



# The fun of repeating: How Japanese speakers jointly engage in conversational playfulness

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## 1. Introduction

How often does a person repeat what another person has just said? Why does he or she repeat another's utterance instead of speaking with their own words? What good (or bad) does repetition do? The answers to these questions may vary depending on the language, but recent research has claimed that in the case of Japanese, interactants repeat each other's utterances quite frequently.<sup>1</sup> Machi (2021, 219) states, "Japanese conversations thrive on cross-speaker repetition" because the linguistic device performs critical roles in carrying out a smooth conversation as well as creating and enhancing a bond among interactants. The importance of cross-speaker repetition is obvious and understandable when it is related to an accurate exchange of information (e.g., when people confirm a procedure of a task) or a display of empathy (e.g., when people express emotions about a dramatic event). Then how about in a more informal and relaxed situation? Notably, cross-speaker repetition is likewise commonly observed in such situations, where interactants often engage in a playful exchange. In such exchanges, interactants casually repeat each other's utterances just for fun, consequently adding liveliness and amusement to the conversation. Since creating and maintaining an enjoyable atmosphere is crucial for a smooth and harmonious conversation (especially in the case of an informal conversation), it is meaningful to examine repetition's role in creating such an atmosphere.

This study analyzes Japanese triadic conversations taken from a TV talk show, focusing on how interactants repeat each other's utterances in seemingly playful exchanges. The analysis shows that cross-speaker repetition is performed in 5 different ways—1) tease, 2) reaction to a tease, 3) savoring echo, 4) developing humor, and 5) enjoyment of repetition—, thus contributing to



the creation of a lively and amusing conversation atmosphere. The study further explores why the act of repeating each other's utterance can be entertaining for Japanese interactants and underscores the significance of this linguistic device in Japanese conversation.

## 2. Previous Studies

### 2.1. Cross-speaker repetition in Japanese conversation

Cross-speaker repetition occurs very frequently in Japanese conversation—more frequently than other languages including English (Strauss and Kawanishi 1996; Fujii 2012, 2018; Machi 2021), and perhaps more frequently than Japanese speakers realize themselves. In addition to its frequency, the device fulfills various important functions in conversations, such as displaying agreement and empathy, asking and answering questions, confirming information, opening and closing a conversation, linking interactants' stories, filling space and so forth (Norrick 1987; Tannen 1989; Machi 2019, 2020, 2021). It has been reported that by fulfilling these functions, cross-speaker repetition facilitates a smooth conversation as well as to create interactants' harmonious relationships (Machi 2020, 2021). While the act of repeating utterances of another speaker is often viewed negatively as lacking in originality, sincerity, or productivity, and hence not encouraged in English and some other Western languages (Johnstone 1987, 2002; Tannen 1989), the previous research on this device has proven that cross-speaker repetition is a necessary and even a crucial device in carrying out a smooth and harmonious conversation in Japanese (Strauss and Kawanishi 1996; Fujii 2012, 2018; Kim 2014; Machi 2020, 2021).

What is still underexplored, on the other hand, is the entertaining aspect of cross-speaker repetition in Japanese conversation. Cross-speaker repetition in humorous or playful exchanges has been observed in English interactions. For example, Duff (2014) examines how humor is generated by means of repetition in a classroom setting, demonstrating high school students' playful banter that includes repetition of their teacher's and each other's utterances. Tannen (1989), Norrick (1993), and Gerhardt (2009) also show examples where interactants appreciate and savor each other's or a third speaker's humorous ex-

pressions and jokes through repetition. While the body of research on this topic is still small in Japanese, Takekuro (2006) observes similar cases, where interactants refer to words and phrases in their interlocutor's previous utterance to make a joke. However, how cross-speaker repetition is involved in and contributes to conversational humor and playfulness is still unclear, especially in Japanese, where repetition is abundant. To contribute to a comprehensive understanding of this device in the Japanese language, this study focuses on its occurrence in seemingly playful exchanges and reveals how it creates a lively and amusing atmosphere in a conversation as well as how it possibly affects interactants' relationships.

## 2.2. Humor in Japanese conversation

This study examines conversational playfulness—the state where interactants spontaneously and playfully use language often accompanied by smiles, laughter, facial expressions, and tone of voice to entertain themselves, consequently uplifting the conversation. Since it includes (but not limited to) humor in conversation, this section briefly reviews some previous research on Japanese humor that is related to this study.

While an increasing number of researchers explore conversational humor and its influence on interactants' relationships in the English language, humor in Japanese conversation has so far received little scholarly attention. This is, according to Zawiszová (2021), partly due to the widely held stereotypical belief—held mainly by Westerners—that Japanese speakers lack a sense of humor. However, it has been claimed that instead of lacking a sense of humor, Japanese humor is simply different from that of American or British English in terms of the context humor is produced as well as its purpose. For example, both Takekuro (2006) and Oshima (2013) remark that while English jokes appear in formal business settings or even between strangers as well as close friends, Japanese jokes appear only within close personal and familial relationships. As for the purpose of jokes, it is reported that English jokes are told as an ice breaker or expression of identity and sense of humor (Takekuro 2006; Oshima 2013), whereas Japanese jokes and humor are shared among close friends to index and reinforce their solidarity (Oshima 2013, Zawiszová 2021).

What I find more noteworthy than the purpose of humor and the context it appears in is the rhetorical difference between Japanese and English humor. Takekuro (2006) shows an example of an English joke where a speaker creatively and wittily introduces new informational material in the punch line to make it humorous—she calls it “far-fetched rhetoric.” She shows that Japanese jokes, in contrast, use “word-bounded rhetoric,” in which interactants pay close attention to words and phrases used in previous utterances in the same conversation and refer back to them to make a joke or a wordplay. This finding is meaningful as it suggests that cross-speaker repetition may be a key device for Japanese speakers to engage in conversational playfulness.

While some aspects of Japanese conversational humor have been revealed through comparison with that of English, it is obvious that more research is needed to better understand how Japanese speakers entertain themselves in a conversation. To contribute to the body of research on this topic, this study focuses on the device of cross-speaker repetition. I will especially focus on the cases where interactants repeat each other’s utterances for fun, which I will call “playful repetition” hereafter, and examine how Japanese speakers engage in conversational playfulness.

### 3. Data

The data for this study were taken from a Japanese TV talk show, “*Bokura no Jidai* (Our Generation),” produced by Fuji TV. This is a weekly talk show that is broadcast on Sunday mornings. Every week, three guests<sup>2</sup>—often close friends, but also people who are meeting for the first time—are invited to talk freely about what is on their minds without a set format. No host or interviewer is present to control the conversation. The three guests talk freely in a relaxed setting, enjoying a cup of coffee and sometimes drinking alcohol. For this study, I analyzed 6 episodes shown in Table 1 (each participant’s age is given in the parenthesis beside their name).

Table 1. Conversation participants in “*Bokura no Jidai* (Our Generation)”

Episode	Participants	Length (min)
1	Three female announcers/TV presenters: Mio (30), Minami (30), and Marie (30)	22
2	Three female actors: Naoko (43), Kyoko (45), and Yū (46)	22
3	Three male TV personalities (two of whom are comedians and one an actor): Toshiaki (51), Koji (46), and Shinobu (48)	22
4	Three male actors: Osamu (28), Ryuta (30), and Kenta (30)	22
5	Three male actors: Teppei (30), Haruma (26), and Kenji (34)	22
6	Two male comedians and one male script writer: Ozawa (41), Tokui (40), and Masumoto (40)	19

In these episodes, participants acknowledge each other as close friends. An exception is Episode 3, where Toshiaki and Koji are in a mild vertical relationship that is generally known as *senpai* ‘senior’ and *kōhai* ‘junior.’ In addition to that, Shinobu is an actor and he has had a different career path from the other two men, not having had many intimate personal conversations with them (This is manifested in his relatively polite way of speaking). Regardless, all the conversations, including Episode 3, were carried out in a relaxed and friendly manner with many playful exchanges. Recording time for each conversation is approximately 22 minutes respectively (except for Episode 6, which is 19 minutes), and 129 minutes in total. All the conversations were transcribed by myself. The transcription conventions are provided in Appendix.

#### 4. Analysis of Playful Cross-speaker Repetition

Among the 6 sets of triadic conversations, I found a total of 51 playful repetitions. While it is possible that a single repetition shows the characteristics of two or more types of playfulness, these repetitions are broadly classified into 5 types: 1) Tease, 2) reaction to a tease, 3) savoring echo, 4) developing humor, and 5) enjoyment of repetition. Table 2 shows the number of occurrences of each type in the dataset.

Table 2. The types of playful repetition and their occurrences

Type of playful repetition	Number of occurrences
Tease	17
Reaction to a tease	6
Savoring echo	11
Developing humor	11
Enjoyment of repetition	6
Total	51

The following sections explore in detail how these types of playful cross-speaker repetition occur in informal triadic conversations and how they contribute to the creation of a lively and amusing atmosphere and hence, uplifts the conversations.

#### 4.1. Tease

One of the commonly observed types of playful repetition is seen in an act of teasing. Teasing is a delicate act as it can be interpreted both as face-threatening (antagonism, aggression, or provocation) and face-saving (bonding, friendliness, rapport, or solidarity) (Norrick 1993; Straehle 1993; Haugh 2010; Geyer 2010). What is also known about teasing in Japanese conversations, especially when there are more than two interactants, is that it occurs in the form of cross-speaker repetition. Machi (2019, 2021) focuses on the phenomenon where two interactants (teasers) team up and tease a third interactant (the tease target) by repeating their comments about the target. She calls this phenomenon “teasing repetition.” These teases are often accompanied by laughter and hence interpreted as non-serious. Machi remarks that such teasing repetition not only connects the two teasers<sup>3</sup> but also creates a friendly and lively atmosphere in the whole group by indicating the three interactants’ close personal relationship. In this study, there are 17 examples where cross-speaker repetition works as a tease, as exemplified in Excerpt (1).

(1) That’s just like him

01 Kenta: *Kono, reeboo ga monosugoi, gachi atari[, suru n de,*

- ‘(I)’ve been over-exposed to air conditioning, so,’  
 02 Ryuta: *[A, naruhodo, naruhodo ne*  
 ‘Oh, I see, I see’  
 03 Kenta: *Chotto kazamuki o kaete itadakeru to[, chotto,*  
 ‘It would be nice if (anyone) could slightly adjust the  
 airflow’  
 04 Osamu: *[A, ikinari kureemu*  
*kara hairu kanji desu ka*  
 ‘Oh, (you) start out  
 by complaining’  
 05 Kenta: *{laughter}*  
 06 Ryuta: *Soo desu*  
 ‘That’s right’  
 07 Kenta: *{laughter} Me ga sugoi...*  
*{laughter} ‘(My) eyes are really...’*  
 08 Ryuta: ***Soo yuu tokoro ari masu yo ne***  
 (\*Wears a deadpan expression)  
**‘That’s just like (him), isn’t it?’**  
 => 09 Osamu: ***Soo yuu toko aru, [soo yuu toko aru {laughter}***  
**‘That’s just like (him), just like (him)’ {laughter}.**  
 10 Ryuta: *[{laughter}*  
 11 Kenta: *{laughter} Cho, matte, omotta koto iuteko*  
*{laughter} Wait, let’s be honest with what (we) think*

This exchange occurs at the beginning of the conversation, where three men enter a café and take a seat. Once they sit down, Kenta mentions that he is over-exposed to air conditioning and asks the staff to change the air flow. Focusing on Kenta’s request, Osamu teasingly mentions, “Oh, (you) start out by complaining” in 04. It leads to Ryuta’s further teasing, *Soo yuu tokoro ari masu yo ne* “That’s just like (him), isn’t it?” in 08. It is noteworthy that while making this comment, Ryuta wears a deadpan expression and uses an honorific *masu* marker<sup>4</sup>—cues indicating that he is being playful. Hearing Ryuta’s comment, Osamu agrees by repeating the comment twice, as in *Soo yuu toko aru, soo yuu*

*toko aru* ‘That’s just like (him), just like (him),’ accompanying it with laughter. As shown in the transcript, Osamu’s repetition in 09 and subsequent Ryuta’s and Kent’s reaction in 10 and 11 are all accompanied by laughter, which further indicates that Ryuta and Osamu’s comments are not critical but a friendly tease, and that is how Kenta interprets the comment.

Cross-speaker repetition as a tease often co-occurs with linguistic and non-linguistic cues that signal a non-serious, “play” frame<sup>5</sup> (Bateson 1972; Straehle 1993), which also simultaneously add playfulness. In Excerpt (1), the combination of facial expression (i.e., Ryuta’s deadpan expression while teasing) and subsequent laughter effectively indicates that the interactants enjoy the friendly tease, while at the same time, it raises the level of playfulness. Other cues/playful elements that are observed along with repetition in my data are lengthening of vowels, change of tones, loudness of voice, unrealistic content of the tease, and speech style shift, some of which are exemplified in Excerpt (2).

(2) When it comes to musicals

- 01 Haruma: *Bokutachi (Haruma and Teppei) wa “Kinky Boots” no keiko o shite ite=*  
 ‘We are rehearsing “*The Kinky Boots*”’
- 02 Kenji: =*Soo soo*, “Ooke no Monsho” *no [keiko o shite*  
 ‘Right, right, and (I’m) rehearsing “*Crest of the Royal Family*”’
- 03 Teppei: [“Ooke” *no ne*  
 “*The Royal Family*,” yeah’
- 04 Kenji: *Ryoohoo myuujikaru, desu yo*  
 ‘Both are musicals’
- 05 Teppei: *Maa demo ne, myuujikaru ttsuttara*  
 (\*Moves a hand to indicate Kenji)  
 ‘But you see, **when it comes to musicals**’
- 06 Kenji: *Iya iya iya*  
 ‘No no no’
- => 07 Haruma: [*Myuujikaru tte ittara Urai Kenji*  
 (\*Spoken in a loud, exaggerated voice with a big smile)



- ‘When it comes to musicals, Kenji Urai (is the best)’**
- 08 Teppei: [*Ken-chan*<sup>6</sup> xxxx  
**‘It’s Ken-chan, xxx’**
- 09 Kenji: *Nande ore nano, nande ore=*  
 ‘Why is it me, why me?’
- 10 Haruma: = [*Nandemo desho*  
 ‘It’s because **it is**’
- => 11 Teppei: = [*Urai Kenji desho*  
**‘Urai Kenji, it is’**
- => 12 Teppei: *Urai Kenji desho*  
 (\*Wears a confident expression, spoken in an affirmative tone)  
**‘Urai Kenji, it is’**
- 13 Kenji: {*hearty laughter*}

Excerpt (2) is somewhat different from Excerpt (1) in terms of the teasers’ attitudes, as the two teasers (Teppei and Haruma) not only tease the target (Kenji) but also show admiration (Cf. Machi 2019, 2021). Here, the three actors are talking about their current activity, mentioning that they are all working on musicals. While they are all well-known actors, their active fields are slightly different: Haruma and Teppei mainly appear in TV dramas and films, whereas Kenji specializes in musicals. This is manifested in Teppei’s comment, *Maa demo ne, myuujikaru tsuttara* ‘But you see, when it comes to musicals’ in 05, where he is about to praise Kenji’s strong performance skills in musicals. Upon hearing that, Haruma joins and repeats the phrase, *myuujikaru tte ittara* ‘when it comes to musicals’ in a loud, exaggerated voice and adds Kenji’s full name authoritatively, which Teppei might have intended to mention in 05 (Overlapping Haruma’s utterance, Teppei also mentions Kenji’s name in 08 and 11). Moreover, in 12, with a confident facial expression, Teppei repeats Kenji’s full name once more in an affirmative tone to push the humorous tease (and also praise) further. This Teppei’s second push induces Kenji’s hearty laughter, which shows that this sequence of teasing/praising by Teppei and Haruma were successfully amusing.

The last example is where cross-speaker repetition occurs in a banter where a teaser and a target repeat each other’s utterances back and forth. Here, playful

repetition occurs with two cues/playful elements: speech style shift (Cf. Takanashi 2011) and lengthened vowels at the end of each utterance (Cf. Straehle 1993; Takanashi 2011).

## (3) Night outs

- 01 Kyoko: ...*Mae yori wa, koo yoasobi no kaisuu ga*, *gun tto **hetteru** tte yuuka*  
 ‘Compared to before, the number of night outs has significantly **decreased**’
- 02 Naoko: /Nn  
‘Ah’
- => 03 Yū: ***Hette** masu kaaa?*  
 (\*Spoken in an upward intonation with a lengthened vowel at the end)  
 ‘Has it **decreased?**’
- => 04 Kyoko: ***Hetteru** yoo[o]*  
 (\*Spoken with a lengthened vowel at the end)  
 ‘It’s **decreased**’
- => 05 Yū: *[**Hetteru** yooni wa kikoete nai*  
 ‘It doesn’t sound like (it’s) **decreased**’

Here, the three women talk about their drinking habits. When Kyoko claims in 01 that the number of night outs has decreased compared to old days, Yū repeats part of the predicate *hette* ‘(has) decreased’ in 03. Yū’s utterance is a playful tease in two ways. First, she produces this repetition with an honorific marker, *masu*, which represents formal and honorific speech style. It is usually employed when a speaker is talking to their senior or talking in a formal setting. Because Kyoko and Yū are close friends, they primarily talk with each other in the plain form. Therefore, Yū’s style shift from the plain form to the honorific form while producing this repetition indicates that Yū is being playful—even slightly sarcastic—to tease Kyoko (Cf. Haga 1962; Maynard 1991).<sup>8</sup> Another element that signals and adds playfulness is seen at the end of Yū’s utterance. After the repetition of *hette* ‘decreased’ and the *masu* marker, she adds a question marker *ka*, whose last vowel is lengthened. By

stretching the last vowel in an overtly upward intonation, Yū adds her question a little sarcastic touch and hence, playfully challenges Kyoko's claim. Upon Yū's challenge, Kyoko counters by repeating the predicate *betteru* with a sentence-final particle *yo*<sup>9</sup>. Similar to Yū, Kyoko also lengthens the last vowel of the particle, but to make a contrast to Yū's preceding comment, it is uttered in a downward intonation to reinforce her claim. Hearing Kyoko's claim, Yū banters with Kyoko once again in 05, repeating the predicate *betteru* to further challenge Kyoko. While there is no laughter in this segment, Kyoko and Yū banter back and forth with each other throughout this conversation, and presumably it is their common way of engaging in conversational playfulness.

As shown in the above, cross-speaker repetition occurs when interactants wish to tease each other. This style of teasing is easy because interactants can reuse the teasing expressions. It also creates a fun and lively atmosphere because repetition allows the conversation to flow rhythmically.

#### 4.2. Reaction to a tease

Another type of playful repetition relative to teasing is seen when a tease target reacts to a tease. When a teaser uses a humorous or somewhat challenging expression to tease a target, the expression often elicits the target's reaction in the form of repetition. 6 cases of this type are found in my data, some of which are shown below.

Excerpt (4) Last-minute guy

- 01 Toshiaki: *Datte Koji nanji iri nano?*  
 'But Koji, what time do you enter the dressing room?'
- 02 Koji: *Boku, rokuji-han kurai desu [yo]*  
 'I enter at around six thirty'
- 03 Toshiaki: *[Gurai de sho? Goji gurai ni okiru desho, dakara]*  
 'At around that, right? So you wake up at around five, right?'
- 04 Koji: *Iya, rokuji, iya, goji-yonjuugo-hun desu*  
 'No, at six, no, at five forty-five'
- 05 Shinobu: *Eee!*

‘What?’

06 Toshiaki: *{laughter}*

07 Toshiaki: ***Girigiri ha da ne***

‘(You’re) **a last-minute guy**’

=> 08 Koji: ***Girigiri ha desu*** (\*Spoken in a downward intonation)

‘(I’m) **a last-minute guy**’

In Excerpt (4), the three men, each of whom works as a personality in a daily news program, talk about their morning routines, asking each other what time they wake up and enter the dressing rooms. When Toshiaki finds out that Koji sleeps until 5:45 a.m. when he needs to be in the dressing room at 6:30 a.m., he teasingly describes him as *girigiri ha* ‘a last-minute guy’ in 05. Koji reacts to this humorous description, *girigiri ha* ‘a last-minute guy,’ in the form of repetition in an approving tone. Notice that he produces the repetition in a downward intonation, which means he accepts the tease without countering.

The next example is where a target’s reactive repetition has a questioning form. Excerpt (5) is seen at the very end of a conversation, where three women—Minami, Marie, and Mio—mention that, after having a fun conversation, they hope to reunite in the same café in 10 years.

Excerpt (5) Divorced twice

01 Minami: *Yonjuu toka de, arafoo de mata koko ni atsumatta toki ni sa,*  
(\*to Mio) *kekkon shite te, kodomo futari kurai ite, de* (\*to  
Marie) *kekkon shiteru no kana, chotto wakan-nai,*  
*[ rikon shite soo=*

‘At forty, at around forty, when we meet here again, (Mio) will be married, and maybe have two kids, and I wonder if (Marie) will be married, I don’t know, maybe (Marie) will be divorced’

02 Marie: *[Watashi wa*

‘I will be’

03 Marie: =*Eee!*

‘What?’

04 Minami: *{hearty laughter}*

- 05 Marie: *Chotto matte! Mada kekkon mo shite nai no ni!*  
 (\*Spoken in an animated voice)  
 ‘Wait a moment! I haven’t gotten married yet’
- 06 Minami: *Nikai dame ni natteru kara, tte itte soo* {hearty laughter}  
 ‘(You) might be saying ‘I screwed **twice**’ {hearty laughter}
- => 07 Marie: *Shikamo nikai? Nikai?*  
 (\*Spoken in an animated voice, with a smile and a hand  
 gesture of holding up two fingers)  
 ‘Even **twice?** **Twice?**’

In 01, Minami predicts what each member will be like in 10 years, mentioning that Mio (who is quiet in this excerpt) will be married with two kids, and then teasingly mentions that Marie will probably be divorced. Minami’s tease is followed by her hearty laughter, which indicates that she is being playful to tease Marie. Upon hearing Minami’s prediction, Marie animatedly counters that she has not even married yet in 05. Minami further produces another tease by saying Marie will be divorced, possibly *nikai* ‘twice,’ then she laughs hard again. The term *nikai* ‘twice’ is repeated by Marie two times in an animated voice with a hand gesture in the subsequent turn. While Marie repeats it in a questioning and countering tone, she does not actually seem cross (in fact, she has a smile on her face). Rather, Marie’s animated reaction in the form of repetition enhances the amusing atmosphere, signaling that Marie takes Minami’s comment as a tease. As shown in Excerpts (4) and (5), a humorous tease sometimes invites a reaction from the target in the form of repetition—either accepting or countering—and this phenomenon maintains and further enhances the playful atmosphere in the conversation.

#### 4.3. Savoring echo

The above two sections examined how cross-speaker repetition is employed in relation to teasing. In addition to that, cross-speaker repetition is also employed when interactants appreciate and savor humorous expressions that they hear (Tannen 1989; Norrick 1993; Gerhardt 2009). In my data, there are 11 cases where interactants simply echo the humorous part of their interlocutor’s utterance to savor the funny wording.

## Excerpt (6) Someone who appears on and watches TV

- 01 Kyoko: *Yū wa datte, terebi toka dorama, igai to miru mon*  
*[ne'*  
 Yū often watches TV and TV dramas, right?'
- 02 Yū: *[Moo atashi, teka, terebi ni deru hito to[, miru hito ga iru jan*  
 'I, well, you see, there are people who appear on TV and  
 people who watch TV'
- 03 Naoko: *[Hai*  
 'Yes'
- 04 Yū: *Watashi koko no mannaka ni iru[, **detari mitari suru** no ne*  
 'I am in the middle. I **appear on and watch** (TV)'
- 05 Kyoko: *[Miru hito to xxx*  
 'People who watch and xxx'
- 06 Naoko: *Aa, **detari mitari suru** hito {laughter}*  
 'Ah, **someone** (who) **appears on and watches** (TV)' {laughter}

In this excerpt, three actresses talk about how often they watch TV. Yū, who loves watching TV but also works for many TV dramas and quiz shows, humorously describes herself as someone who *detari mitari suru* 'appears on and watches (TV).' Finding Yū's self-description funny, Naoko appreciatively echoes the part, accompanying it with laughter.

The next example of savoring echo is phonetically amusing as repetition contains onomatopoeias. This excerpt takes place where the three male actors discuss how they release their stress when they have some spare time during their busy schedule.

## Excerpt (7) Crack 'n' play (Full)

- 01 Teppei: *Ore, ittaku da na*  
 'One option for me'
- 02 Kenji: *[Nani?*  
 'What?'
- 03 Haruma: *[Ittaku?*  
 'One option?'
- 04 Teppei: *Moo ore moo sugu kasha tsutte*

- ‘I would crack open (a beer) without hesitation’
- 05 All: {laughter}
- Omission-----
- 16 Haruma: ... *Nani ga aru no?*  
‘What would (you) do?’
- 17 Kenji: “*Dorakue*”  
“‘Dragon Quest’”
- 18 Teppei: [*Aa, geemu da*  
‘Oh, a computer game’
- 19 Haruma: [*Haa, yaru-da ne, geemu*  
‘Ah, (you) play computer games’
- 20 Teppei: *Ore mo yaru*  
‘I would play too’
- 21 Haruma: *Jibun mo yaru ja nai desuka, kasha ja nai janai*  
(\*Spoken with a big smile at Teppei)  
‘You would play too. It’s not cracking (open a beer)’
- 22 All: {laughter}
- 23 Kenji: *Chiga(u), kasha kara no piko desho*  
(\*Spoken with gestures of opening a beer and playing a game)  
‘No, (you would) first crack, and play, right?’
- 24 Teppei: *Soo, kasha kara no piko. **Kasha-piko***  
‘Right, first crack, and play. It’s **crack ‘n’ play**’  
(\*Spoken with gestures of drinking a beer and playing a game)
- 25 All: {hearty laughter}
- => 26 Haruma: ***Kasha-piko*** {hearty laughter}, *aa*  
‘**Crack ‘n’ play** {hearty laughter}, oh my’

In 01, being asked what he would do, Teppei straightforwardly states that he would “crack” open (*kasha* is an onomatopoeia for opening a can) a beer, which invites everyone’s laughter. After a short omitted part, this time Haruma asks Kenji what he would do in 16. Without a moment’s hesitation, Kenji answers that he would play computer games. Kenji’s answer quickly changes Teppei’s mind, who joins Kenji by saying *Ore mo yaru* ‘I would play too.’ When Haruma points out the inconsistency about Teppei’s answers (because

he previously said he would crack open a beer, but now he just said he would play computer games) in 20, Kenji assists Teppei by saying *kasha kara no piko desho* ‘(you would) first crack, and play’ (*piko* is an onomatopoeia for the electronic sound that computer games make). The climax of this excerpt is where Teppei shortens Kenji’s utterance and creates a new expression, *kasha-piko* ‘crack ‘n’ play.’ Because both *kasha* and *piko* are onomatopoeias, the combination of the two makes a very funny-sounding expression, which does not sound like ordinary Japanese, and everyone bursts into laughter in 25. In the subsequent turn, Haruma further echoes the expression to savor its funny sound while laughing hard in 26.

As illustrated in Excerpts (6) and (7), interactants often repeat each other’s humorous expressions to appreciate and savor the humor. Because this type of playful repetition is generally produced with laughter, it contributes to the creation of an amusing atmosphere of the conversation.

#### 4.4. Developing humor

Another type of playful repetition is in which interactants incorporate their interlocuter’s humorous expression in their own utterance and further collaboratively develop the humor. While the savoring echo examined in 4.3. was about passively repeating the humorous expression alone with little modification, the fourth type of playful repetition goes further by proactively incorporating the humor and developing it. It is done by confirming the expression, producing a similar humorous expression, asking about the expression, showing agreement, developing a story using the humorous expression, linking a related story, and so forth. There are 11 cases of this type of repetition in my data. Excerpt (8) below is the last part of Excerpt (7).

Excerpt (8) Crack ‘n’ play (last part)

23 Kenji: *Chiga(u), kasha kara no piko desho*

(\*Spoken with gestures of opening a beer and playing a game)

‘No, (you would) **first crack, and play**, right?’

=> 24 Teppei: *Soo, kasha kara no piko. Kasha-piko*

‘Right, **first crack, and play**. It’s **crack ‘n’ play**’

(\*Spoken with gestures of drinking a beer and playing a game)



- 25 All: {hearty laughter}  
 26 Haruma: ***Kasha-piko*** {hearty laughter}, aa  
 ‘Crack ‘n’ play {hearty laughter}, oh my’

What is noteworthy this time is Teppei’s repetition of Kenji in 24. When Teppei hears Kenji’s assist, *kasha kara no piko* ‘(you would) first crack, and play,’ he repeats it in an approving tone with an agreement token, *soo* ‘right.’ While Teppei might be appreciating the playful sound of the phrase—*kasha kara no piko*—, his repetition is more than just displaying appreciation. Through the repetition of *kasha kara no piko*, he proactively approves of the message that Kenji provides, which is, he would crack open a beer first and then play computer games. By so doing, Teppei insists that his statements are not inconsistent as Haruma claims in Excerpt (7), in 21. Furthermore, Teppei develops the humor by producing a similar humorous expression. He shortens the original phrase, combining the two onomatopoeias alone—*kasha piko*—, which induces everyone’s hearty laughter as well as Haruma’s savoring echo in 26.

Interactants also repeat each other’s humorous expressions to ask about its meaning. This type of repetition—questioning repetition—is often seen when interactants wish to clarify the content of their interlocutor’s utterances (Norrick 1987; Machi 2021) even when those utterances are not particularly funny. At the same time, questioning repetition also signals the repeater’s surprise and uncertainty (Machi 2021). This happens with humorous expressions as well, generally accompanied by laughter as a natural consequence of the funniness of the expressions. Excerpt (9) exemplifies this phenomenon.

Excerpt (9) I want to be unbeatable

- 01 Marie: *Toriaezu ima picchingu renshuu yattete=*  
 ‘Recently, I’ve been practicing pitching’  
 02 Minami: = *E, nande?*  
 ‘What, why?’  
 03 Marie: *Nanka anoo, itsuka shikyuushiki o yaru tte yuu yume ga*  
*atte[, yakyyu sugoku suki daka[ra, gambatte mokuhyoo*  
*hyakkiro nanda kedo*  
 ‘I have a dream of throwing the first pitch (in a baseball

game) because I love baseball, and my goal is to pitch at 100km/h'

04 Minami: [*Un*  
'Yeah'

[*Un*  
'Yeah'

05 Mio: [*E!* [*Sugoi ne!*  
'What! My goodness!'

06 Minami: [*Hyakkiro?* [*Doo naritai no?*  
'100km/h? What do you want to be like?'

07 Marie: *E, moo, muteki ni naritai*  
'I want to be **unbeatable**'

=> 08 Minami: [*E, muteki tte nani?* {laughter}  
'What do you mean, **unbeatable**?' {laughter}

09 Mio: [{laughter}

10 Marie: *E, nanka, nani nimo makenai tsuyoi kokoro, mitaina* {laughter}  
'Like, I want to have a strong, unbeatable mentality' {laughter}

Here, the three women talk about Marie's current passion—pitching practice. When Marie says her goal is to pitch at 100km/h, which is an unusual speed for a non-athlete female, Minami asks Marie what she wants to become. Because Marie's answer—she wants to be *muteki* 'unbeatable'—was unexpected and surprising, it invites Minami's questioning repetition (in 08) and Minami's and Mio's laughter (in 08 and 09). As a consequence of Minami's repetition, the story of Marie's goal is further developed and clarified.

The last example is where interactants become not only playful but also witty in terms of using each other's utterance in collaboratively developing a story.

#### Excerpt (10) Drinking alone

01 Kyoko: *Wake ga wakan-nai no, gyaku ni*  
'(I) just don't understand'

02 Naoko: *Sugoi tanoshii desu yo, nanka, hitori de nomu-no=*  
'It's so much fun, like, drinking alone'

- 03 Kyoko: = *Datte*  
*hitori de yopparacchattara*  
 ‘But if (I/we/you)<sup>10</sup> get drunk alone’
- 04 Yū: *Furaffura nano, hitori de, ie de, (\*to Naoko) ne?*  
 ‘(I/we/you) get dead drunk alone, at home, (\*to Naoko) right?’
- 05 Kyoko: [*Desho? Kitto*]  
 ‘(I) guess so. Perhaps’
- 06 Naoko: [*Un*]  
 ‘Yeah’
- 07 Kyoko: *Watashi mo yatta koto wa arunda yo, demo nanka hitori de yopparacchatte, ikiba ga nai kibun=*  
 ‘I’ve done that myself, too, but (I) got drunk alone and (I) felt like (I) had nowhere to go’
- => 08 Yū: = *Ikidaore mitai ni naru no*  
 ‘It turns out that (I/we/you) go collapse and die’
- 09 Naoko: {laughter}
- => 10 Kyoko: *Naru yo ne*  
 ‘That’s how it turns out, yeah’

This is the same group that was examined in Excerpt (3). The three women again talk about their drinking habits. While three of them are all fond of drinking, they assume different positions about drinking alone at home. In 01, Kyoko, who loves having drinks with friends but does not drink alone, claims that she does not understand why people drink alone at home. Then Naoko and Yū, who enjoy drinking alone, explain how fun it can be. A playful exchange takes place from 07 to 10. When Kyoko shares her experience in which she felt like *ikiba ga nai* ‘(she) had nowhere to go’ when she got drunk alone, Yū wittily and humorously responds *Ikidaore mitai ni naru* ‘It turns out that (I/we/you) go collapse and die,’ repeating and incorporating Kyoko’s wording *iki* ‘go’ into her utterance. In 10, Kyoko repeats Yū’s *naru* ‘(it) turns out’ to display her agreement.

As illustrated in Excerpts (8) to (10), interactants repeat each other’s humorous expressions not only to appreciate their humor but also to use the expressions to further develop the story collaboratively. The development of a

story by means of repetition is widely seen in non-humorous, non-playful exchanges (Johnstone 1987, 2002; Tannen 1989; Machi 2020, 2021), and yet when humor is involved as in the above excerpts, this type of repetition induces laughter and uplifts the conversation.

#### 4.5. Enjoyment of repetition

Lastly, interactants repeat each other's utterances to simply take pleasure in the act of uttering the same expressions with their interlocuter(s). While there are various ways to play with words, perhaps this is one of the most uncomplicated, rudimentary forms of play. Playing with words by means of cross-speaker repetition is observed by Keenan (1974) and Duff (2014). Whereas Keenan's research target is toddlers and Duff's high school students in classroom settings, my data of Japanese adult conversations also have 6 similar cases. Excerpt (11) is one example.

Excerpt (11) What is this?

- 01 Tepei: *Nanda kore*  
'What is this?'
- => 02 Haruma: *Nandaro[ne*  
'What is this?'
- => 03 Kenji: *[Nandaro ne, kore*  
'What is this?'
- 04 Haruma: *Mezurashii membaa* (\*Wears a smile)  
'Interesting line-up'
- => 05 Kenji: *Mezurashii membaa desu* (\*Wears a smile)  
'Interesting line-up'
- 06 Teppei: *Jaa suwari [masu ka*  
'Shall we sit then'
- 07 Haruma: *[Hai*  
'Yup'
- 08 Haruma: *Shitsurei shi[masu* (\*Wears a smile)  
'Excuse me'
- => 09 Kenji: *[Shitsurei shimasu. Shassu*<sup>11</sup>  
'Excuse me, 'cus me'

- => 10 Teppei: *Shiyasu*<sup>12</sup>  
 ‘Excuse me’
- 11 Kenji: *Onegai shimasu* (\*Spoken quickly and lightly)  
 ‘Thank you (in advance)’
- => 12 Teppei: *Onegai shimasu* (\*Spoken quickly and lightly, with a smile)  
 ‘Thank you (in advance)’
- => 13 Kenji: *Onegai shimasu* (\*Spoken quickly and lightly)  
 ‘Thank you (in advance)’
- => 14 Haruma: *Onegai shimasu* (\*Spoken calmly in a low voice)  
 ‘Thank you (in advance)’
- 15 All: {laughter}

This exchange takes place when the three men, the same group as in Excerpts (2), (7), and (8), enter the café and settle in their seats. Having a mixed feeling of excitement and slight nervousness about being in a café with a film crew, they express the feeling by uttering (almost) the same expressions, *Nanda kore* or *Nanda ro ne* ‘What is this?’ and *Mezurashii membaa* ‘Interesting line-up,’ in quick succession. By these, they not only share their feelings but also seem to enjoy the act of saying the same things. This is more apparent when they take their seats. In 08, Haruma says *Shitsurei shimasu* ‘Excuse me’—a formulaic polite phrase that is commonly used when a person enters or leaves a room or takes a seat, especially in a formal setting. While it is natural for these men to say this phrase in this situation (they are surrounded by staff at the café and the film crew), instead of saying this politely, Kenji and Teppei say this quickly and lightly in a cheeky way, and hence create a playful atmosphere. This continues with Kenji’s *Onegai shimasu* ‘Thank you (in advance)’—another formulaic polite phrase that is commonly used when a person embarks on a task with others—which is rhythmically repeated by Teppei, Kenji himself, and Haruma. The first reason that these repetitions of *onegai shimasu* are playful is that the three actors are close friends and thus do not need to use this polite phrase with each other. Nevertheless, they repeatedly utter this phrase, playfully enacting a formal style of recording a TV show. Another reason that these repetitions are interpreted as playful is the interactants’ way of speaking. As shown in the transcript, both Kenji and Teppei say the formulaic phrase

quickly and lightly, which is not a proper way to say it, yet they seem to enjoy saying the same phrase cheekily. This repetition cycle ends when Haruma says the phrase in 14, contrary to Kenji and Teppei, in a calm, low voice. While it is difficult to know Haruma's intention, Haruma's use of a different speaking style can also be interpreted as an attempt to be playful. It is possible to think that by saying the same expression, but in a contrastive way, he playfully keeps a distance from his "cheeky" interlocuters. The series of repetitions are followed by everyone's laughter in 15, which indicates that they enjoyed being part of this language play by means of repetition.

The last example is where three interactants playfully reenact a very short scene in one interactant's story. By reenacting the same scene in the same way through repetition, they engage in a language play for a short period of time.

Excerpt (12) "Waaaaa!"

01 Ozawa: ...*Ore wa ne <omission>, chuugakusei no toki ni, Buruu Haatsu ga debyuu shite, ore honto ni "Waaaaa!" tte itta no, hajimete arubamu kiita toki, moo makura ni kao o oshit-sukete "Waaaaa!" tte natta [no*

'When I was in junior high school, the Blue Hearts made their debut, and when I first listened to their album, I got like "Waaaaa!" I put my pillow on my face and (shouted) like "Waaaaa!"

02 Masumoto: *[Hoo*  
'I see'

03 Ozawa: *De moo Buruu Haatsu daisuki de, toku ni Mashima Ma-satoshi san tte yuu, Maashii, ga suki de, Maashii ga donna ongaku o kiita ka, Maashii ga donna hon o yonde kita toka sugoi okkake te[, Maashii mitai na otona ni naritaina tte omotta no*

'Then I fell in love with the band, especially I loved Mr. Masatoshi Mashima, Maashii, and I searched what kind of music he had listened, what kind of books he had read, and I wanted to become an adult like Maashii'

04 Masumoto: *[Nn*

'Ah-huh'

-----omission-----

09 Ozawa: *Mitaina hanashi konaida shuzai demo ittara sa[, sono shuzai no hito ga T. Masashi san tte kaite sa,*

'I shared this story during an interview the other day, then the interviewer wrote Mr. T. Masashi (by mistake)'

10 Masumoto: *[Un un*  
'Ah-huh'

11 Tokui: *{laughter}*

12 Ozawa: *{laughter} Ore sa, (shuzai no hito ga) katte ni kakikaechatte sa, ore, T. Masashi san ni chuugakusei no toki deatte, ni nacchatta no*

'(He) wrote that I had met Mr. T. Masashi when I was in junior high school'

=> 13 Tokui: **"Waaaa!" tte=**  
(\*Spoken with a smile and a gesture of putting a pillow on his face)

'(You got) **like "Waaaa!"**

=> 14 Ozawa: = **"Waaa" tte na[te {chuckling}**  
'(I) **got like "Waaa"** (\*Spoken with a smile and a chuckle)

=> 15 Masumoto: *["Waaa" tte natte, xxx*  
*{laughter}*

'(You) **got like "Waaa"** xxx

*{laughter}*

In this excerpt, Ozawa shares his memory of being strongly inspired by his favorite band, the Blue Hearts, especially by his favorite guitarist, Mr. Masatoshi Mashima, whose nickname is Maashii. In 01, he describes how he was impacted by the band's music, quoting his past self, shouting "Waaaaa!" with excitement. While this is a heartwarming episode, the climax of Ozawa's story is different; the interviewer with whom he recently shared this episode mistakenly wrote a different celebrity's name, Mr. T. Masashi, in his article because their names are similar. The latter celebrity, who used to be a comedian and

actor, has been arrested for the possession and the use of illegal drugs several times, and hence not exactly a respectable figure. However, the interview article mistakenly states that Ozawa was influenced by the latter celebrity due to the interviewer's misunderstanding. Hearing about this ironic story, in 13, Tokui teasingly reenacts Ozawa's moment of excitement saying "Waaaaa!" with a gesture of putting a pillow on his face. In a split second, both Ozawa and Masumoto also reenact the moment, saying "Waaa" with a laughing voice quality. The three men thus engage in a language play of threefold repetition and enjoy this ironic but funny story.

What we can see from these examples is that interactants sometimes entertain themselves by simply uttering the same expression one after another, or in the form of cross-speaker repetition, or even threefold repetition. This happens even though the expression itself is not particularly humorous or funny-sounding as in Excerpt (11). This uncomplicated, even rudimentary level of language play is not limited to little children but also seen among adults' conversations, and interactants indeed take pleasure in the act of uttering the same expression with their interlocutors.

## 5. Discussion

This section briefly explores why Japanese speakers take pleasure in repeating each other's utterances when they engage in conversational playfulness as in the excerpts above, and what we can see from it. To build on the previous findings about the high frequency and various functions of cross-speaker repetition in Japanese, Section 4 demonstrated how the device is employed in playful exchanges. It revealed that cross-speaker repetition is employed in 5 ways—1) tease, 2) reaction to a tease, 3) savoring echo, 4) developing humor, and 5) enjoyment of repetition. By employing these five types of repetition, interactants interweave their playful utterances and jointly create a lively and amusing conversation atmosphere. Here, a question arises: How can the act of repetition, which is basically repeating another's utterance without adding much new informational content, be entertaining?

As pointed out in previous research, in Western cultures, including the US, repetition of another's utterance is often viewed negatively. It is more or less associated with boredom because it is redundant, unoriginal, and lacks refer-



ential novelty (Johnstone 1987, 2002; Tannen 1989; Ferrara 1994). Value is placed on autonomy and uniqueness (Markus and Kitayama 1992) and that is why Westerners “strive to make their statement fresh and original” (Scollon and Scollon 1995, 110).

Interestingly and significantly, Japanese speakers, on the contrary, seem to find the features of cross-speaker repetition positively. What I could see from the various playful repetitions with all the paralinguistic features (e.g., laughter, smiles, tone of voice, and facial expressions, etc.) presented in Section 4 was that in addition to taking pleasure, Japanese speakers seem to find comfort in repeating each other’s humorous expressions, sometimes even multiple times. One simple reason for this phenomenon may be that interactants can jointly and smoothly, even rhythmically, engage in playfulness through repetition.

Another and more substantial reason can be found in Japanese cultural values. It is said that Japanese (and other Asian) culture places value on having one mind or achieving oneness and harmony (Kim 2014;<sup>13</sup> Machi 2021). According to Machi (2021), in a conversation, Japanese speakers pursue the state of belongingness or oneness between individuals, especially those that are intimate, and she also claims that that state is partly created by cross-speaker repetition. This is because multiple speakers’ sharing the same expression, as well as the idea behind the expression, is an intimate act and has a profound impact on interactants’ interpersonal connection. The device is also very easy to employ, hence interpersonal connection is created effortlessly. While Westerners avoid repetition of another’s utterance and strive to use original expression to be unique, Japanese speakers regard the same act as a sign of connectedness. In other words, uttering the same expression with others in a conversation fosters a sense of connectedness and oneness between interactants, which is valued in Japanese culture, and thereby interactants can find comfort in that state. Moreover, it is also possible to think that playful repetition—repetition that involves humor and playfulness—can be even more impactful than non-playful repetition in terms of creating connection because the former simultaneously adds liveliness and amusement to the conversation.

To summarize, cross-speaker repetition is commonly used by Japanese speakers as a device to jointly engage in conversational playfulness. While the

same act is often associated with boredom in English and other European languages, it is viewed positively and regarded as entertaining, and even comforting in Japanese. This is because the act of uttering the same expressions easily creates a sense of connectedness and oneness among interactants, which is valued in Japanese culture. It is often the case that no new informational content is added, and sometimes the repeated expressions are not particularly funny. Still, being playful through cross-speaker repetition is a common phenomenon in Japanese conversation, providing interactants with not only entertainment but also comfort of achieving harmony among themselves.

## 6. Conclusion

To deepen the understanding of the role of the cross-speaker repetition device in Japanese, this study focused on its performance in terms of conversational humor and playfulness. Analyzing 6 sets of informal triadic conversation taken from a TV talk show, the study revealed that there are 5 types of playful cross-speaker repetition. First, the device often occurs relative to teasing. It is used by a teaser in a teasing comment, as well as by a tease target in a reaction to a tease. The device is also used when interactants appreciate and savor humorous expressions that they hear. Another type is that interactants incorporate their interlocutor's humorous expressions in their own utterances to further develop the humor collaboratively. Finally, there are cases where interactants repeat each other's utterances to simply take pleasure in uttering the same expressions with others. By employing these various repetition types, interactants interweave each other's playful utterances and jointly create a lively and amusing atmosphere, and hence entertain themselves in a conversation. It was also shown that those playful repetitions not only entertain interactants but also seem to provide them a sense of comfort.

The discussion section explored why the act of repeating another's utterance, which is often associated with boredom in other cultures, can be not only entertaining but also comforting in Japanese conversation. As a substantial reason, the section addressed the Japanese cultural values that are placed on having one mind and achieving oneness and harmony. I discussed that repeating another's utterance itself is an intimate act, which fosters participants' sense of connectedness and oneness. Therefore, engaging in playful exchanges

through repetition is comforting for Japanese interactants as the device allows them to simultaneously create a lively and amusing atmosphere as well as interpersonal connection.

This study underscores the significance of cross-speaker repetition in Japanese conversation. The study has reinforced that Japanese conversation does thrive on this device. In addition to the management of smooth conversation and interactants' harmonious relationships, the device creates a playful and lively atmosphere, which consequently uplifts the conversation. The device also brings the interactants closer, as they can achieve a sense of oneness and harmony through sharing the same humorous and playful expressions. While more research is needed to elucidate the characteristics of Japanese humor, I hope this study gives a better insight into how Japanese speakers entertain themselves in a conversation.

#### Notes

1 One study reports that Japanese speakers repeat each other's words more than 5 times per minute (Cf. Machi 2021).

2 The TV show invites guests from various backgrounds. They include not only celebrities, such as actors, comedians, announcers, athletes, and musicians, but also renowned writers and comic artists who may not often appear on TV.

3 The two teasers establish rapport by agreeing and emphasizing their mutual assessment of the target (Ishikawa 1991; Strauss and Kawanishi 1996).

4 The effect of using this honorific *masu* marker between close friends is further explained in Excerpt (3).

5 Frame is a concept that was originally developed by Bateson (1972). It is a metamessage about what is going on in the conversation, or as Strachle (1993, 213) puts it, a "label" that shows us what we and our interlocutors are doing in the conversation.

6 Kenji's nickname.

7 Maynard (1991, 555) states that, citing Haga (1962), in a discourse where the plain form is dominant with occurrences of sporadic *desu/masu* form, the latter form expresses "humor and insertion of personal comment, as well as sarcasm."

8 The same phenomenon is shown in Ryuta's teasing comment on Kenta (line 08) in Excerpt (1). Ryuta shifts his speech style from the plain to the honorific to signal that he is being playful.

9 While the particle *yo* performs various functions in Japanese spoken discourse, the main function of this *yo* used by Kyoko is to reinforce her claim.

10 Because the Japanese language does not require the explicit marking of the sentential subject or topic, when such sentences are translated into English, it is often difficult to specify which subject pronouns should be used.

11 This is considered a shortened and quickly spoken version of *shitsurei shimasu*. It is often heard in informal settings.

12 The same as the previous footnote.

13 Kim (2014) analyzes self-deprecating language in Korean, Japanese, and American English, discovering that more self-deprecating language is used by Asians than Americans. She states that, by so doing, Asian speakers equalize with each other and achieve one mind or oneness, which, according to Kim (2014, 83), is the “ultimate goal” of a conversation.

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### Appendix

Transcription conventions are as follows:

[	speech overlap
=	latching without perceptible pause
{laughter}	laughter
xxx	transcription impossible
=>	repetition
Utterance in boldface	points singled out for analysis
Double underline	honorific marker