

# Repetition and Deletion in Literary Texts

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Every class in a school has a literary text as a part of its curriculum. This text generally contains poems, short stories, one-act plays or other narratives. Each of these pieces has a theme, i.e. the subject matter of the piece of writing, the central idea that pervades it. The guiding principle of a writer is to make every part of the writing move towards that central idea and to conform to it. He/she does this by trying to ensure that his/her work is presented as a cohesive whole and the subplots of the text take their proper place in that united whole.

While moving from one part of the composition to another, the writer may pause to think whether the subplots help him/her to carry out his/her purpose. Purpose here refers to the singleness of objective. The result of such an effort is cohesiveness, not the dull repetition of an idea without variation, nor the unity of isolation. It is the structural union or harmony of the different components of the text and guides the writer in selecting and using appropriate vocabulary. In the words of Sir Winston Churchill (1930: 211-212), "...sentences should follow one another in harmonious sequence, so the paragraphs must fit onto one another like the automatic couplings of railway carriages."

The writer selects a group of words or phrases (such as noun phrases, verb phrases, adjective phrases and adverb phrases) and carefully puts them into clauses. He/she then combines the clauses to form a simple, compound or complex sentence. The writer also decides whether to

use the normal word order or an inversion or other structural manipulations (transformations) to create the desired effect. To this end, an expression may be repeated or deleted to intensify the desired effect and maintain harmony within the text. In all of this, the main purpose is to make sure that the writing is cohesive. Structural connections (such as "and", "but", etc.) may be used to put a group of sentences together, not mechanically, but in a logical manner. Sentence connectors (such as "however", "therefore", "nevertheless", etc.), when used with accuracy and restraint, give a strong sense of cohesion to a paragraph. For instance, let us look at the closing lines in *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham (1961/1915):

1. He smiled and took her hand and pressed it. They got up and walked out of the gallery. They stood for a moment at the balustrade and looked at Trafalgar Square. Cabs and Omnibus hurried to and fro, and crowd passed, hastening in every direction, and the sun was shining. (p. 127)

The relaxed quality of the repeated use of the coordinator "and" in (1) gives the novel a peaceful end.

Let us now look at (2), which is structurally different from (1) but serves the same purpose, i.e. making the conclusion cohesive. This excerpt, taken from *The Razor's Edge*, another novel of W. Somerset Maugham (1944), is a conclusion summarizing the subplots of the novel.

2. For all the persons with whom I have been concerned got what they wanted; Elliott, social eminence; Isabel, an assured position backed by a substantial fortune in an active and cultured community; Grey, a steady and lucrative job with an office to go to from nine to six everyday; Suzanne Rouvier security; Sophia death and Larry happiness. (p. 209)

The deletion of the verb "got" from all the clauses, except the first, brings the novel to a crisp and precise end. What the repetition of "and" achieves in (1), the deletion of "got" accomplishes in (2). Both make the conclusion cohesive, though in different ways; the first ends in a relaxed atmosphere, whereas the second in a precise business like fashion.

Deletion (also called ellipses) and repetition are syntactic devices which act differently, even though in most cases, they serve the same purpose: they bring cohesion to the text by intensifying the intended effect.

Deletion is a syntactic process that involves the elimination of a word or phrase from a sentence, a clause from a compound or a complex sentence or a sentence from a paragraph. One may also delete a noun phrase from a coordinate sentence if it is identical with another expression in the same structure, as in (3b).

- 3a. John came back from office and he had a cup of coffee at home.

- 3b. John came back from office and - had a cup of coffee at home.

Another possibility is to eliminate an identical verb phrase from a coordinate structure, as in (4b).

- 4a. John had a cup of coffee and Bill too had a cup of coffee.

- 4b. John had a cup of coffee and Bill too.

- 4c. John had a cup of coffee and so had Bill.

In (4c), "so" is used in place of "have a cup of coffee". In (5b), the noun phrase as well as the

main verb of the verb phrase have been deleted, leaving only its complement behind.

- 5a. Criticism it is, biography it is not.

- 5b. Criticism it is, not biography.

The deletion of the subject and the main verb can be seen in (6) as well.

6. There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting

So we moved, and they in a formal pattern,

Along the empty alley, into the box circle...

(Eliot, T. S., 1971, p. 118)

The appositive expression "accept and accepting" are the post-deletion forms of "they were accepted as guests and were accepting of our hospitality". In the second line, the verb "moved" has been deleted after the subject noun phrase of the clause "They moved in a formal pattern". The expression "They moved" has been deleted from "they moved along the empty alley" and from "they moved into the box inside". These deletions make the remaining adverbial expressions parallel to one another.

Parallelism is a syntactic device which indicates correspondence between one phrase, line or verse and another. In the last two lines of (6), there is parallelism between the three adverbial phrases.

The parallelism in (7) piles up the adverbial phrases of the type "between X and Y":

7. Between the idea.

And the reality,

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the shadow.

(Eliot, T.S., 1971, p. 58)

The last line 'Falls the shadows' has been omitted from the sentence with the first adverbial phrase "between the idea and the reality". Most parallel constructions are created by deletion of the

recoverable constituents, either syntactically or contextually. However, because of the underlying logic of deletion, the reader can fill in the gap easily. The deletion of the repetitive expressions tightens the text and focuses the attention of the reader on the essential message. Excerpts (2) and (5) demonstrate how deletion creates parallelism and so do (8) and (9) from Francis Bacon (1625):

8. Love is stronger than hate, and peace than war.
9. Reading maketh (i.e. makes) a perfect man, conference a ready man and writing an exact man.

(Bacon in Abrams 1968, p.1217)

In (8), the expression "is stronger" has been deleted from the second clause and in (9) "maketh" from the second and third clauses. In (10), the writer has piled up parallel constructions after deleting "Milton was able to select".

10. Milton was able to select from nature or from story, from ancient fables, or from modern science whatever could or adore his thoughts.

(Johnson, 1771 quoted from Abrams 1968, p. 221)

Some modern writers use deletion very liberally, as shown in the following example (11):

11. They buy the pile up... : piled up in cities,  
worn away age after age, Pyramids in sand.  
Builds on bread and onion. Slaves Chinese  
walls. Sprawling suburbs, jarry buildings.

This extract from *Ulysses* by James Joyce (1914/ 1961, p. 221) contains a telegraphic language with just the bare essentials. However, the missing parts can be reconstructed by the reader without any difficulty. Although the deleted elements are not of much importance to the logical expression of thought, they are

called for by the rules of syntactic construction. Deletion is permitted so long as the meaning remains clear.

Repetition involves the repetition of a word, a phrase a sentence, or sometimes even a stanza in a poem. It is used to reinforce, complement or supplement, or substitute an expression. Like deletion, it creates parallelism, which is used to reinforce a thought or to bring it into focus. For instance, in example (12) taken from 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Coleridge (1970, p. 20) uses repetition to reinforce that there was water everywhere around the mariners.

12. Water, water everywhere  
And all the board did shrink.  
Water, water everywhere  
Not any drop to drink.

This stanza also brings out a contrast; there is water all around but there is an absolute dearth of drinking water. In (13), Coleridge once again uses repetition, but this time it is only for emphasis:

13. The ice was here, the ice was there  
The ice was all around.  
Coleridge (1970, p. 812)

In (14), the entire line has been repeated thrice to emphasize how the world ends.

14. This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but with a whimper.  
(Eliot, T. S., 1971, p. 52)

In (15), repetition has been used to emphasize the permanence of time and place:

15. Because I know that time is always time  
And place is always and only place  
And what is actual is actual for one time  
And only for one place

I rejoice that things are as they are...

Consequently I rejoice having to construct something upon which to rejoice.

(Eliot, T. S., 1971, p. 60)

The repetition in (16) emphasizes the significance and uniqueness of the word in the world:

16. If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent

If the unheard, unspoken

Word is unspoken, unheard;

Still is the unspoken word, the word unheard

The word without a word, the word within

The world and for the world;

And the light shown in darkness and

Against the word, the unstilled world still whirled

About the centre of the silent word

O my people, what have I done unto this

(Eliot, T. S., 1971, p. 65)

Such a repetition is meaningful, but not all repetitions are meaningful. Some repetitions are seemingly meaningless; (17) contains an example of one such repetition:

17. The sea was wet as wet could be

The sands were dry as dry

You could not see a cloud because

No cloud was in the sky.

No bird was flying over head

There were no birds to fly.

(Carroll, Lewis, 1872/1998, p. 162)

These lines from "The Walrus and the Carpenter" are meaningless because the similes attached to them do not convey anything beyond the objects they are supposed to compare and clarify. Yet they are meaningful in the sense that they are intended to convey meaninglessness, which they do quite successfully.

Some lexical repetitions are not really repetitions in the sense that they are not the same word; they are homophonous words. For instance, let us look at the meaning of the word "play" in the lines in (18) from Shakespeare's famous play *'The Winter's Tale'*:

18. Go play, boy, play: thy mother plays and I

Play too, but so disgraced a part, whose issue

Will hiss me to my grace.

Usually, the word "play" refers to participation in a sport for the purpose of enjoyment and recreation. That is the sense in which the word has initially been used here. The third occurrence of the word however refers to sexual intercourse, and the fourth occurrence means "to react"; it also means "to play the role of a character in a theatrical activity".

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, when Othello repeats the clause "it is the cause", he does so for emphasis but when he says, "Put out the light and then put out the light", the first expression means "to extinguish the light" and the second "to make someone unconscious, to kill someone". This type of repetition is not redundant. In short, all repetitions are not redundant.

Although both deletion and repetition are used to create parallelism, there is a subtle difference between the two. In deletion, parallelism is used to highlight the comparison of similar elements; on the other hand, repetition creates balance and deletion highlights the contrast between parallel expressions, as in (19) and (20).

19. Marilyn was destroyed by her own oversensitive perceptions,

Jayne, ... by her lack of them.

(Champlin, Charles, 1967)

20. Neither is mind material, nor is matter mental.

(Spinoza, p. 134)

Example 21 exhibits a beautiful combination of repetition and deletion:

21. My nerves are bad tonight, yes bad.

Stay with me.

Speak to me. Why do you never speak  
Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking?  
What?

I never know you are thinking. Think.

(Eliot, T. S., 1971, p. 40)

In these lines, the two devices of repetition and deletion work harmoniously to convey the sense of loneliness and the need to be together, and share their thoughts.

To sum up, although deletion and repetition are two processes which work differently; syntactically both of them add harmony to the text. Deletion creates parallelism, and repetition creates balance. Together, they can be used to reinforce the thought expressed in the text and bring it into focus.

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