REPETITION AS A FEATURE OF AFRO-AMERICAN DISCOURSE

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Repetition has long been recognized as a salient feature of Afro-American verbal artistry. The way in which black evangelical preachers capitalize on phonetic, lexical and phrasal repetition has been studied by specialists in Afro-American language, such as Geneva Smitherman[1]; or Bruce Rosenberb, whose intelligent analysis pointed out that in the "call and response" interaction between the black preacher and his congregation, repetition can function: a) retrospectively, as a recall device; b) prospectively, permitting reduced planning time; or, c) agonistically, building emotional involvement[2]. As well, the "call and response" pattern of repetition in the American Negro work song, which some scholars see as directly contributing to the blues tradition, has been shown to be a direct descendant of the West African work song[3].

Of the many types of repetition present in Afro-American discourse (that is phonological (including tone and other prosodic features), lexical, or phrasal units), this paper will focus solely on parallel phrases. Of this type, the parallel reiteration of the blues verse in probably the most popularly known Afro-American repetitional figure. A blues stanza is usually formed by three lines

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1 G. Smitherman, *Talkin' and Testifyin'* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

2 B. Rosenberg, "Oral Sermons and Oral Narrative", in *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, ed. by D. Ben-Amos and K. S. Goldstein (The Hague: Mouton, 1975).

3 A. Lomax, "The Homogeneity of African - Afro-American Musical Style", in *Afro-American Anthropology*, Whitten and Szwed (ed.), (N. Y.: Free Press, 1970), pp. 181-201.

(rhyming AAB), delivered in 4/4 time over twelve bars in a call and response pattern[4]. Each line of four bars is sung in iambic meter over the first eight or nine beats. This takes up about two bars and the remainder of the 4-bar phrase is filled in with complementary instrumental music, which constitutes the "response" to the singer's "call". The singer's next line is generally an exact repetition, or a slightly altered version, of the statement made in the first line. The third line is in some way a commentary on or resolution of the theme reiterated in the first two lines, thus establishing an AAB pattern: statement, restatement, resolution. In addition to this rhyming pattern, there is a frequent return to the keynote on the last syllable of each line, which lends a rather hypnotic effect[5]. For example:

(1) "Drifting Along Blues"[6].
I'm drifting and drifting just like a rolling stone (repeat).
No one to love me, no place to call my home.

Life is lonely when you have to travel all alone/Life is a lonely thing...
I long for happiness, that's something I've never known.
True love is something that money can't ever buy (repeat).
Day after day you walk, day after day you walk and cry.

The recurrence of the first two lines carries out one of the most well-known functions of repetition, that of providing the singer/narrator with enough time to organize ideas and invent the next lines, in other words, a prospective function. But the repetition in the blues creates as well a certain expectation, resolved in the final line of the stanza.

Although the particular consistency of form displayed here was (is) not always present in the less commercialized blues[7], it appears that there has always been a steady percussive rhythm to which the singer set his/her lines. It is this rhythmic pattern, set to the AAB rhyme scheme, which takes on meaning itself. The form becomes as important as the content in distinguishing the

4 The blues verse may vary considerably. Sometimes the rhyme is realized through the reiteration of the same words; other times there is no rhyme discernible. As far as number of bars, Courlander *(Negro Folk Music, USA*, p. 126) has recorded rural Southern blues with 12, 13, 14, 15, 17 or 22 bars. On the other hand, as W. C. Handy ("the father of the blues") explained, the 12-bar framework was quite established by 1900: "... the 12-bar, three line form of the first and the last strains (of "Mr. Crump", later "Memphis Blues", c. 1912) with its three-cord basic harmonic structure (tonic, subdominant, dominant, seventh), was that already used by Negro roustabouts, honky-tonk piano players, wanderers, and other of the underprivileged but undaunted class from Missouri to the Gulf, and had been a common medium through which any such individual might express his personal feelings in a sort of musical soliloquy".

5 A. Niles, "The Story of the Blues", in *Blues, an Anthology*, W. C. Handy (ed.), (N. Y.: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 17-19.

6 This version was recorded by Lonnie Johnson, The Asch Recordings, 1939-1947, Album No. AA 1/2.

blues. That, is, rhythmic form has as much impact on the listener as the information which it communicates. Here one is tempted to quote Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message", although without necessarily subscribing to McLuhan's theories on "oral culture".

This type of repetition occurs, of course, in highly ritualized, performance styles of talk or song (or sometimes the combination of the two, talk-singing). Such a use can readily be observed in religious behavior or blues performances, in which repetition is one of the linguistic devices employed to build up to a ritual event which stresses group solidarity and therefore brings about a sort of cathartic effect.

Repetition can, however, play an essential role in less ritualistic uses of language in Afro-American discourse, for example, in the telling of a folktale or the relating of a personal experience. In these, recurrent phrases help to create a rhythm (Gr., *rhythmos*, "flow"), a continuous moving forward, while marking off narrative events, and in this way produce a certain narrative style.

Some of the forms described in this paper have been largely neglected to date, perhaps because they occur in less ritualistic events or perhaps because, superficially, they are sufficiently similar to the forms which occur in utterances in non-Black varieties of English. Especially at the sentence level of analysis, peculiar-sounding phrases appear to reflect grammatical differences which some would judge as "ungrammatical" - the deletion of an anaphoric pronoun or its inclusion where one would not normally expect it, for example. Or, specifically with the use of strategies of repetition, such ways of speaking often provoke misinterpretation of the speaker's ability to describe something precisely and succinctly. It is only upon the carrying out analysis across entire units of discourse, paying special attention to the frequency and distribution of repeated forms, that a distinct "system of style", as Gumperz[8] would term it, becomes discernible. And when these strategies, or types of repetition, are compared with similar discourse strategies found in narratives told in West Africa and in Black communities throughout the New World, they contrast even more strongly with the discourse modes of the Euroamerican mainstream.

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7 Courlander, Harold, *Negro Folk Music, USA*, (N. Y.: Columbia Univ., 1966), pp. 125-146.

8 J. Gumperz, G. Aulakh and H. Kaltman, "Thematic Structure and Progression in Discourse", in *Language and Social Identity* (N. Y.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982).

Labov[9] has stated that the device of repetition affects the narrative in two senses: "it intensifies a particular action, and it suspends the action". The types of repetition described here display the intensifying effect to which Labov refers, but also a series of related patterns —a continuum of types of repetition— which runs from the purely rhetorical use of repetition for intensification to the use of repetition as a feature of discourse structure, passing through an intermediate level of repetition which seems to carry out both the intensifying and structural, linking functions. This study, as previously mentioned, is focused on parallelism in an attempt to delineate clearly the three types of functions carried out along the continuum.

Repetition in the form of parallel phrases is quite frequent in Black narratives, in which there appear to be the three types of functions just mentioned. The first type carries out the intensifying function described by Labov, while at the same time suspending the forward movement of the action. Rather than a "stop", the reiteration allows the speaker "planning time" and thus provides for the *smooth flow* of the discourse, as in this animal tale (2) (Bontemps and Hughes, 1958)[10] or in this "preacher tale" (3) from Virginia (D. Dance, 1978)[11]:

(2) "Why Br' Gator's Hide is so Horny".
An' Br' Alligator *'suade* A_1 *an' beg,* an' *beg an'suade* A_2, til as las' Br' Rabbit 'gree to show him Trouble.

(3) "Don't Wake 'Em".
Once there was a preacher and he had a dear friend; and the friend died.
And after the friend died, *he* A_1 *wandered about,* A_2 *wandered about*[12].
And after a while he (the preacher) died.

A similar use of repetition can be observed in earlier, and more basilectal forms, in this Cullah "ghost story" (4) (L. Turner, 1949)[13]:

(4) "The llag" (Johns Island, South Carolina)
dɛn, i kipawʌndarin rɒuŋ, wʌandarin rɒun fatri a fo dez. afta i fɒin nobɒɣ i wudn ʒiəm nʌtŋ, i tuk sik. [Then she keep awundering around, wandering around for three or four days. After she find nobody wouldn't give her nothing, she took sick].

9 W. Labov, *Language in the Inner City,* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 379.

10 Hughes and Bontemps, *The Book of Negro Folklore,* (N. Y.: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1958), p. 25.

11 D. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin',* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), p. 14.

12 Thanks are due to David Sutcliffe for pointing out that the repetition of "wandering about" may be related to the lexicalized repetitions of active verbs, taking on the meaning "continue to".

13 L. D. Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect,* (1974 rpt., Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press), p. 276.

It was Turner (1949) who first observed that "the practice of repeating words and phrases" was common to both the Gullahs and the West Africans, although he made no attempt to classify them into different types or functions within the narrative. The following examples demonstrate how the first type of repetition [as in (2) to (4)] appears in West African discourse. Example (5) is from Nigerian Pidgin English[14], and (6), collected by Turner (1949) is from Yoruba[15]:

(5) "Papa Spider".
...na man *like honi*, e too *like am too much.*
(and he was [topicalizer] a man who liked honey, he really liked it too much).

(6) "The Child Eats Too Much".
Because he [the child] could *eat much, eat too much,* he said, his mother she brought meat [and] left it with which he should cook yam flour.

Although recurring phrases of this type intensify a characteristic of the child in this case, they seem to be focused more towards a smooth narrative flow than towards an immediate culminating point, as in the blues. The relationship of this type of intensifying repetition to the progression of the underlying narrative structure can be shown thus:

$A_1 \longrightarrow$
$A_2 \longrightarrow$

The second type of parallel repetition entails not only dramatic intensification, as the reiterations cited in (2) to (6), but its use as a discourse device which sets off a new event in the narration, as in the third stanza of the blues cited in (1) or in the following examples:

(7) "Pass the Collection Plate" (ghost story, Virginia, D. Dance, 1978).
...He just didn't know what to do (to scare the 'hag' away). So then he reached down hereunder the bed and *picked up a* A_2 *collection plate* (he was a deacon, see), *picked up a* A_2 *collection plate* and *started to pass B it around.* The ghost left!

(8) "Frankie and Albert" (1961)[16].
One truck of *policemans* A^1 *come down; policemans* A_2 *come down* and *held B an inques' over Albert.*

14 I am indebted to the group of English Philology students (C. Ameller, M. E. de la Morena, A. Rodríguez, T. Martínez del Pozo, E. Moriones, A. Redondo, E. Vela) and to Prof. Klara Bastianon (Univ. of Madrid) for allowing me to use this Anansi tale recorded from a speaker of Nigerian Pidgin English.

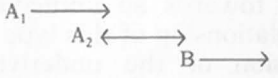
15 Turner, *Op. Cit.*, p. 222.

16 I am indebted to David Sutcliffe for this version of "Leadbelly" (Huddie Ledbetter) reciting "Frankie and Albert" *(The Life Treasury of American Folklore,* 1961) and for pointing out similarities in types of repetition found in Jamaican Creole, as well as for suggesting the use of "A Saramaccan Narrative Pattern" as a source for the "when-clause" repetitions see (22).

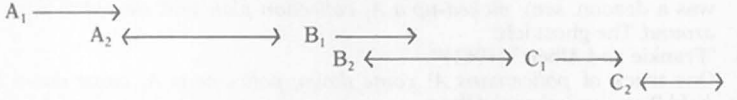
David Sutcliffe (1977)[17] cites a similar example which he recorded in Bedfordshire (England) narratives told by British Blacks:

(9) An'den we *go down to the* A^1 *river now, go down to* A_2 *the river* and we B catch fish...

Here, A_1 intensifies or focuses on what was said in A_2, but it also acts as a frame for the new information added in B, which is a continuation of a process initiated by the same actor in A_1. Thus, the recurring phrase functions as an anaphoric reference signal, but since the new information constitutes a further step in the narrative, it also creates a foreshadowing effect. That is, against the background of repetition of A_1, A_2, the listeners expect a new element to appear at B, as with the improvisational figures of Black music, made more apprehensible because of the background beat[18]. With respect to the narrative progression, this type of iteration can be diagrammed as:



Finally, the third type of parallel repetition involves the reiteration of A_1, or its principle elements, but in this case, A_2 initiates a new sentence with what appears to be a temporal clause (most frequently beginning with "when", but sometimes with "after" or "then" [or "so"]). Sometimes this sets up a chain parallelism, apparently similar to what Finnegan[19] has noted in southern Bantu praise poetry, having a A_1/ A_2 B_1/ B_2 C_1/ C_2 pattern. Another way in which this pattern differs from the second type of parallelism is that a new actor may be introduced in the B_1, C_1 clauses. The relationship of this type of repetition to the narrative progression can be shown as:



(10) "I Raised Hell While I was There" (D. Dance, 1978).
So finally he kep' on and kep' on until *the table* A^1 *went over,* and *when the* A_2 *table went over,* then *they put* B_1 *him out of heaven.* So *after they* B_2 *put him out of heaven,* they say he said, "Well, they put me out", he says, "but, HEY. HEY. I raised hell while I was there".

17 D. Sutcliffe, *The Language of First and Second Generation West Indian Children in Bedforshire,* M. Ed. Thesis, Univ. of Leicester, 1977.
18 This rhythm suggets as well the types of phrasing found in African music.
19 R. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry,* (London: Cambridge, 1977).

Example (10) shows that these rhythmic patterns of discourse, clearly of African heritage, are still in use, but in older, and more basilect narratives, the frequency with which they are employed is even more striking, as in (11), a Gullah narrative (Turner, 1949). The same pattern of linking with "when-clauses" can be found in many narratives throughout Afro-America, although space permits exemplifying from only one story (12) from St. Croix, Virgin Islands, recorded by Courlander[20]:

(11) "The Ghost".
One day *the ghost was trying to scare me.* And *When the ghost try to scare me,* he was coming past the house, and there is a *wire fence run.* And *after the wire fence run along like that,* I get to the *wire fence,* I put my hand on *the wire;* and *when I put my hand on the wire,* he say "Booh!"...
And then I gone and *I pray;* and *after I pray,* then he come back another night and start to scare me. *He put on a long, old white white gown. When he put on a long white gown* - time I get to the door, *he say, "Meeow!".*
And *when he say, "Meeow!"* I say, "Oh, that ain't nothing but a cat"....

(12) "Tar Baby".
An' de blacksmith go right off and make Moon, Sun, Star, and hand them to him (Anansi, the spider), and *he was away wid it.* And *when he went, he hand it to de Lard,* and *when he hand it to de Lard,* de Moon, San, Star commence to fight...

The use of the "when-clause" here is very similar to that which Grimes and Clock[21] have observed in the Saramaccan narrative, where the *dí*-clause (a sentence-initial particle introducing the reiteration and translated as "with reference to") functions as "a two-directional system of repetition on the one hand, and foreshadowing on the other, that marks them [the units] as divisions of the discourse". A more direct African source for the "when" linking device can be found in (13), a Nigerian Pidgin English tale of the spider Anansi, who tricks his opponent by spreading honey on his belly, and in Turner's (1949) transcriptions of Yoruba (14) and (15):

(13) "Papa Spider".
...So, first wey go, e just go butu by di man and de di man *e start for lick di honey.* / So, *e start for lick dis honey,* na an *bra spider just take pepper e sendan na im face.* / And when *e send di pepper na dis man im face,* di man e no able see and de bra spider can beats di man. (So, first way go, he just go groveling by, turned over, belly up (ideophone) by the man and then the man he start for lick the honey. So, he start for lick this honey while brother spider just take pepper (and) he send it into his face.

20 H. Courlander, *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore,* (N. Y.: Crown, 1976), p. 114.
21 "A Saramaccan Narrative Pattern", *Language,* Vol. 46, No. 2 (1970), pp. 408-425.

And when he send the pepper into this man his face, the man he not able to see and then brother spider can beats the man).

(14) "The Young Woman, the Young Man, and Their Son".
She took her portion of the yam; *she cooked her portion of the yam; when she cooked her portion,* she cooked the yam...

(15) "The Farmer, the Snake, and the Thief".
'... perhaps it was a person that he [the snake] swallowed...' *The farmer was suspicious; when the farmer was suspicious,* he told the governor.

That the "when-clauses" are not used in the same way as temporal sequencers in a more standard type of English is obvious from the narration of the "wire fence" (11) and from examples like (16):

(16) "The Champion" (Courlander, 1976)[22].
...And the other captain over here *bought him 500 Negroes.* And *buying the five hundred Negroes,* this master has a big Negro in there he said was stouter than any Negro...

Repetition as a feature of discourse structure offers clear evidence that African oral traditions survive in the New World, although they may be expressed through English. It is true, of course, that some of the "when-clauses" converge with the temporal sequencing clauses in standard English, such as in (10), for example. Thus in the analysis of this repetitional figure, consideration of diachronic data is essential. As well, the study of the system of nominalization and pronominalization usually points to cross-cultural differences in seemingly similar discourse.

Reiteration in the form of parallel phrases makes the structure of the narrative apparent, the rhythmic expression of the form becoming as much a part of the total message as the content. This is a use of language similar to what we observed in the blues (although in a much less fixed framework, of course) and it, like the more formulaic uses, shows how deeply patterns of dramatic rhythmic expression permeate Afro-American culture. The parallelism we have discussed here sets up a rhythmic background against which the new element, the variation, can be more dramatically introduced and made more apprehensible to the listener, like the jazz improvisation. And this certainly points to an African heritage much deeper than the occurrence of linking "when-clauses". Rhythms in African and Afro-American communities are a way of transmitting experience, because rhythmical patterns are built into society, into the way people relate to each other[23].

22 H. Courlander, *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore,* p. 434.

23 J. M. Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility,* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979).