient understand that a list or series of repetitions has ended? Whether in speech or storytelling, repetition works with many signals that create expectations toward continuation or closure. Thus, our example of the list form involves, in speech, special intonational patterns that do not only specially mark a list's first element, but verbal and/or intonational and/or non-verbal cues also foreshadow the list's conclusion (Dankel and Satti 2019, Selting 2007).

4. Repetition and Seriality

The phenomenon of repetition is also of major relevance in seriality studies, which conceptually has much to offer for the study of repetition. After all serial storytelling prominently involves repetitions, including those of episodic plot patterns, overarching narratives, or characters. The case of iconic "serial figures" appearing across multiple media (and media transformations) such as Dracula, Spiderman, or Sherlock Holmes (Denson / Mayer 2017) is another example. While seriality studies (located mostly in media studies and cultural studies) has conceptualized seriality as the higher-level term, of which repetition is a part, repetition itself has not been in the focus of theoretical attention. Seriality and the serial are one (and a very important) context for theorizing repetition, but the two – seriality and repetition – are not congruous nor interchangeable, and it is the intricacies of their complex relationship that is worth investigating further.

Seriality studies consider how serial narrative forms have developed in close interaction with industrialized, commercial production since at least the nineteenth century. Special emphasis has been placed on the conceptualization of the textual affordances of serial storytelling, as well as its production and reception contexts.[6] The central theoretical impetus of seriality scholarship is the understanding that serial storytelling can never be reduced to a merely textual feature, a mere question of narration independent of reception or production

practices. Seriality is "a practice *of* popular culture, not a narrative formalism within it" (Kelleter 2017, 15; italics in the original). Hence, to study serial storytelling will necessarily involve studying the series as a conglomerate of practices of narration, production, and reception. Rather than accepting the traditional media studies division of production, reception, and narrative/content as separate, seriality research is interested in how these mutually condition each other as "coevolving forces" (Kelleter 2017, 24). Seriality scholars' analysis of reception practices asserts that, "as a storytelling format, seriality comes with a well-developed set of aesthetic practices and pleasures for audiences that help explain the continuing popularity of serial narratives" (Loock 2014, 5). Christine Hämmerling and Mirjam Nast (2017, 249) translate the German concept of *Alltagsintegration* into "quotidian integration" to describe "the habitual dimension of media reception, that is, symbolic and social follow-up practices at the level of everyday life" – practices that are greatly enhanced when enacted in the gaps between serial installments (episodes or issues).

Seriality also raises questions of beginnings or endings. Seriality scholarship faces challenges when confronted with "a text that, despite being obsessed with an elusive ideal of closure, is designed to continue endlessly" (Sulimma 2021, 7). The storytelling of serial artefacts, such as television shows, novel series, or comic books, balances two competing aspirations toward a desire for narrative closure and commercial continuation. As Frank Kelleter (2012, 12f.) highlights, the two competing demands only appear to constitute a paradox. Instead, serial storytelling delivers partial endings to satisfy the recipient's desire for an end to the story, while postponing any finite, irreversible conclusion that would cancel further instalments. When serial narratives do end, these endings are often perceived as economic or creative failures. For example, an abrupt cancellation and the consequence of a premature, make-shift ending (or no ending at all) has long been the norm of serial television production. But even when serial narration provides a carefully crafted conclusion to wrap up long-spanning narratives, these conclusions also "frequently produce disappointment and backlash when they inevitably fail to please everyone" (Mittell 2015, 322). Such extreme reactions may also arise from an end to repetition processes across different media and platforms. From disappointment to relief, disbelief, or satisfaction, the responses to the closing of a form characterized through repetition react to something seemingly counterintuitive occurring: an end to repetition. In all of the examples adduced here, across disciplines, closure appears to play a role when repetition itself is semiotically constitutive. For example, the series becomes a series through repetition, and it is as a series that closure, whether fulfilled or not, becomes desirable as well as feared.

Even though repetition is sometimes evoked as a synonym for seriality, analytically, they can be understood to occur at different scales and refer to different cultural practices. Repetition is both a much larger phenomenon than seriality – with the latter maybe even subsumed under it – and also a component or technique of seriality. In other words, serial storytelling balances repetition and in-

novation, described as one of the first observers by Eco (1985, 173) as the dialectic between "order and novelty" and "scheme and innovation." Koselleck (2006, 2) highlights the very same dialectic: without innovation, there would be no change and no surprises, yet without repetition, humankind would lose any sense of direction. Rather than pitting repetition against innovation, or assuming a binary of repetition vs. innovation, one could also make a case for a productive dynamic *within* repetition: repetition can enable innovation and change. However, it can also lead to stasis and block novelty. For Gilles Deleuze (1984), 'bare' repetition always already implies a difference. Similarly, repeated language use of a certain item or structure itself creates, by necessity, change: for example, in the semantic bleaching and phonetic erosion typical of grammaticalization (Bybee 2006). From a media studies perspective, Susana Tosca (2023, 2) highlights the pleasures to be found in repetition across digital and social media environments and platforms, while also addressing it as "a danger of monolithic uniformity, of partisan algorithms hiding divergent voices, anaesthetising us." Hence, the repetition of the familiar is part of the dynamic of seriality, and yet seriality, too, contributed to the larger scale phenomenon of repetition as a foundational principle of cultural production.

5. Repetition and Orality

Repetition looms large on several levels of research into so-called primary orality (Ong 1982), i.e., oral language in societies that do not use writing. In the absence of writing as a means to externalize thought, repetition of speech, i.e., ritualized speech, is the primary vessel of knowledge transmission (Goody 1975, Havelock 1963, Kelly 2015, Ong 1982). The binary of orality and literacy highlighted in earlier literature (most prominently in Ong 1982), however, has been critically analyzed in recent studies that situate themselves in decolonial and indigeneity discourses, arguing that there is a multiplicity of communicative channels (e.g., de Vries 2003, Teuton 2014).[7]

Not only entire discourses of ritualistic, formalized language are repeated in primary-oral societies, but also their structuring components, ranging from topoi and stereotypes to clichés and epithets. While this may be true of all language use, it is particularly true in traditional oral art as well as written texts that show strong roots in oral art, including genres such as the ancient epic, medieval romance, or the folk ballad. Although many of these texts have been preserved in written form, their origins are rooted in oral tradition, evidenced by various features linked to oral performance and transmission. The repetition of words, phrases, and whole passages is typical of an oral backdrop. In Classics, Albert B. Lord's (2000) and Milman Parry's (1928, 1930) work was fundamental in establishing the orality of the Homeric epics based on fieldwork in Yugoslavia on traditional epic singers (the so-called oral-formulaic theory).

Scholars have since developed their theory further and pointed out the nuanced forms and functions of repetitive techniques in ancient literature, especially the epic, but also other genres, such as the lyric (see Beck 2021). John Miles Foley and Justin Arft (2015, 84), for instance, distinguish between repetition – "to do something again, with the rhetorical force of the second and subsequent repetitions stemming from their imitation or echoing of the initial item" – and recurrence, which arises "idiomatically – not because of a specific prior occurrence, but rather because the element or pattern is itself associated with the compositional and artistic task and redolent with inherent, embedded meaning."[8] Lord and Parry's theory has been fruitfully applied to other oral genres as well: the folk ballad likewise relies on heavy phrasal and stanzaic repetition, as Flemming G. Andersen (1985) has demonstrated, distinguishing between different kinds of repetition, such as emphatic or rhythmic repetition. W. Edson Richmond (1972, 88) remarks that "repetition is not only the hallmark of folk poetry, it is the very sum and substance of its being."

In the medieval period, texts often seem to bear traces of orality even though we can assume a written origin ("fingierte Mündlichkeit"; see Erzgräber / Volk 1988, Schaefer 1996). Medieval romances in particular rely on formulae that evoke oral contexts ("listen up"; "you may hear"; addresses to the audience; see Ford 2006). Contexts of performance play a central role in analyzing and interpreting the function of such repetitions, which range from oral-aural effects to highlight aspects of the plot (see, e.g., Amodio 2020, Cohen / Twomey 2005, Vitz et al. 2005).

Repetition thus seems to be the central structuring principle of semantic and formal aspects in traditional oral art – albeit it is still less than clear whether the traditional universalist claims by, e.g., Jack Goody (1975), Marshall McLuhan (1964), Walter J. Ong (1982), and others hold up when empirically scrutinized. For example, Alan Rumsey (1999) discusses the prosaic and condensed, rather than "redundant and copious" (Ong 1982) style of central Australian myths (see also de Vries 2003, 2015). This diversity notwithstanding, parallelism (especially, couplet structure) has been described as the defining structuring device of oral art in numerous societies around the world.[9] There is variation with regard to the question of whether parallelism structures are primarily formal, primarily semantic, or both, and in the concrete stylistic devices used (Jakobson 1966), while the basic binary principle appears indeed ubiquitous.[10] The stylistic means of repetition – identical or with variation – are of course not restricted to primary-oral art, but shape all ritualized language, albeit often to a lesser degree. Thus, the same or similar stylistic means, from alliteration to synonymy, shape non-spontaneous, planned and "worked-over" (Chafe 1994) language also in non-oral modes such as rhetoric or academic writing. Nonetheless, it is also clear that oral traditions rely on repetition to a particularly great extent, to the point that oral tradition, poetic structure and parallelism have at times been seen as co-extensive (Jakobson 1966, 399).

An essentially untested, controversial claim revolves around Eric A. Havelock's (1963), Ong's (1982), and some other researchers' insistence that language

structures in oral art, with their heightened reliance on repetition (Ong's "redundant or copious" style) also seep into the everyday speech in primary-oral societies. With reference to early primary-oral Greek society, Havelock (1963, 134) diagnoses that "[t]he whole memory of a people was poetised, and this exercised a constant control over the ways in which they expressed themselves in casual speech." Irrespective of the role of writing in societies, some researchers have highlighted the prevalence of repetition in everyday conversation (Auer / Pfänder 2007, Chafe 1994, Koch / Oesterreicher 1994, Tannen 1987). In Paul Friedrich's (1986) words, conversations are "rough drafts for poetry" in that they use repetition to build social coherence, for interactional purposes, or to ensure understanding. In particular, onomatopoetic language, ideophones or child-direct speech are replete with lexemes that are inherently based on repetition structures, whether holistic (e.g., German *Mama*, *Papa*, *Wauwau*, etc.) or partial (*Mami, Kickeriki*, etc.) – that is, they involve morphological reduplication (Dingemanse 2015).

6. Repetition and Social Interaction

Repetition is a ubiquitous phenomenon in language use in everyday interactions with a significant role in the constitutions of individual and communal identities. It is discussed under a variety of labels and with regard to diverse domains, including recurrence, resonance, replication, re-uptake, reduplication, imitation, echolalia, and others (cf. Aitchison 1994, Pfänder / Couper-Kuhlen 2019, Tannen 1987).[11] In psycholinguistics, repetition plays an important role, for instance in 'priming,' where one's production or processing of a stimulus is subconsciously affected by a previously encountered stimulus. In corpus linguistics, 'persistence' describes the lasting effect of a stimulus on subsequent linguistic choices.

The central empirical observation is that speakers have a strong tendency to repeat prior speech – this is not only true for those cases where the repetition itself creates the linguistic sign or type, but also where it does not (see, e.g., Couper-Kuhlen 2020 for prosody, Hoey 2005 for lexemes, and Dreyer 2021 for idioms). Benedikt Szmrecsanyi (2006, 1) claims: "Language users are creatures of habit with a tendency to re-use morphosyntactic material that they have produced or heard before. In other words, linguistic patterns and tokens, once used, persist in discourse." The robustness of this effect is evident even when the preceding lexeme or grammatical construction is a low-frequency item, or when a female-identifying speaker continues the speech of a male-identifying interlocutor (Couper-Kuhlen 2020), echoing his (clearly lower) prosodic pitch contour. Repetition then can be regarded as a powerful accommodation strategy in interaction.

When it comes to face-to-face interaction, recent research has made significant advances. For example, as Shawn Warner-Garcia (2013) and Kawai Chui

(2014) for gesture repetition, and Giovanni Rossi (2020a, b) for verbal repetition, have pointed out, repetition can be an efficient way of negotiating contrastive stances. Across languages, speakers challenge their interlocutor's utterance by repeating it (near-)verbatim on the lexical level, though with a different prosodic contour (A: 'I'll have a BEER!' B: 'YOU'll have a beer? I thought you don't drink alcohol.'). Yet another way of challenging the interlocutor's epistemic and/or emotional stance is to repeat a prior utterance and only replace one lexeme, as in the following example: A: 'Do you like ice tea?' B: I LOVE ice tea.' By recycling, i.e., repeating prior utterances verbatim, next speakers can efficiently claim access to what has just been said (including to stances that have been taken). At the same time, in doing so, they gain epistemic entitlement to making a difference, i.e., to taking a divergent stance. Introducing divergence at one and only one point highlights the contrast. As the commonality in structure, prosody, or lexis remains, the one change on one of these levels makes the twist in joint meaning-making apparent (Jakobson / Pomorska 1983, 103, apud Tannen 1987, 583).

As we have seen, research into repetition patterns abounds across the humanities, and the above examples and brief sketches of the research landscapes only capture fractions of the traditional and ongoing interest into repetition phenomena across scales. As mentioned in the introduction, it is an understanding of repetition phenomena as only selectively semiotically constitutive that structures this vast domain in novel ways. At the same time, we see evidence in all of our examples for the claim that any repetition of a particular item or structure is in itself transformative. For example, whereas repetition-as-accommodation in talk-in-interaction is not necessarily intentional (and thus not consciously expected), repeating my interlocutors' speech melody, words or grammatical design can also be an intentional, i.e., conscious choice in displaying belonging and togetherness (Tannen 1987). Repetition, then, is part and parcel of joint meaning-making in everyday interaction.[12] In Conversational Analysis and Interactional Linguistics, repetition by a following speaker is attributed especially to two communicative functions: Securing understanding and confirming epistemic and/or emotional positioning. Rhetorical uses of repetition may thus have positive effects for the interaction, i.e., the display of or the negotiation of understanding and, if necessary, emotional involvement of the audience.

There is, however, a 'dark' side to such positive aspects of repetition: the echo chambers (defined as "clusters of users exposed to news or opinions in line with their previous beliefs" [Pratelli et al. 2023, 1]),[13] where a populist and propagandistic effect is achieved through frequent repetition of something non-factual or non-verifiable, but that people believe to be true, only because they have heard or read it often. Sigmund Freud (1982), too, pointed to a 'darker,' more problematic aspect of repetition: in contexts of repressed trauma, people reproduce and repeat, obsessively and yet unknowingly, certain acts of behaviour because they cannot otherwise deal with difficult parts of themselves.

In literary and cultural studies, there is a wide variety of concepts that heavily capitalize on practices of repetition, including adaptation, rewriting, history of

motifs (*Motivgeschichte*), topoi, and various forms of intertextuality. In all of these cases, repetition takes on an active, productive, and community-creating role. Besides, there is the important function of the repeated, for instance in cases of rewriting, to enable cultural remembrance: as an "act of cultural memory" (Bal 1999), repetition can also ensure that texts and their contents are transmitted and adapted to new and later contexts.

Similarly, repetition establishes connections between different positions, narrators, audiences, and activities that may be fleeting but create a sense of community or identity. Ritualized reception practices of literature, media, and popular culture provide examples of repetition's influence on the formation of identities of individuals and communities through connectivity. Benedict Anderson's (1985) influential notion of "imagined communities" describes how the repeated reading of newspapers, the collectivity and simultaneity of shared mass media consumption, creates the formation of collectives (such as "the nation" in his work): "the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors," described by Anderson as generically male, is "well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar" (35f.).

Foundational work in Gender Studies further demonstrates the relevance of repetition for social interactions and the formation of identities. Ushering in the performative turn in the humanities, Judith Butler (1998) understands gender as a cultural and social construction enacted and inscribed in bodies through processes of repetition. Butler describes gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" (519f.). In other words, "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Butler 2008 [1990], 191).

The recognition of repetition and variation can be a source of entertainment and pleasure (against boredom and cliché) but a refusal or failure to repeat correctly may also cause disruption. Gender Studies and Queer Studies following Butler's work have raised questions about the changing of norms through different forms of repetitions. For instance, Jack Halberstam (2005) finds repetition to be a postmodern queer method, exploring how queer feminist artists and critics emphasize "seriality, repetition, absurdity, and anomaly" in their work, especially in contrast to male-centric narrations of artistic progression and heteronormative conventions of inheritance and genealogy (122). However, while Gender Studies has clearly recognized the (transformative, productive) power of repetition, the focus of analysis to date has *not* been on repetition as the generator of meaning – but rather on the effects on actors and their gender performances.

7. Conclusion

As arguably a defining feature of "all cultured objects" (Brown 1999) we propose that *repetition* holds exciting new avenues for cross-disciplinary dialogue between linguistics, literary and narrative studies, cultural studies, and media studies. Our approach has been to begin a critical dialogue across the rich, but mostly separated research traditions in each of these disciplines. We found 'repetition' to be located on a scale that ranges from micro-levels of linguistic expression (e.g., Indonesian *orang* 'person' and *orang-orang* 'people') to the larger 'grammar' of narratives, including novels, films, TV series, and other media. Our cross-disciplinary exploration of the phenomenon started from the following observations: (1) repetition in language is inherently user-dependent. The repetition of an item or structure depends on speakers' classification of this element as an instance of the same category as an item or structure that was previously produced. (2) When it comes to repetition, there are different levels of linguistic and semiotic complexity, from simple to complex, and from concrete to schematic. (3) Repetition itself can, but does not need to, be semiotically constitutive. (4) Repetition has many social functions. It allows the speakers to confirm, create and negotiate not only shared knowledge, but also stances, meaning, social connection and identity.

In order to explore these cross-disciplinary potentials, we approached repetition through five conceptual frames: (1) *tradition/transformation*, (2) *prediction*, (3) *seriality*, (4) *orality*, and (5) *social interaction*. While some of these foreground spatio-temporal aspects of repetition (prediction, closure), others focus on the social dimensions of repetition phenomena, including the impact of production conditions (tradition/transformation, orality, and interaction). This diversity is intentional in that it brings out points of connection as well as points of departure for collaborative research into repetition phenomena in the humanities. Here, narrative theory, due to its long tradition of engaging with approaches and concepts from both linguistics and literary studies, can take on a leading role. In exploring repetition through these selected touchpoints, we return time and again to what makes repetition "meaningful re-enactments" (Brown 1999) in dependence of (spoken and written) context, and relating to questions of spatial and temporal scale.

As a key component of meaning-making in both spoken and written contexts, repetition allows for a nuanced re-configuration and cross-fertilization of research into linguistic practices and narrative forms and functions across a wide range of media. Our aim has not been to simply repeat previous scholars' works. Rather, we have assembled diverse research fields and traditions in a dialogue about what we conceive of as a driving force of language, and by extension, of cultural productions more generally – and which is perhaps, with Koselleck, even located also on the much larger, all-encompassing scale of human life and sociality. We envisage a history, both synchronic and diachronic, of repetition phenomena, and ultimately a theory of repetition. Repetition can be productive and

obstructive, constitutive and disruptive; it can enable and disable; frustrate and delight. We aim to re-write the story of repetition by taking a new interdisciplinary approach and thus uncover hitherto unrecognized fault lines – which means that we, too, become agents in a chain of repetitions in order to create something new.

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[1] Notable exceptions include, e.g., Miller 1982, Lobsien 1995, and Middeke 2009.
[2] While repetition also occurs in nature – e.g., in regular, often instinctive, animal behaviour, for instance –, we here restrict ourselves to language-based repetition phenomena.
[3] Linguistic-lexical repetition, by comparison, plays a subordinate role, because list elements are usually variable – although they often belong to the same category (e.g., men-women-children, blue-green-colorless; Selting 2007, 489; see also Dankel / Satti 2019).
[4] See Duranti (1997), Mondada / Sorjonen (2021), and Schegloff (1968).
[5] Likewise, Tzvetan Todorov, in his *Introduction to Poetics* (1981 [1973]), uses repetition, iteration, and opposition as key features of the notion of frequency. See also Brooker (2004), who has come up with seven basic plot structures that repeat themselves across literary texts.
[6] See Allen / van den Berg (2014), Brasch (2018), Kelleter (2012, 2014, 2017), Loock (2014), Stein / Wiele (2019), and Sulimma (2021).
[7] It is, however, widely accepted that oral art transmission – through repeated performances with variation (Ong 1982) – is central in societies that do not depend on writing, and plays a much more minor role in societies with writing (Kelly 2015).
[8] Note that a quite similar distinctions has recently been proposed in co-speech gesture studies (see, e.g., Ladewig 2024).
[9] See, e.g., Jakobson 1966 on Russian Folklore, Fox 1988 on Eastern Indonesian oral art, Gaenszle 2018 on Himalayan oral art, and Reinöhl et al. (subm.) on Igu, a shamanic language of the Northeast Indian-Tibetan borderlands.
[10] A particularly interesting type of parallelism can be found in traditional collaborative story-telling in some Australian Aboriginal societies, where participants co-narrate stories by taking turn in building referential expressions (Poff 2006).
[11] Repetitions in talk have been investigated for both the verbal (for an overview, see Brône / Zima 2014) and the non-verbal level (Chui 2014, Kimbara 2006, Warner-Garcia 2013, Yasui 2013).
[12] Another more conscious way in which repetition is encouraged in interaction occurs in communication trainings for conflict work such as mediation (see, e.g., Kupetz / Milan 2017). The communication trainers speak here of mirroring and see the great potential in the fact that the conflict parties finally feel understood by mediators. The technique of mirroring can be traced back to the psychotherapy research of Rogers (1952), who mentioned verbatim repetition as one way of active listening (for a recent study on the therapeutic effects of repetition, see Dreyer 2021). In the context of conflict resolution processes, mediators tend to reformulate emotional, evaluative statements of one conflict party if these are face-threatening for the other conflict party, in order to avoid further escalation and to promote mutual understanding. Vice versa, it is also possible for patients/clients to mirror statements made by therapists and coaches. The transition between repetition and reformulation is fluid. Verbatim repetitions may be more likely when describing facts or in individual work with patients/clients, while reformulations often serve a face-saving purpose.
[13] See also, in a similar vein, but for different social media, Gao et al. 2023.