

TEACHERS' SLIGHTLY VARIANT REPETITIONS OF PUPILS' UTTERANCES: A STUDY OF CONVERSATIONAL SEQUENCE AND INTONATION IN GREEK NURSERY CLASSROOMS

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Περίληψη

Το κείμενο αυτό εξετάζει την επανάληψη του εκφωνήματος του μαθητή από την εκπαιδευτικό σε ελληνικά νηπιαγωγεία, μέσα από την προσέγγιση της ανάλυσης συνομιλίας. Μελετώνται οι διαφορετικές λειτουργίες της επανάληψης σε φυσικές συνθήκες συνομιλίας, σε σχέση με τη συνομιλιακή αλληλουχία, τον επιτονισμό και το επιστημικό περιβάλλον στο οποίο αυτή εμφανίζεται. Το υλικό της ανάλυσης αποτελείται από 20 ώρες ηχογράφησης συζητήσεων νηπιαγωγού-μαθητών όπου σημειώθηκαν 875 περιπτώσεις επανάληψης. Για την κατανόηση μιας συνομιλιακής πρακτικής όπως η επανάληψη είναι απαραίτητο να μελετήσουμε τη θέση που αυτή κατέχει κάθε φορά μέσα στη συνομιλιακή αλληλουχία (Schegloff, 1997). Με την επανάληψη στο θεσμικό πλαίσιο αλληλεπίδρασης που εξετάζουμε και σύμφωνα με διαφοροποιήσεις επιτονισμού και επιστημικής θέσης, εκπαιδευτικός και μαθητές προσανατολίζονται σε 4 διακριτές λειτουργίες: α) θετική αξιολόγηση του προηγούμενου εκφωνήματος του μαθητή, β) έναρξη διόρθωσης, γ) έλεγχος κατανόησης και δ) δήλωση της λήψης του προηγούμενου εκφωνήματος.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά

ανάλυση συνομιλίας, γλωσσική αλληλεπίδραση, σχολική τάξη, επανάληψη, συνομιλιακή αλληλουχία, επιτονισμός, διόρθωση, επιστημική θέση.

1. Introduction

In this paper I examine cases where the teacher repeats, fully or partially, what the pupil was saying in the previous turn.¹ I will argue that these repetitions can do a variety of actions in classroom talk: positive assessment, correction initiation, understanding check or they can register receipt of the prior turn. This classification is possible by situating the teacher's repetitions within sequences of talk and by finding prosodic correlates of actions, concentrating on pitch. I will argue that particular intonation underlines an action in talk within a specific environment. However, Levinson (1983: 291) correctly warns that 'it is impossible to specify in advance what kinds of behavioural units carry major interactional acts (...) there is simply no form-to-force correlation'. He also argues that one utterance can perform more than one action at a time. For that reason I will attempt to specify what the teacher's repetitions are doing locally through a number of parameters such as sequential organisation, epistemic environment and intonation. Before I move on to the analysis of each case, I will briefly present the background of this research.

This study is theoretically and methodologically informed by the conversation analytic approach. Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) is the systematic analysis of naturally occurring talk, revealing members' interactional, social and practical accomplishments and their orientation towards meaningful, orderly communication within sequences of actions. The point

is how social activities are interactionally organized and how intersubjectivity is managed (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Variations of everyday conversation structures can be traced in institutional talk (Drew and Heritage, 1992) and more specifically in classroom settings (McHoul 1978; Mehan 1979), taking into consideration asymmetries of interaction among participants and implications stemming from the degree of pre-allocation of talk. For the scope of this study, conversational data were collected in the form of audio recordings from 11 different nursery classrooms in the area of Athens and Piraeus. Each classroom had an average number of 15 pupils and all teachers were females. A selection of 20 hours of teacher-pupil talk was made consisting of 10-15 minute discussion activities.²

The starting point of discussion in the field of prosody in conversation, a fairly new area within CA, is that there are prosodic aspects of speech that have interactional meaning. In previous linguistic study only the grammatical functions of prosody have been approached through constructed examples. However, categories and methodologies used in these studies are not appropriate for the study of naturally occurring talk. CA methodology shows how participants can use prosody as a resource for interactional management and meaning (Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 1996: 2-3).

Previous CA research has shed light on some actions of repetitions and their intonation. According to Schegloff (1997), repetitions in American English ordinary conversation can initiate repair, register receipt or target a next action. However, Schegloff's categories of actions and intonational correlations cannot be directly compared to findings in Greek nurseries, as they are, to some extent, language-specific and related to the particularities of the setting. Selting (1996) shows that it is not just sequence that plays a role in the utterance's actions and argues that prosody sometimes overrides other cues in talk-in-interaction. Especially in adult-child talk, prosodic characteristics play a crucial role (Tarplee, 1996). Drew (1981) points to different features in adults' utterances that may invite children's self-correction, among which, emphasis in repetition to locate an error in the child's previous turn. He further cautions that repetitions can do other interactional work, apart from inviting self-correction and he points out that careful sequential analysis is required to this direction (Drew, 1981: 253).

As far as classroom interaction is concerned, intonation is a basic communicative channel through which cued elicitation are given (Edwards and Mercer, 1987: 142). McHoul (1990: 370) draws attention to the difficulty in distinguishing what interactional work some of the teacher's utterances do because classroom settings don't have the same 'epistemic democracy' as everyday conversation. The most relevant CA study that specifically addresses prosody in the teacher's repetitions is that of Hellermann (2003) in two North American high school classrooms. He examines how the teacher's feedback is patterned in terms of pitch, rhythm and duration. According to Hellermann, the teacher's repetitions can do positive assessment (falling pitch contour), 'closing' of the teacher's questioning (low pitch level) or can display that the pupil's prior utterance was not incorrect but not complete either (slight rise in intonation contour).

Research in related fields, though different in scope, has identified repetitions in the classroom. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 37, 43) distinguish repetition as part of the 'accept' and 'evaluate'

act. Kondyli's (1990) first application of discourse analysis in the Greek classroom context notes the importance and multiple functions of repetition. The study of prosody in everyday Greek naturally occurring talk is limited; further research is required in order to shed light on the interactional processes of prosody. Papazachariou (1993) draws a relationship between intonation and semantics in one-word questions in a Northern Greek dialect, which can be extended to a wider scale.³

While this study builds on existing work, it is different because it examines freestanding repetitions, situates them within sequence in talk within the setting of nursery classroom, and addresses a set of parameters. An important starting question here is at what point repetitions occur in nurseries: after pupils' responses to teachers' questions and after pupils' self-selections. The teachers' repetitions appear after pupils' replies in the slot of feedback, within the basic classroom exchange structure Initiation-Response-Feedback IRF (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) or Initiation-Reply-Evaluation IRE (Mehan, 1979). Students of different stages and educational settings orient to the existence of feedback after their responses (see Hellerman, 2003). In the nursery classroom data there is another instance when teacher's follow up occurs: in cases of pupils' self-selections, i.e. when the latter proffer utterances that the teacher has not initiated.⁴

For each type of repetition I will analyse a representative example. Repetitions are marked with a horizontal arrow on the left of the transcript and their pitch is presented in a picture of fundamental frequency (Fo) below each analysis. The display of pitch was possible with the use of Praat phonetics software (PRAAT 4.0.20, © Paul Boersma and David Weenink). The general findings are also backed up by impressionistic hearings of the data, where the quality of recordings didn't allow digital processing. The transcription conventions are those introduced by Gail Jefferson (1989:193-6). Transcript extracts have two lines: the original Greek (in Latin, italicised characters) following the Collins dictionary phonetic symbols and an approximate English translation.

2. Positive Assessment

In 20 hours of nursery talk, there were 875 cases of repetitions of pupils' responses or self-selections. A large number of them, 380, were doing positive assessment work, i.e. the teacher was displaying positive evaluation of the pupil's prior utterance while the rest 495 cases covered all 3 other categories. Previous research in American high school classrooms agrees with this finding; it has shown that positive assessment covers the majority of repetitions in the research sample, characterized by falling pitch contour (Hellermann, 2003: 92).

The following example, with two instances of repetitions as positive assessments, is drawn from a classroom discussion about kites. The teacher nominates a pupil to answer what a kite is made of:

(1)

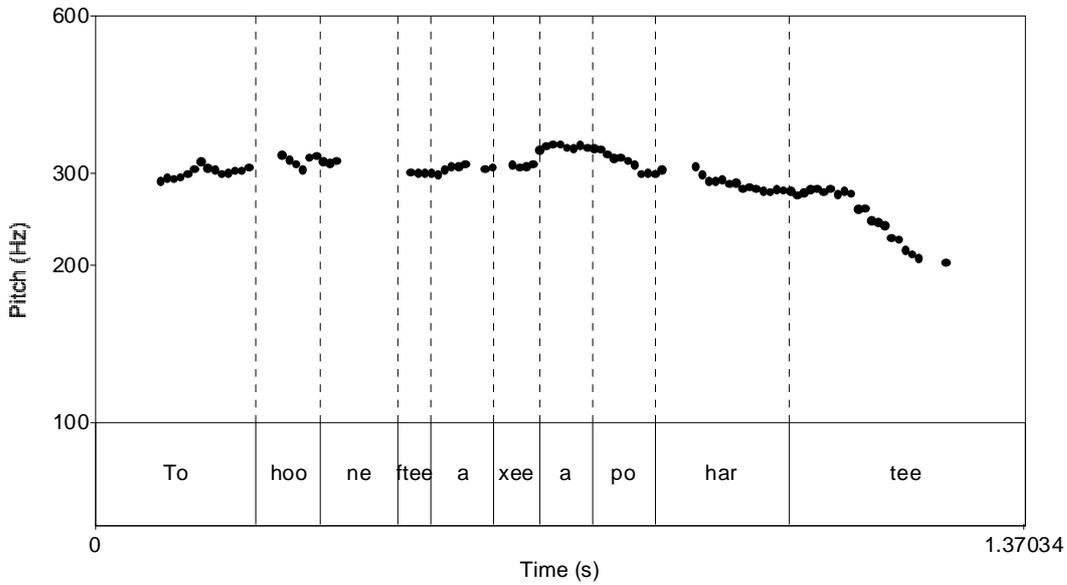
1. Teacher: *apo tee eene fteeagmenos, pes moo Polina*
what is it made of, tell me Polina
2. Giorgos: *apo plastiko*
of plastic
3. Polina: *apo - eene epo hartee. To fteeaxane apo hartee.*
of – it is made of paper. They made it of paper.
4. Teacher: → *to hoone fteeaxee apo har^htee. Ee apo?*
they have made it of paper. Or of
5. Giorgos: *ee apo plasteeko*
or of plastic
6. Teacher: → *ee apo hartee ee apo plasteeko*
of paper or of plastic
7. *ke poo to steereezoone*
and where do they support
8. *to hartee ee to plasteeko?*
the paper or the plastic

Following the teacher's question, two pupils proffer answers as to what kites are made of. The teacher subsequently repeats the answer of the initially nominated pupil, Polina, and not the other one, an application of the pre-allocation rule in classroom turn-taking (McHoul, 1978). All three speakers orient to the teacher's repetition as being positive assessment. The teacher's follow-up *Ee apo* displays that the repetition has established positive evaluation of the 'repeatable', through the disjunctive conjunction *ee* and invites other correct answers. Polina does not continue with another try, on the basis that she has answered correctly.

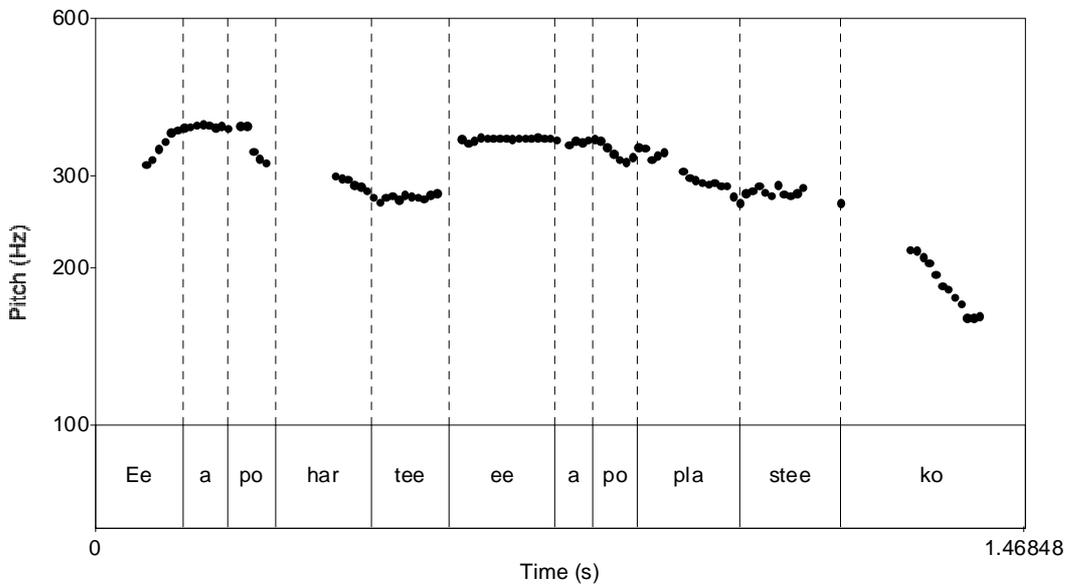
The previously disattended pupil provides the same answer, displaying the understanding that only Polina's answer has been positively evaluated. Again, there is a similar orientation to the teacher's second repetition (line 6) as positive assessment. Its turn design incorporates both pupils' prior utterances using disjunctive, and links both as having the same epistemic properties, i.e. that they are correct. The teacher continues with further questions and no pupil comes in to proffer alternative answers, all parties treating the quest for kite construction answer as successfully resolved.

This is a representative example of repetition as positive assessment, with a patterned combination of pitch contour, epistemic stance and sequential organisation. In the teacher's repetitions the pitch falls in turn-final position as the pitch pictures below show. Pitch falls lower than the onset level. Epistemically, the teacher initiates the sequence with a question which has exam properties – the answer to which she already knows (Searle, 1969). Therefore, she has access to the knowledge she asks pupils to display. Sequentially, a positive assessment follows a pupil's answer which is invited by the teacher's question. The sequence is complete in the end of the repetition with no further pupil's turn being allowed or invited.

Pitch Praat picture (1a)



Pitch Praat picture (1b)



Apart from the declarative, positive assessment function, the teacher's repetitions may have other operations, more crucial for socialization and the way knowledge is formed, to which I now turn.

3. Correction Initiation

A category that stood out in the analysis is where the teacher's repetitions are doing correction initiation. The term 'correction' is more limited and can be considered a sub-category of the more general 'repair'. Correction can occur in the environment of functional errors while repair

more broadly addresses issues of general common understanding among participants that they rectify (Macbeth, 2000).

Among repair strategies in the classroom, Seedhouse (1997: 556) distinguishes the repeat of the learner's error with a rising intonation in English classroom talk. This is also the case of correction of errors that Archakis (1994) presents as part of other-initiated self-repair in his analysis of classroom repair. He notes that the teacher repeats the problematic part of the pupil's utterance in 'questioning intonation' (Archakis, 1994: 681). Indeed, in the nursery context, repair appears in a certain type of intonation, close to Jefferson's (1972) 'questioning repeats'.

What follows is an extract from a discussion about Eskimo's sleighs. Here the teacher is asking the class who is pulling the sleighs, pointing at a photo of sleighs.⁵

(2)

1. Teacher: *pees ta sernee afta ta elkeethra?*
who pulls those sleighs?

2. Nikos: *o Ageeos Vaseelees*
Father Christmas

3. (Pupil): ()

4. Petros: *ta skeeleea*
the dogs

5. Nikos: *o Ageeos Vaseelees*
Father Christmas

6. Teacher: → *o Ageeos Vaseelees sernee to elkee /thro?*
Father Christmas pulls the sleigh

7. (Pupil): *ohee*
no

8. (Pupil): [*o*
n

9. Teacher: [*pae mprosta ke to ser /nee?*
[he goes to the front and he pulls it

10. (Pupil): *of::*
n((o))

11. (Pupil): [*ne*
yes

12. (Pupil): [*ohee*
no

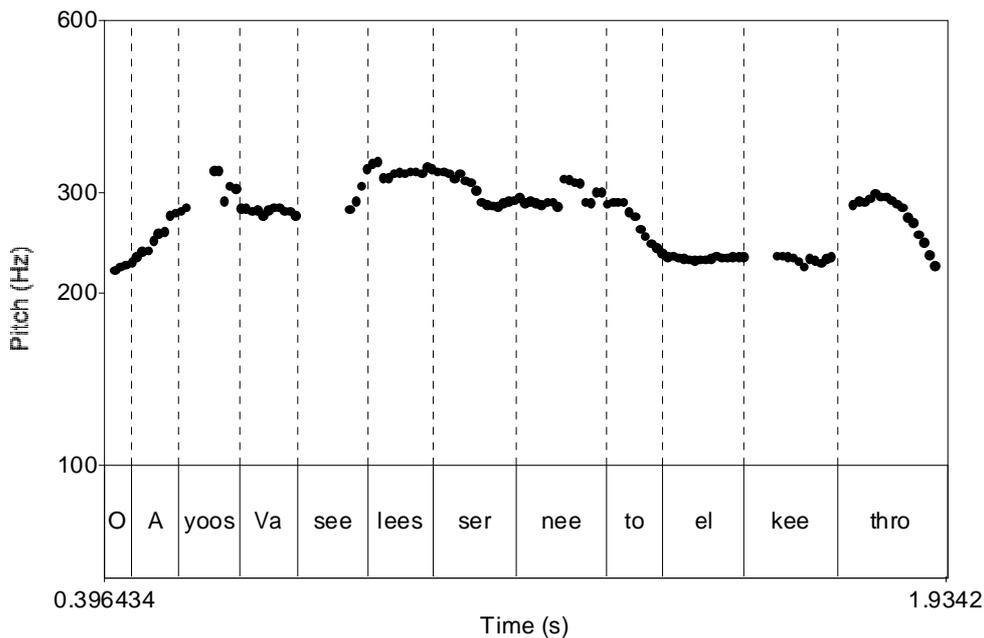
13. (Nikos): *ohee pae me to e::lkeethro*
no, he goes with the sleigh

The teacher's slightly variant repetition in line 6, brings together the two parts: the teacher's question and pupil's answer *o Ageeos Vaseeles*. This is a 'partial repeat of the trouble-source turn', which, according to CA literature, displays repair initiation (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977: 368). Indeed, the repetition is treated here as a display that the pupil's knowledge needs to be revisited.

The epistemic context is that the teacher is checking whether the pupil knows the answer and proceeds to correction initiation as soon as the correctable occurs. According to Koshik (2002), questions of this type convey an assertion of reverse polarity – they are Reverse Polarity Questions. An epistemic stance 'it is not Father Christmas who pulls the sleigh' is conveyed here. This questioning repeat invites a preferred negative answer aligning with the reverse polarity content 'Father Christmas doesn't pull the sleigh': Pupils align with a preferred 'no' answer in lines 7 and 8. Note also how the teacher rephrases her utterance in line 9, making the epistemic stance more explicit, therefore treating the pupil's answer as inadequate. Again, there is a strong alignment with the preferred structure. Even though the pupil's correction in line 13 is not the expected correct one, it proves that the pupil treats the teacher's turns as correction initiations.

The sequential organization is as follows: a) the teacher asks a question about something known to her (she knows the vocabulary in which to describe it), b) the pupil answers, c) the teacher repeats the pupils' prior utterance and this is followed by d) pupils' utterance(s), a negation of the previous one, with a turn-initial 'no'. The repetition as teacher's initiation of pupil's self-correction is performed in a rising and slightly falling turn final position. At that point the pitch is near the middle of the teacher's pitch range, around 210 Hz, almost at the same level of the intonation unit's onset (see Praat picture 2).

Pitch Praat picture 2



McHoul (1990) argues that correction initiation is slightly different from understanding checks. Indeed the current study shows that understanding checks have different sequential characteristics and pitch correlation as we will see in the following.

4. Understanding Check

Understanding checks can be considered a type of repair. Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977: 378) note that this is an action where the recipient of a turn checks his/ her understanding of it. However, the epistemic properties of understanding checks are much different from correction. McHoul (1990) observes that it is difficult to discern correction from understanding check, because the teacher doesn't generally ask questions to which she doesn't know the answers. Even when it occurs, this question may be heard as placing the problem in the pupil's prior utterance rather than in the teacher's actual understanding. But inside the nursery classroom, the teacher is faced with many problems of understanding. It would be impossible for the lesson to proceed if the teacher didn't do any clear understanding checks. In order to show how they differ from correction initiations, we need to examine the environment in which repetitions-as-understanding checks appear.

In this example teacher and pupils are talking about Kathari Deftera, the day in which Greeks traditionally fly kites. Sotiris is telling his own narrative on flying kites.

(3)

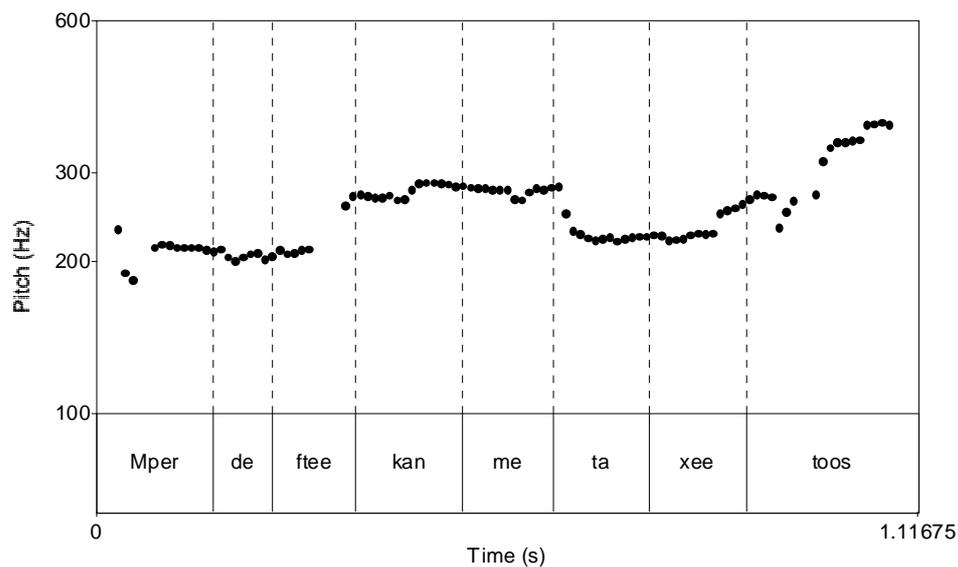
1. Sotiris: *keereea e-emees petaxame*
miss w we flew
2. *deeo hartaetoos*
two kites
3. Teacher: *deeo hartaetoos yatee deeo? (.)*
two kites why two? (.)
4. *ee meesee ton enan*
half ((of the people flew)) one
5. *ke ee meesee ton alon?*
and the other half ((flew)) the other?
6. Sotiris: *ohee petaxame deeo mazee,*
no we flew two at the same time
7. *mperdefteekane*
they got tangled up
8. Teacher: → *mperdefteekan metaxee t[oos?]*
they got tangled up the two of them
9. Sotiris: *[ne.]Ke meta-*
Yes.And then
10. Teacher: *ke petaxane,*
and they flew,

11. *den pesane kato?*
they didn't fall down?
12. Sotiris: *ohee pesane kato*
no they fell down
13. *ke o () ke petaxame ena ena*
and the () and we flew them one by one
14. Teacher: *a:: maleesta.*
a: I see.

Sotiris describes his experience – how he and his family flew two kites which got tangled up; the teacher's slightly variant repetition occurs in line 8. Participants attend to it as an understanding check as we see in the pupil's subsequent positive answer and his attempt to continue with his narration. It seems that the teacher requires a yes/ no answer and specific further clarification as the pupil's narration gets cut off by the teacher's following questions. The teacher's repetition is uttered in a rising intonation. The pitch is slightly rising in the second part of the turn and has a steep rise in the final part (picture 3).

Sequentially, the pupil is narrating his story when the teacher repeats the utterance that is unclear; the pupil replies to establish common understanding. Epistemically, the event of how the kites were exactly flying is unknown to the teacher because the pupil has been narrating his own 'unique' story. Here, repetition has elements of 'real' questions. The teacher requires clarification as to whether one option is right or wrong and there are no preference constraints on the pupil's answer: yes and no have equal weight, either confirming or rejecting the teacher's understanding, articulated in the repeatable.

Pitch Praat picture 3



5. Registering Receipt

The teacher's repetitions can register receipt of the pupil's prior utterance in a different intonation contour which tends to have 'middle' pitch with slight fall at times. In everyday American English conversation, Schegloff (1997: 527) has observed that a special type of repetition displays receipt of what the previous speaker said in downward or clause final intonation. No classroom talk research has identified this phenomenon. However, this type of repetition marks a recurring pattern in the recordings of nursery classrooms.

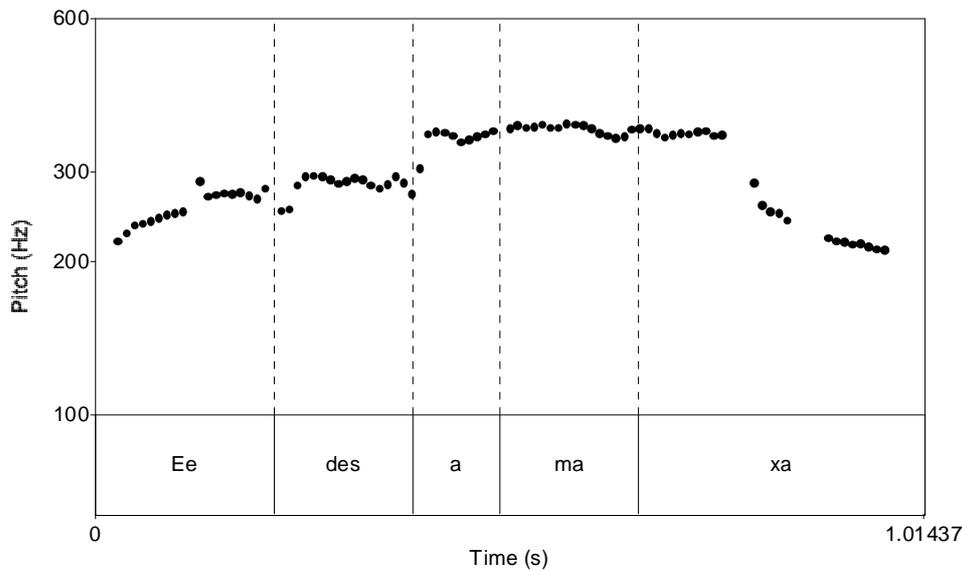
The next fragment of interaction occurs while the teacher is reading an extract from a book about the horses of a cart driver. This reading prompts the class for further discussion. Viki self-selects to narrate her own unique experience on carts:

(4)

- 1.Viki: *kapeea mera poo eeha pae me tee mama moo*
one day that I went to Zakynthos with my mum
2. *ste Zakeentho, eeame dee amaxa*
we had seen a cart
- 3.Teacher:→ *eedes ama↘xa:*
you saw a cart
- 4.Viki: *ee- eeda*
I-I saw
- 5.Teacher: *ena oreo alogo brosta e?*
a nice horse at the front eh
- 6.Viki: *ne. ee- eeda ()*
yes.I-I saw ()
7. *eehe [()*
it had ()
- 8.Teacher: *[o psomas.*
the baker

Viki narrates her story when the teacher's slightly variant repetition occurs in mid level and falls slightly in turn final position; it invites the pupil's positive response (line 4). The phenomenon recurs in a second adjacency pair, where the teacher's question receives a similar reply. The teacher's assessment in line 5 makes an agreement, *ee-eeda*, sequentially relevant (Pomerantz, 1984). This is the mechanism behind the minimal answer of the second pair, while in the first one, the device is repetition: it appears to register that the teacher has received the pupil's utterance rather than to invite elaborate answers from pupils. Viki attempts speaker continuation but she gets overlapped in mid-utterance by the teacher who introduces another topic. The teacher claims, keeps the floor and shifts to another topic according to her own agenda and the repetition points to that. She simply acknowledges the pupil's turn and holds the floor so as to direct the lesson herself.⁶

Pitch Praat picture 4



This case is epistemically similar to understanding checks as the teacher has limited access to pupil's information. However, in the previous case there was no constraint regarding the answer while here the repetition presupposes a positive response. In the next, final section, I will make more general comments on the aforementioned cases.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I have examined the interactional work in teacher's repetitions of pupils' prior utterances, a recurring pattern in the nursery classrooms under study. I have drawn correlations of actions in talk with specific pitch contours as strong possibilities and orientations of participants. Repetitions doing the action of positive assessment occurred in falling pitch, while correction initiation was uttered in high and then slightly falling intonation. Another group appeared as understanding checks with rising intonation in the turn-final position. Repetitions as registering receipts occurred in mid-level plateau with slight fall.

Sequentially, all four cases have minute differences: The positive assessment set of sequence completes itself with the teacher's repetition and doesn't allow further turns from the pupils' side, while in the other categories, this is required (correction initiation, understanding check) or optional (registering receipt). Positive assessment and correction initiation are typical classroom phenomena where the teacher initiates the IRF sequence with an exam question. In the other two cases, pupils' self-selections do the opening. The sequential organisation in registering receipt is close to that of understanding check as they invite minimal answers from pupils; but the pupil's utterance is not subject to clarification, so a subsequent pupil's turn does not necessarily occur.

The epistemic environment is crucial here for the distinction among similar categories: correction initiation and understanding checks may have similarities, as they are both types of repair. But in the latter case the teacher does not ‘test’ the pupil’s knowledge; the pupils are narrating their own ‘unique’ experience to which the teacher doesn’t have direct access. There is a similar difference between positive assessments and registering receipts.

At this point two issues deserve special attention. Firstly, we cannot argue that one parameter (e.g. pitch) is more important than the other. Meaning and actions in talk are a result of a multiplicity of factors. However, there are ‘trends’ in which specific context types of repetition co-occur with the aforementioned intonation contours. Secondly, a speaker’s utterance in naturally occurring talk is doing more than one thing at a time and we can only separate actions for analytical reasons. Apart from many clear-cut cases, there are some examples which appear to combine the properties of the aforementioned types of repetitions. The analytical distinction sheds light, among other things, on the two similar sets of repetitions - positive assessment and registering receipt, correction initiation and understanding check, that participants themselves don’t always discern.

The goal of this paper was to establish interaction patterns, not to discuss their implications in detail.⁷ It is important to note, however, how socialization and pedagogic practices take place through such small interaction fragments which differ so little at first glance. The teacher’s repetitions appear to provide clues as to what the ‘correct’ answer is and what interactional steps are further required. They socialize pupils into classroom pacing and shape knowledge as the lesson proceeds towards more constrained and narrow paths. For instance, the role of repetition as correction initiation and the pupils’ adherence to the preference structures of the questioning repeat directs and ‘constructs’ knowledge. This interaction tool is a proof of the teacher’s control over classroom talk and of the possibilities she has to convey meaning, epistemic position and evaluate, without ruling out possibilities of pupils’ resistance.

APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

[Point of overlap onset
]	Point in which an utterance terminates
=	Latching, indicate no gap between the two lines.
(0.0)	Elapsed time in silence by tenth of seconds
(.)	A tiny gap within or between utterances
<u>word</u>	Underscoring indicates stress, via pitch and/or amplitude
::	Prolongation of the immediately prior sound.
-	A dash indicates a cut-off
.	A period indicates a stopping fall in tone
,	A comma indicates a continuing intonation
?	A question mark indicates a rising intonation
↑↓	Marked shifts into higher or lower pitch
°	Relatively quieter than the surrounding talk

² Pupils were sitting in a semi-circle, the teacher facing them. Two tape recorders were on the floor, on the sides of the semi-circle.

³ Also, Tannen (e.g. 1987) looks at repetition in wider contexts and operations.

⁴ Although further discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, pupils' self-selections appear to be a recurring and often condoned phenomenon in Greek nursery classrooms, as I have pointed out and elaborate elsewhere (Vasilopoulou, 1999; in preparation).

⁵ The answers that the teacher considers as correct are 'dogs', 'deer' and 'reindeer' as they appear later on in the transcript.

⁶ The argument becomes stronger with analysis of registers of receipt that are not followed by pupils' turns at all.

⁷ An extensive discussion appears in Vasilopoulou (in preparation).

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