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**Echoing in Real-Life English Conversation**

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# Echoing in Real-life English Conversation

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## Abstract

In a corpus-based analysis of spontaneous naturally-occurring conversation, the linguistic phenomenon of *echoing* is studied across genres and its frequency of occurrence noted. In the research undertaken, a seemingly redundant linguistic feature, which flouts Grice's Co-operative Principle, is argued to be a linguistic means for creating particular styles of verbal interaction. We argue that the occurrence of echoing and its frequency depend on two factors: the degree of formality in the conversation and the nature of the interpersonal relations between participants. We propose that echoing is a linguistic marker of social relations as well as an index of the levels of familiarity and intimacy between participants. The aim of this article is to make contribution to a better understanding of English conversational styles.

*Keywords: echoing, interaction styles; interpersonal relations; Grice; Co-operative Principle; turns and turn-taking; affective meaning*

## 1 Introduction

In exploring stretches of conversational discourse from a corpus of naturally-occurring speech, we are forcibly struck by the repeated occurrence of *echoing* (*the speaker's immediate lexical, syntactic or semantic repetition of the previous speaker's most current utterance(s), sometimes completely and sometimes with some variation*) in certain spoken discourse genres (Genres are episodes of speech in which participants, if interaction is successful, have a shared view of their nature as social encounter. (Carter and McCarthy, 1997)). Some genres in particular exhibit marked degrees of echoing. During the course of our research, we have also discovered that echoing involves different degrees of repetition. We have hypothesized that echoing is a reflection of the formality of the spoken discourse and the nature of the relationship between participants.

Echoing is conventionally regarded as undesirable in conversation. English language learners are constantly discouraged from repeating, or echoing, what another speaker has said. Donnellan's comment (1978: 58) is instructive in this respect:

In some of the cases repetition of information makes the discourse sound like the awkward language of a child's first reader.

Brown and Yule (1983:172) try to explain why we sometimes find a sentence with repetition 'awkward': 'this is presumably because normally, in genres other than children's first readers, speakers do not reiterate so much given information.'

Echoing is therefore believed to slow down the pace of or the sequential movement of conversation and speakers run the risk of violating Gricean maxims (particularly the maxim of quantity) (Grice, 1975) and of making little contribution to the propositional content of the utterances.

Yet close observation of real-life everyday conversational discourse reveals that a great deal of conversation contains echoing and repetition, although variability in both extent and frequency of echoing could differ with culture and individual style. As Winter (1979: 101) rightly states:

A common observation that everyone can make for themselves is that many clauses are repeated, either partially or (almost) entirely, in speech, and in writing, the most obvious kind of repetition being the very common partially repeated structures of the clause.

Brown (1977:113) also believes that

the repetition of what someone else says, whether whole phrases or words abstracted from phrases, is a common feature of all sorts of dialogues, formal or informal.

Hymes (1981), Becker (1984), and Bolinger (1961) all suggest that repetition is at the heart not only of how a particular discourse is created, but also of how discourse itself is created. Tannen (1989:46) claims boldly that: 'repetition is at the heart of language,' and Toolan calls repetition 'the mother device of all expressive devices, the heart of rhetoric, the essence and the unmasking of language' (1996: 253).

The major questions to be addressed in this article are, then, what is meant by 'echoing'? What is the relationship between repetition and echoing? Under what circumstances does echoing occur, i.e., is echoing a common feature in both formal and informal spoken discourse, as Brown believes it to be? Does the relationship between the participants have anything to do with the frequency of echoing?

## 2 Definition of echoing

Echoing in this study refers to **the speaker's immediate lexical, syntactic or semantic repetition of the previous speaker's most current utterance(s), sometimes completely and sometimes with some variation.**

As repetition is a large area, we have limited ourselves in this study to one aspect of repetition in spoken discourse, to which we have ten the term 'echoing'. It is similar to repetition in that both of the speakers repeat, either exactly the same words, or with some variation, what has been previously said. However, it is different in the following ways.

First of all, the most obvious difference is that 'echoing' in this study only refers to the repetition of others' words, not self repetition, as we are concerned only with echoing across turns, not inside turns. Secondly, unlike Tannen's *allo-repetition* (1989), which can go across several turns, 'echoing' in this study is only the immediate repetition of the previous speaker's most current utterance(s). Thirdly, repetition of questions transformed into statements is not taken into consideration, as the most obvious and mechanical example of interactive linking is realized by question - response pairs. We also consider answers to questions using exactly the same words as mechanical and therefore deserving of less consideration at this stage in the research. However, replies with or without variations to tag





For reference, a brief introduction to the context in which the excerpts take place is given here:

(1) *The first excerpt takes place between a married couple (Speaker 1, the wife; Speaker 2, the husband) in their own home in the presence of a family relative (female) who is a house guest. They are planning their next holiday and thus making decisions.*

(2) *In the second excerpt there are two speakers, a mother and her daughter. They are at home, talking about family matters and family arrangements in a relaxed and easy manner.*

(3) *The third excerpt is between two young women, in their early 20s, traveling by car. They are very close friends who see each other frequently. In the excerpt they are talking about Speaker 1's forthcoming wedding.*

(4) *In Excerpt 4, two pupils are talking in the house where one of them lives.*

(5) *In Excerpt 5, three female Art College students who share accommodation in Carmarthen, Wales, are chatting round the tea-table on a Sunday afternoon. Speaker 1, aged 20, and Speaker 3, aged 21, are from the south-west of England and Speaker 2, aged 21, is from South Wales.*

(6) *Excerpt 6 takes place among relatives. Speaker 1 is female, aged 77 and Speaker 2 is 24, great niece of Speaker 1. Speaker 3 is 46, uncle of Speaker 2. They are talking in an informal atmosphere about railway tickets and matters related.*

(7) *Excerpt 7 is mainly an excerpt of oral narration. Speaker 1, the narrator, aged 78, is recounting how she was invited onto the flight deck during a return flight to the UK from a holiday in Cyprus. Speaker 2 is female in her 30s while Speaker 3 is male, aged 47. Speaker 1 is Speaker 3's mother-in-law and Speaker 2 is Speaker 3's cleaning lady.*

(8) *Two old friends (adult British males, both in their 40s) in Excerpt 8 meet up again after not having seen each other for a few years. The conversation takes place in a village pub garden on a hot summer's evening. They are trying to catch up with each other. Speaker 1 is Scottish and Speaker 2 is of Irish ancestry.*

(9) *In Excerpt 9, two relatives (Speaker 1, male in his 50s, Speaker 2, female in her 20s) are talking in a casual way about how to make pasta.*

(10) *There are three participants in Excerpt 10. Speaker 1, female in her 30s, is the informal meeting chairperson. Speaker 2 is male in his 30s, and Speaker 3 is male in his 20s. They are colleagues attending a meeting held at the headquarters of Cambridge University Press, planning the production schedule for English Language Teaching books and the accompanying tapes. They are trying to arrive at a number of decisions, negotiating their way to the important decisions. However, since the people at the meeting know each other well and work closely every day the atmosphere is quite informal.*

(11) *In Excerpt 11, there is a group of 4 people who are assembling a portable baby's cot in the bedroom of Speaker 2 (female, 37, Yorkshire) and Speaker 4 (Speaker 2's partner, 47, South Wales) where Speaker 1 (female, 25, Yorkshire) and Speaker 3 (Speaker 1's husband, aged 30, Yorkshire) are staying for the weekend with their young baby. Speaker 2 is Speaker 1's aunt. This excerpt is particular because its language is what we call 'language-in-action'. That is to say, the language used is almost wholly dependent on what the people are doing at the moment.*

(12) Excerpt 12 was recorded in the kitchen of a family home; all the participants are members of one family: Speaker 1 is female, aged 45, and Speaker 2 is male, aged 19. Speaker 3 is male, aged 46 and Speaker 4 is male, 49. Speaker 2 is Speaker 1's son and Speaker 3 is Speaker 4's brother. It is similar to Excerpt 11 in the sense that the language in both of them is language-in-action. The family are cooking rice for a family meal. The main focus of the talk is on the cooking of the rice and on the procedures involved in its cooking.

(13) Excerpt 13 is a discussion between an English teacher (male, aged 37) and a small group of secondary school pupils. The social relations in this excerpt are asymmetrical, with the teacher in authority. The teacher has asked them to consider how they would spend £10,000 for the benefit of the local community'. Even though the teacher is outnumbered by his pupils, the teacher is in control of the discussion.

(14) Excerpt 14 is between a hairdresser (female) and her customer (female, 21). They are talking in order to reach an agreement as to how the hair is to be cut and styled.

(15) Excerpt 15 is taken from a televised political debate with a panel of politicians and a chairperson, where questions are set by members of the audience and answered in turn by each panel-member. Speaker 1 is the television presenter, Speaker 2 is a member of parliament taking part in the televised debate; Speaker 3 is a member of the studio audience and Speaker 4 is a member of the panel. The atmosphere is very formal and there is a fixed topic.

(16) In Excerpt 16, an 84-year-old English woman, brought up in Ireland, reminisces about her youth to her great niece (in her late 20s, Glasgow) who asks her questions about herself in an informal yet interview-style conversation.

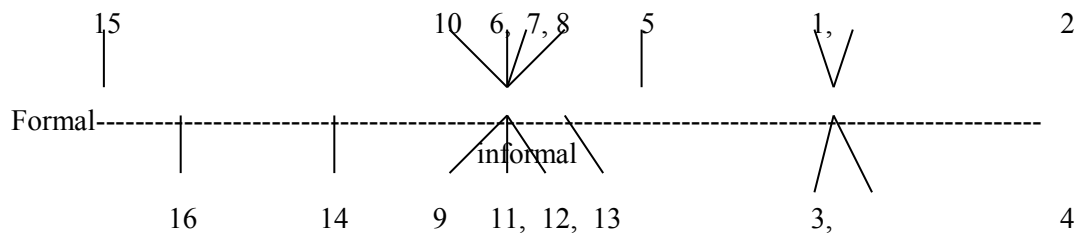
## 5 Data analysis - frequency of echoing

The following table is a frequency account of echoing in the excerpts selected. It shows the relations of the participants, the numbers of turns of talk, the instances of occurrence and the percentage of echoing:

Excerpts	Turns of Talk	Occurrences of echoing	Percentage
1. Between husband, wife and guest	112	6	5
2. Between mother and daughter	76	3	3
3. Between close friends	183	11	5
4. Between pupils	62	2	3
5. Students chatting round tea table	54	4	7
6. Between relatives	42	7	16
7. Narration	42	6	14
8. Two friends chatting	15	2	13
9. Between relatives	42	6	14
10. Publishers' planning meeting	68	12	18
11. Assembling a baby's cot	42	2	5

12. Cooking rice	49	2	4
13. School discussion between teacher and pupils	65	13	20
14. Discussion at the hairdresser's	59	4	7
15. Political debate	10	0	0
16. An elderly lady reminisces	18	0	0

The excerpts range from very informal (the first two excerpts) to very formal (the last two). However, formality is a question of degree. There is great difference in the degree of formality as the roles and relationships among the participants vary. Therefore we believe it is more appropriate to see excerpts of conversational discourse on a cline from 'more' formal to 'more' informal. An attempt has been made at putting the excerpts on the following cline, which will help us see differences in the degree of formality:



The figures on the cline stand for the numbers of the conversational excerpts. They are positioned as either more formal or more informal. At the left pole of the cline we place Excerpt 15 which displays clear formality and Excerpts 1, 2, 3, 4 at the right hand pole as the most informal.

As spoken discourse is a here-and-now joint venture, in this research the type of conversation (formal or informal), the relationship between participants (e.g., whether of symmetrical or asymmetrical social status) are considered as they are at the time when the spoken discourse is taking place. For instance, the role and relationship between a teacher and his/her students in class will change when they meet in a pub. Doctors and patients may talk as friends as they meet at a party. The type of conversation will also change from a more formal one to a more informal one. However, this research studies the conversation only as appropriate to the setting: hair-dresser and her customer in the hairdresser's shop, not in a pub; teacher and pupils in the classroom, not at a party. Sometimes, the formality and the roles and relationships can change even during the course of a conversation. However, we hope we are sufficiently careful in choosing excerpts of conversations to make sure that the genres as well as relationships and roles remain the same.

The following table will give us a better idea of the percentage of echoing in these conversations:

## Percentage Variance

Excerpts	0	Under 5%	From 6-10%	Over 10%
1		--		
2		--		
3		--		
4		--		
5			--	
6				--
7				--
8				--
9				--
10				--
11		--		
12		--		
13				--
14		--		
15	--			
16	--			

From the above tables, it can be seen that echoing occurs most frequently in conversations that sit in the middle of the formality cline, the two extremes being reflected in Excerpt 15, a political debate and in Excerpt 1, between husband and wife, as against Excerpts 6 and 8, between relatives and friends who have not seen each other for quite some time.

It is noticeable that frequencies of echoing vary to quite a considerable extent even within informal conversations, as in Excerpt 1, mainly between husband and wife, and in Excerpt 10, among colleagues. Both of them are informal conversations and concern the making of plans. Differences are also obvious in Excerpt 3 between two close friends and in Excerpt 8, between two friends who have not seen each other for some time. Excerpt 4, between pupils and Excerpt 5, among university students, also exhibit some differences in the frequency of echoing.

## 6 Explanation for the differences

What is the possible explanation for these differences? Why does echoing occur more frequently in some stretches of talk than in others? The questions themselves point to one of the social functions echoing performs: it makes contribution to the establishment or consolidation of social relations. Although echoing is employed by participants for various purposes in conversation, its main overall function is a social function, whatever linguistic variation it might exhibit.

Participants of a conversation often employ various styles for interactional behavior to achieve satisfaction of certain basic wants. Echoing reflects the speaker's desire for making the other(s) feel good (in accordance with Lakoff's politeness maxim (Lakoff, 1973)). By echoing, people are flouting deliberately one of Grice's well-known cooperative maxims (Grice, 1975) -- be brief (maxim of quantity)-- as echoing appears to have a very low focus on informational content, but aims to claim common ground for establishing and consolidating relations.

Giles and Coupland (1991: 75) believe that interactions usually have multiple goals, and language behaviors often have multiple social meanings for hearers. Analysis of this data reveals that echoes of words, phrases and whole utterances appear to be intended more as contributions to a conversation in building and maintaining social relationships than to be taken as instances of information-giving. (See also Brown and Yule, 1983: 3). Indeed, on occasions, conversation can be seen as 'uninformative' and 'tells the hearer nothing' (Lyons, 1977: 33). It is to show agreement with the speaker, to establish common ground and to show they share the same perspective towards the world. Therefore echoing is a far from meaningless act. It does have a relatively low value in terms of content, but a relatively high value in terms of communication. Echoing is not 'saying' much, but it is 'doing' quite a lot.

We agree with Stenström (1994) who believes that conversation is a social activity involving two or more participants. Who the participants are, how well they know each other, their shared knowledge, and what they are talking about is reflected in the language they use and the stylistic strategies they adopt. Therefore, in a very formal conversation, like a political debate, or an interview, participants interact, but not with the aim of seeking common ground. Rather, they will try every means to emphasize their own social identity, to accentuate differences between them and dissociate from each other's position. Therefore, echoing, a stylistic strategy (conscious or unconscious) to seek common ground and to make the other(s) feel good, is rarely employed in formal conversations. Within informal conversations, on the other hand, it seems to follow that the greater the participants' awareness of and need to seek common ground, the higher the frequency of echoing there will be.

For people who have the strongest bonds, echoing in this corpus is found to be more frequently absent, as between wife and husband, or mother and daughter. On the one hand, they share such a large common ground that there is little need for one to reinterpret what the other is saying; and on the other, the relation between husband and wife, or mother and daughter, is solid or comparatively solid, and there is little need to make an effort to establish or maintain a relationship which already exists. This coincides with Östergren's discovery (1984: 243) that among the eleven transcribed texts she studied, the conversations between a married couple have far fewer follow-up moves than any other texts she has studied.

This will also account for the near absence of echoing in conversations between very close friends who know each other very well as in Excerpt 3. However, between friends who have not seen each other for some time as in Excerpt 8 and between relatives as in Excerpt 9 rather than between close family members as in Excerpt 1, the need to catch up with each other, to maintain and consolidate relations already established becomes of great importance. Echoing then becomes one of the linguistic means for this purpose.

The difference in the occurrence of echoing in Excerpt 4 between pupils and Excerpt 5 among university students might be explained by the fact that university students are more aware of social relations and face values than pupils who are several years younger.

Although both dialogues in Excerpts 10 and 1 are about planning, the publishers planning a publication (10) and the husband and wife planning a holiday (1), echoing occurs in the former over twice as many times as in the latter. (In fact, the few instances of echoing in 1 are not between the couple, but between either husband and house guest, or wife and house guest). The different relationship between participants accounts for this difference again. Between colleagues, it is more important to seek common ground, to negotiate peer solidarity, to establish social relationship and to agree on points of view. People act in a more polite way. Face value is taken into more consideration. In Excerpt 10, at the publishers' meeting, we find that the participants make more efforts to make the others feel good, to reassure, to mitigate, to show agreement by the means of echoing.

This effort of trying to be agreeable, to converge with others, is reflected in almost all types of echoing when employed in the more interactional conversation.

For example, in Excerpt 5, in which three students are chatting round the tea-table, we find six instances of echoing (of different categories) in one segment:

- <S 02> Oh *those cherry Bakewells* look lovely
- <S 03> They *do* don't they
- <S 01> Oh *they were ... gorgeous ...* did you say you'd like a cup of tea
- <S 02> Yes
- <S 03> All right then
- <S 01> *Sound like a right mother* don't I
- <S 03> You *do*
- <S 02> But *they would go smashing* with a cup of tea wouldn't they
- <S 01> *They would* yeah
- <S 03> *Cup of tea and a fag*
- <S 02> *Cup of tea and a fag* Misses we're gonna have to move the table I think
- <S 03> Yeah d'you like Sara's table she's constructed of erm boots and and a book
- <S 01> Oh *that's brilliant*
- <S 03> Eh *that's really good* there look
- <S 02> I'll just put the Milky Way wrapper as the little extra support
- <S 03> I like Sunday nights for some reason, I don't know why
- <S 02> *cos you come home*
- <S 03> *I come home*
- <S 02> *You come home to us*
- <S 01> (([Inaudible])) go out
-

<S 02>            Yeah yeah  
 <S 03>            *Sunday's a really nice day I think*  
                           ↑                    ↑  
 <S 02>            *It certainly is*  
 <S 03>            *It's a really nice relaxing day*

In this segment the speakers show agreement with each other from time to time by echoing what the others have stated, which indicates the participants' strong desire to show that they share the same view, so that a close tie is formed among them.

It is commonly observed that in the western cultures lapses into silence are embarrassing to the participants and that as a result the participants resort to 'masking behaviors' such as echoing as well as coughing and other non-verbal communication to cover the gaps in the discourse.

Let us take a look at a segment from Excerpt 6 when the speakers who are all relatives are talking about using railcards on the train:

<S 01>                    Wallet thing where your  
                           railcard usually is so the two are showing together, you know  
 <S 03>                    *Mm*  
 <S 02>                    *Mm*  
 <S 03>                    *Mm*  
 <S 02>                    No I've never been asked to show, there was three guards  
                           on the train today and I never got asked to show my young  
                           person's railcard [*<S 03> Mm*] He clicked my wrong ticket  
                           ((([laughs])) and he had to sign it

After Speaker 1 makes a remark about the wallet and the railcard, the other two do not seem to be ready to go on with the topic. So there is a round of murmuring "Mm" from Speaker 3 to Speaker 2, and then back to Speaker 3, to avoid silence. It is Speaker 2 who finally takes up the floor. Echoing is thus a resource for producing ample talk, both by providing material for talk and by enabling talk automatically. It enables a speaker to produce speech while formulating what to say next, thereby making important contributions to sustain the flow of interaction.

Related to the matter of covering gaps in conversation is the behavior of the listener in listening to the speaker. A successful interaction comes from listeners who make it clear that they are following what the speaker is saying. When speakers say something, they also expect to get response from the listener in one way or another, as it is very important to have feedback for the speaker. Echoing, when used to show listenership, is then backchannelling.

For instance in the same excerpt:

<S 01>                    ... but I *cannot do it*  
 <S 03>                    *Couldn't do it*  
                           aye

Also:

<S 02>                    Karen would have had a valid ticket, so they *couldn't*  
                           *ever do anything to her*, I mean and [*<S 03> Yeah*] you know, what  
                           could they prove

<S 01>        *No, nothing*

And another segment from the same excerpt:

<S 03>        *So they don't ask you to show the card*

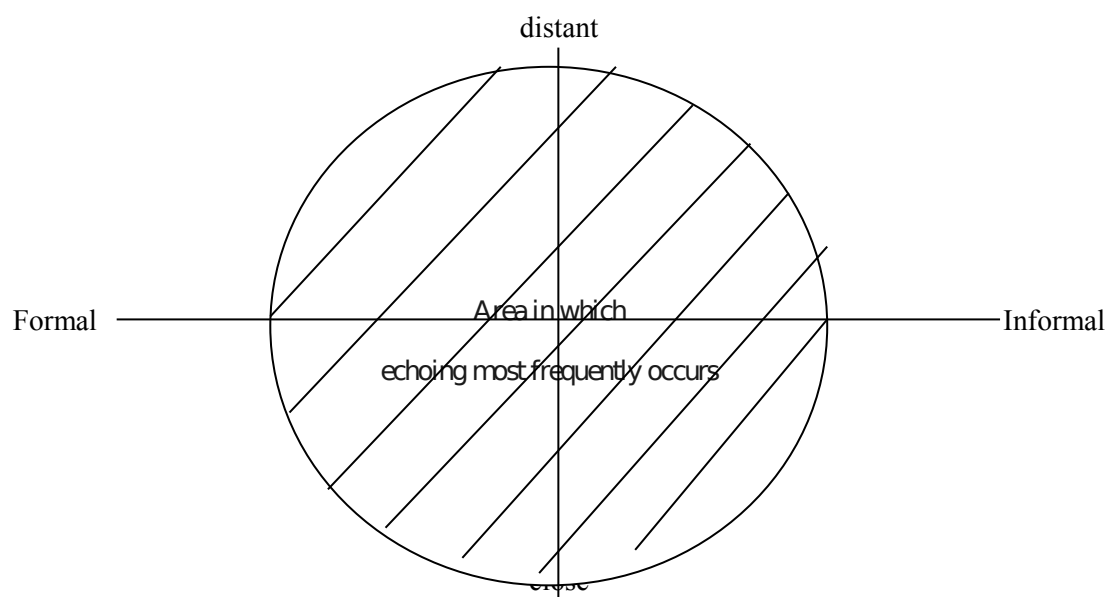
<S 02>        *No they never, I have never been asked to show my young  
                  person's railcard, ...*

In these cases, by echoing on the part of the listener, he/she is showing his/her listenership as well as informing the speaker that the message has been received, understood, agreed to and/or has caused a certain effect thereby supplying the speaker with supportive feedback.

What seems to be primarily at issue here is that echoing is a sign of sharing a common point of view. In other words, it contains information which is to be found not so much on the content level as on the level of social relationships. What matters is that the social relationships are consolidated and we can see clearly that the seemingly meaningless, redundant echoings of utterances that seem to go against Grice's cooperative principle, in reality make both sides feel that they are listening attentively to the other and that they share the same view towards the world, allowing the convergent progression of particular interactional conversations.

## **7 Conclusion**

Echoing mostly occurs in conversations that are neither too formal nor too informal and within those more informal conversations the tendency is that the closer the ties you have with the other participant(s), the fewer the instances of echoing which occur. This is due to the fact that participants use this linguistic means for establishing, maintaining and consolidating relations when the occasion arises. Whether echoing occurs or not, and if it does occur, whether its frequency is high or low, depends on two factors: the type of conversation, i.e., its degree of formality and the roles and relationships between participants. Echoing thus depends not only on what is being talked about, but even more on who is being talked to. It means that apart from what is being talked about (conversational content), who the participants (roles and relations) are, how well they know each other (degree of familiarity), their shared knowledge, the attitudes they adopt toward each other, are all reflected in the use of echoing. Therefore the occurrences of echoing should be measured along a cline of conversation from 'very formal' to 'very informal' together with the relation between participants which is 'distant' to 'very close'. When considered together the area in which echoing most frequently occurs is as follows:



The horizontal bar stands for the type of conversation ranging from informal to very formal and the vertical bar stands for the relation between participants from very close to distant. The circle that sits in the middle shows that it is in this area that the occurrence of echoing is most frequent. The four extremes, the spoken discourse being very formal, or very informal, or the relationship being very close or very distant, are not marked by significant degrees of echoing.

As this linguistic feature of echoing in spoken discourse has not been investigated comprehensively before, further study of its distribution among participants, its social functions, its function in mm-allocation and topic change, as well as its classification in relation to its linguistic environment, is a future valuable research undertaking.

## Notes

1. Data from the corpus reveal that echoing is employed by participants to express a range of affective meanings, such as reinforcement, endorsement, evaluation, irony. For a more extensive study, see Zhang, (forthcoming) *Echoing in English Conversation*, PhD Thesis, Nottingham University, Nottingham.
2. All the data are from transcriptions of recordings which are conducted when the informants are unaware. Consent for the recordings to be used is obtained after the recording.

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