

## **Echo utterances and epistemic knowledge transfer in German and Chinese oncological preoperative conversations**

When an interactant repeats their interlocutor's previous full or partial utterance word for word, this is known as an echo utterance. At first glance, such repetitions do not appear to provide any additional information. Nevertheless, in institutional conversational contexts, such as doctor-patient communications, such echo utterances are conspicuously frequent and have taken hold as a routinized pattern.

Repetition is an interdisciplinary phenomenon that has been investigated extensively in various fields, including anthropology, poetics, literary theory and particularly in linguistics (Norrick 1987; Johnstone 1994; Haiman 1997; Kim 2002; Tannen 1987, 2007; Huang 2010; Finkbeiner/Freywald 2018; Stevanovic/Hakulinen/Vatanen 2020). There is consensus in research carried out so far that such a repetition enables the following speaker to produce their contribution to the conversation more effectively and effortlessly. Such repetitions do not only serve to purely reproduce already existing information. They also help to jointly create cohesion on the textual level and can simultaneously fulfil a conflictual function on the ideational level (Johnstone 1994, p. 56). Other research has revealed that repetitions with a similar sentence structure and in a similar sequential position can be used for different social actions (Kim 2002).

Current linguistic research primarily concentrates on the analysis of repetitions in everyday interactions. A few studies have investigated repetition in a specific institutional context, regarding it as a communicative strategy that fulfils specific communicative purposes in different contexts, while others (Schegloff 1997; Betz et al. 2013) have analysed repetition from the perspective of its sequential placement, concentrating on its function as a repair. Research into the links between repetition and the dynamic transfer of epistemic knowledge is very rare, however, and is generally limited to just one language. This is where the present study comes in with its description and comparison of the pragmatic and interactional functions of echo utterances in German and Chinese oncological preoperative conversations. In this medical genre, which is characterized by high information density, echo utterances are not only considered as simple repetitions but also as a resource for transferring institutional epistemic knowledge. The research question focuses on how echo utterances serve as a sequentially anchored activity for the creation of intersubjectivity in relation to specific areas of knowledge and facilitate the conversation process in both German and Chinese oncological preoperative conversations. This also involves analysing similarities and differences in the use of echo utterances in the two languages.

In our study of echo utterances in Chinese and German oncological preoperative conversations, the focus is on the relation between epistemic knowledge levels and the functions of echo utterances. Labov/Fanshel (1977, p. 100) differentiate between A-, B-, AB-, O- and D-events in relation to shared knowledge, with the individual epistemic knowledge level of the speaker and recipient serving as a guide. Building on this, Heritage (2012) proposes the concepts of "K+ (more knowledgeable)" and "K- (less knowledgeable)", suggesting that interactants occupy different positions on an epistemic gradient. Heritage describes this as the careful flow of information by which participants drive the K+/K-

seesaw (Heritage 2012, p. 45). As Labov and Fanshel's classification is more specific, it will be used here for the analysis of echo utterances. Following Labov and Fanshel, the echo utterances are subdivided into three types, namely echo utterances in A-, B- and AB-events. An A-utterance relates to linguistic constructions in which speaker A makes use of an echo utterance and is found to be in an epistemically higher position than speaker B. Echo utterances in B-events (henceforth B-utterances) refer to constructions produced by a speaker A who has a lower level of epistemic knowledge than speaker B. In an AB-event (AB-utterance), the epistemic knowledge levels of both interlocutors are similar.

The results reveal that echo utterances in both the German and Chinese data corpora mainly meet the epistemic requirements of oncological preoperative conversations, fulfilling a specific function of knowledge transfer between doctors and patients in this context.

In the German corpus, A-utterances are used by doctors and patients alike. When having their medical history taken or making an appointment, for example, patients are considered to be interactants with epistemic authority. In contrast, echo utterances in A-events in the Chinese data corpus are only produced by doctors.

While echo utterances in the German dataset are found more frequently when there is a small epistemic difference between doctors and patients, in the Chinese dataset they appear in relation to both large and small epistemic differences. In the Chinese conversations, echo utterances serve a variety of question and answer actions (query, verification, reply to a purposefully broken off question, confirmation) while in the German dataset, the functions of echo utterances are more restricted. For example, there are no echo utterances to ask about a technical term. Furthermore, B-utterances in the Chinese preoperative conversions serve to verify the information communicated and to ask the previous speaker to take responsibility for the relevant messages. Such utterances usually trigger a correction sequence. In contrast, B-utterances in the German dataset are mostly used to check and elicit relevant information. The epistemic gap between doctors and patients is generally larger in the Chinese corpus than in the German corpus. It can also be seen that Chinese patients have a greater need for information.

In addition, there is a specific type of AB-utterance in the Chinese data corpus that not only signals reception but also confirms the speaker's certainty and consolidates their knowledge through formal parallels. Whether the content matches plays a subordinate role here.

Quite a few echo utterances in the analysed German data overlap with the utterances of the previous interactant while the Chinese echo utterances usually appear after a smooth change of speaker.

The interactional functions of echo utterances are closely related to the communicative genre. Other functions of echo utterances, such as humour, which are known from other studies, are not present in the oncological preoperative conversations analysed in our study. In this context, echo utterances primarily contribute to balancing the epistemic knowledge level between the interactants and to consolidating or promoting intersubjectivity. The results of this study are limited due to the small amount of data available. A

multimodal analysis of the video recordings would be a worthwhile task for future studies.

## References

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