Composite Social Actions: Question-Intoned Repeat-Formatted Repair Initiation in Mandarin Conversation

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Abstract

Repair refers to the process of detecting and responding to problems with speaking, hearing or understanding in talk-in-interaction. In Mandarin conversation, repetition can function as a linguistic device for implementing other-initiated repair. This is primarily realized through three specific practices: question-intoned repetitions, repetitions suffixed with the final particle "a" and repetitions suffixed with the final particle "ma". Focusing on the first type, this study conducts a fine-grained analysis of naturally occurring Mandarin conversations to demonstrate that such repetitions function not merely as a device for repair initiation, but as inherently composite social actions. Within a single turn, they can simultaneously accomplish additional interactional work, such as seeking clarification, highlighting unexpectedness, or negotiating responsibility. By examining their sequential environment and co-occurrence patterns, this study reveals how interactants utilize this repair form to manage both understanding and social relations within the micro-dynamics of conversation.

Keywords: conversation analysis, repeat-formatted repair initiation, clarification-seeking, unexpectedness, composite actions

1. Introduction

Repair is a central organizational feature of talk-in-interaction that ensures mutual understanding and sustains the progressivity of social interaction. It's an interactional mechanism for addressing problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding to maintain intersubjectivity and enable the progress of talk (Schegloff, 2007; Hayashi, Raymond & Sidnell, 2013). Crucially, repair is typically prompted by "inappositeness" within the sequential context rather than by linguistic "incorrectness". Other-repetition can serve as a form of repair

initiation. Such repetition acts as a "restricted" form of initiation, as it functions to delimit the scope of the trouble source rather than leaving it "open" (Drew, 1997). In Mandarin conversation, question-intoned repeat-formatted other repair-initiations, such as responding to "我昨天去了书店" (*I went to the bookstore yesterday*) with a partial repeat like "昨天？" (*Yesterday?*), constitute a pervasive and systematic practice.

Building on Rossi's (2018) concept of composite actions in talk, this study explores the multifaceted functions of question-intoned repeat-formatted other repair-initiations in

Chinese. While prior study has framed them primarily as understanding checks, expressions of disbelief, or resistance to medical advice, this study shows that their interactional functions are more varied and subtle than simply initiating repair.

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a rigorous, empirical methodology for studying the structures of social interaction (Heritage, 1984). Drawing on this methodology, this study examines how participants treat other-repetitions both as repair initiators and as vehicles for other social actions. Consequently, the study refines our understanding of this specific repair format in Mandarin and provides insights that can inform and extend cross-linguistic research on the interplay between repair organization and social action.

2. Previous Studies on Repair

Repair ensures mutual understanding among interlocutors at the expense of suspending conversational progress and sacrificing communicative continuity (Schegloff, 2007). Of particular relevance to this study are other-initiated repairs of the repetition type, delivered with questioning intonation and positioned in the responsive turn.

The execution of conversational repair is closely intertwined with the performance of other social actions. Drew (1997) observed that open-class repair initiators primarily serve to indicate the initiator's difficulty in understanding the trouble-source turn, thereby revealing that the topic shift in that turn was too abrupt or the action performed was inappropriate. Similarly, Kitzinger (2013) argues that repair is intricately linked to other interactional practices. Repair can be employed to redesign a granting action to meet the contextual demands of a specific sequence; to enhance the credibility of an information source; to fulfill the requirements of storytelling; or to manage epistemic authority, among other functions. Wu (2006) categorizes repetition-based repair initiators into those with interrogative intonation and those ending with the particle "a", positing that both types can perform the communicative function of conveying negative assessment. Yu and Wu (2022) found that patients' repeat-formatted repair initiators simultaneously accomplish three social actions: questioning, initiating repair, and covert resistance. They suggest that training doctors to effectively identify such resistance

actions embedded within repair initiators during medical consultations could enable intervention, thereby promoting smoother and more harmonious doctor-patient communication.

3. Research Methodology and Data Collection

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a rigorous, empirical methodology for studying the structures of social interaction (Heritage, 1984). Originating in the late 1960s through the pioneering work of sociologists Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, it is built upon the foundational insight that everyday conversation is a highly structured, orderly domain of social life (Sacks, 1984).

The theoretical foundations of CA are deeply rooted in the sociological insights of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. Goffman's (1983) concept of the "interaction order" established social interaction as a legitimate institutional domain with its own moral structures, thereby providing CA with its core object of study. Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology shifted the analytical focus onto the common-sense reasoning, or "ethnomethods", that members of society rely upon to create and maintain a shared sense of mutual understanding and social order. CA synthesizes these traditions, examining the interaction order not through external theories but from within, by analyzing the very procedures participants employ to render their conduct intelligible and organized.

At the heart of CA is the study of social action (Sacks, 1992). The central question is not what language means, but what it does. CA investigates how participants design their turns-at-talk to be recognizable as specific actions (action formation) and how recipients ascribe meaning to those actions through their subsequent responses (action ascription) (Schegloff, 2007). This process is inherently collaborative and sequential; actions are "context-shaped" and "context-renewing" (Heritage, 1984: 242), with each turn displaying its understanding of the prior one and shaping the next (Raymond & Robinson, 2024).

Methodologically, CA is distinguished by its commitment to naturalistic data (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). Analysts examine recordings of natural interactions, which are transcribed in minute detail using the system developed by Gail Jefferson (2004). This ensures that analysis is grounded in the observable orientations of the

participants themselves. The key analytical tools for this endeavor are turn-taking and sequence organization. The turn-taking system (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) explains how participants coordinate speaker change through Turn-Constructional Units and Transition-Relevance Places. Turn design examines the linguistic and non-linguistic resources selected to perform an action for a specific recipient (Drew, 2013). Ultimately, social action is understood through the interplay of turn design and its sequential position, a relationship encapsulated as "turn design + sequential position = social action". In essence, CA provides a powerful framework for analyzing the infrastructure of human sociality, revealing the sophisticated order inherent in the flow of everyday conversation.

The data for this study were drawn from two primary sources: a portion was collected firsthand by the author, while the remainder was sourced from the DIG Mandarin Conversation corpus (DMC) (Yu et al., 2024). Following the methodological principles of Conversation Analysis, all audio recordings were transcribed using the Jefferson's transcription system (Jefferson, 2004).

4. Analysis

4.1 Seeking Clarification or Specification

In response to lexical or referential trouble sources, Chinese speakers may employ question-intoned repeat-formatted other-initiated repair as a mechanism to restore and maintain intersubjectivity. The elicited response may take various forms, including: reformulating the original statement to enhance precision, disambiguating a vague or underspecified referent, or providing additional explanatory detail to resolve the perceived opacity of the prior talk.

Thus, such repetition functions not merely as an echo but as a targeted mechanism for achieving mutual understanding and discursive precision within the sequential flow of conversation. They simultaneously perform two tasks: first, they request confirmation that the repetition is accurate, and second, they implicitly and urgently demand further clarification or specification. The following excerpt is a conversation between friends Min (敏) and Yu (玉) about what they had for lunch.

[LWZ: 03:36-04:01]

01 敏: .hhh 那你中午吃的啥?

02　　(0.2)

03 玉: 我点的那个(0.2)熔岩堡.

04　　(0.4)

05 敏: 熔岩堡?

06 玉: .hh 对, 就汉堡王新出的那个,双层牛肉,

07　　中间夹了特辣岩浆芝士酱的.

08 敏: 哦::::, 那个,那个 he>我看广告了<,辣吧?

In line 1, Min initiates a topic by asking Yu about her lunch, positioning herself as unknowing (K-) regarding this specific personal experience. Yu, in line 3, provides an information-giving turn, naming the item she ate as "*Lava Burger*" (熔岩堡). The referent "*Lava Burger*" is produced without elaboration, treating it as a recognizable or self-explanatory item for the recipient. The 0.4-second silence (line 4), projects potential interactional trouble. In line 5, Min initiates repair with a partial repeat (*Lava Burger*?) delivered with a questioning intonation. This turn treats the prior reference as problematic or insufficiently specified, displaying Min's momentary lack of recognition or epistemic access (K-status) regarding the named object, and solicits clarification or specification from Yu as the epistemic authority (K+) on the matter. Yu's response in lines 6-7 elaborates and provides additional explanatory detail to resolve the perceived opacity of the prior talk. The detail provided upgrades Yu's epistemic authority (K+) on this specific personal consumption experience.

In line 8, Min's response exhibits a change-of-state token ("*o::::*"), marking the receipt of new information and a shift from K- to K+ status. The repetition ("*that*") demonstrate online processing and recognition, linking the now-specified item to a prior encountered advertisement. The subsequent tag question seeks confirmation on an inferred property (spiciness), which, while building on the newly established common ground, also displays Min's continued K-status regarding the subjective experience of taste, subtly inviting further elaboration from Yu.

The sequence thus demonstrates a trajectory from problematic reference to resolution and recognition, followed by a topic extension grounded in the newly clarified referent. It further demonstrates how question-intoned repeat-formatted repair initiations serve to

reformulate the original utterance with enhanced precision and provide added explanatory details to address perceived opacity in the prior talk. This point is also demonstrated in the following excerpt.

[GXJ: 07:28-07:44]

01 嘉： 我接下来两周(.)要当查操员了.
02　　　(0.2)
03 琴： 查操员？
04　　　(0.3)
05 嘉： 呃::对, 就是-就是查大家做眼保健操的.
06 琴： hehehe 我还以为什么操呢.

In line 1, Jia produces an informing turn, introducing a new referent "*inspector*" (查操员) into the conversation. By announcing his upcoming role, Jia assumes the epistemic authority (K+) regarding this personal appointment, while treating the term as potentially recognizable or at least interpretable within the ongoing interactional context. Qin initiates repair by repeating the noun phrase with a questioning intonation. This turn treats the prior reference as problematic and solicits clarification from Jia. In line 5, following the utterance "呃::" (uh::), Jia offers confirmation (*yes* "对") and then proceeds to provide a definitional elaboration, specifying the scope of the role (*checking everyone doing eye exercises*). This turn orients to Qin's repair initiation as stemming from a referential gap and systematically addresses it, thereby reinforcing his K+ status on the matter.

4.2 Highlighting Unexpectedness

Question-intoned repeat-formatted repair initiations can also function as a marker of unexpectedness, signaling the speaker's affective, epistemic, or stance toward prior talk. There are two subtly distinct categories in the classification presented below. First, speaker may repeat the interlocutor's prior utterance to highlight its deviation from his/her expectation, thereby enacting a display of surprise. This action makes the interlocutor accountable for explaining or reconciling the discrepancy between expectation and reality. Second, the repetition can serve to implicitly or explicitly challenge the truthfulness, appropriateness of the prior talk.

4.2.1 Surprise-Oriented Repetition

Surprise in interaction serves as a social display, often conveyed through repetition and emphasis on unexpected elements to show affective involvement. This action is oriented toward building a shared stance among participants, and can occur regardless of the positive or negative nature of the unexpected event. It thus functions as a positively valenced move that promotes alignment and affiliation.

[LYC: 01:32-01:48]

01 张: 我跟你讲,我昨天做那道三不粘,
02　　搅了整整四十分钟才成功.
03　　　(0.5)
04 王: ↑四十分钟？
05　　　(.)
06　　天哪, [¥你这手劲也太吓人¥了.
08 张:　　　[hehehe¥不然根本成型不了¥.

In line 1, Zhang begins with the preface "我跟你讲" (*I tell you*), which frames the upcoming utterance as an informing of an A-event, something the speaker has primary epistemic authority over. Then Zhang uses the demonstrative "那" (that), implying the dish is mutually known or inferable from prior context (perhaps they had discussed cooking before). The key detail "四十分钟" (forty minutes) is prosodically stressed, marking it as a noteworthy and potentially surprising element. The 0.5-second pause allows the recipient to process the information, particularly the emphasized duration "forty minutes".

In line 4, Wang produces a turn consisting solely of a repeat of the highlighted element: "↑四十分钟？" (*↑Forty minutes*?). The upward arrow indicates a sharp rise in pitch on the first syllable "四" (sì), making the repeat prosodically marked. This format is a classic other-initiated repair via repeat, but here it does not primarily target hearing or understanding (Zhang has clearly articulated the number). Instead, the repeat serves as a surprise or unexpectedness marker. Wang then explicitly expresses unexpectedness with "天哪" (*Oh my god*), an exclamation that upgrades the affective display from the implicit surprise in line 4. This is followed by an assessment: "你这手劲也太吓人¥了" (*Your arm strength is really frightening*). The exaggerated assessment provides a justification for the surprise—stirring for 40 minutes is physically extraordinary.

In line 8, Zhang's laughter begins in overlap with the end of Wang's turn, showing affective alignment. Zhang then adds an account: "不然根本成型不了¥" (*Otherwise it wouldn't form at all*).

This justifies the extreme effort and treats it as necessary, not just voluntary, thereby modestly downplaying the remarkable achievement while still accepting the positive assessment.

4.2.2 Challenge-Oriented Repetition

A problem of acceptability in interaction often relates to perceived issues of truthfulness or accuracy in prior talk. The speaker can employ this type of repair to question the acceptability of the prior turn and express explicit dissatisfaction, thereby enacting a "negatively valenced" action that signals a belief that the previous statement was incorrect and requires correction.

[JY: 02:31-02:46]

01 风: .hs-,这个模块的开发,我估计大概(.)需要 5 万左右.
02 　　(0.4)
03 婷: 五万?
04 　　(0.2)
05 　　上次类似功能不是只花了两万.
06 风: 和上次不一样(.)结构完全不一样.

In line 1, Feng provides a cost estimate "5 万左右" (*around 50,000*) for a module development project. The 0.4-second silence allows Ting to process the figure and potentially compare it with prior knowledge. In line 3, Ting initiates a question-intoned repeat-formatted repair with "五万？", which questions the accuracy or appropriateness of the figure and mark the unexpectedness of the speaker. In line 5, Ting explicitly contrasts this with past experience ("上次…只花了两万" *Last time… it was just twenty thousand*). The negative-interrogative construction ("不是…吗") presupposes shared knowledge and invites confirmation of an apparent discrepancy. This formulation highlights unexpectedness by juxtaposing the past ("两万") and present ("五万") figures, thereby implying an inconsistency that requires explanation. She then offers a conceptual summary ("结构完全不一样" *The structures differ completely*), explicitly framing the discrepancy as structural rather than merely numerical.

4.3 Negotiating Responsibility Implicitly

Everyday conversation frequently involves narratives about personal and social problems. This study finds that this type of repair is frequently observed within problem-reporting sequences. Specifically, when a preceding turn involves problem reporting that implies "attributing responsibility to the other party",

recipients frequently employ this type of repair as a form of implicit negotiation to responsibility attribution. Subsequently, recipients may utilize some practice to challenge the legitimacy of the reported problem, thereby attempting to negate the premises underlying its presentation.

[QYC: 06:32-07:21]

01 小白：我之前给您说那个:::空调漏水的情况,
02 　　　>你啥时候能过来看看,现在还在漏着呢
04 师傅：还漏?
05 　　　(0.3)
06 小白：还漏:,
07 师傅：[你那个加.你你.你那个是加到 15 米管子吧?
08 小白：[我这个是不是( )
09 　　　(0.7)
10 小白：啊对
11 　　　(1.0)
12 师傅：嗯:,<搁 15 米管子的话>,按说应-
13 　　　(0.2)
14 　　　那-那段时间不应该漏.

In this excerpt, the temporal term "之前" (*before*) in Xiao Bai's turn in line 1 establishes a past reference point. By contrast, the use of "现在" (*now*) in line 2—"现在还漏着呢" (*it's still leaking now*)—frames the air conditioner leakage as a persistent issue that has continued from the past into the present without being resolved. The aspectual ending "着呢," which marks an ongoing state, further underscores the current and unresolved nature of the problem. Xiao Bai's request in line 2, "啥时候能过来看看" (*when can you come and take a look*), is designed with the precondition that a visit is possible ("能来看" – *can come*). By specifically inquiring about timing ("啥时候" – *when*), the turn displays Xiao Bai's relatively high entitlement to make this request.

The way Xiao Bai presents the problem, emphasizing both its duration and persistence, serves to implicitly assign a degree of responsibility to the technician for addressing the leakage. This problem reporting also projects an expectation that the technician should take charge of arranging a repair or other relevant actions. In line 4, rather than accepting or rejecting this projected responsibility, the technician redirects the interaction by initiating a clarification: "还漏？" (*still leaking*?). This repair initiation shifts the conversational focus from *"when"* the repair will occur—a matter directly tied to responsibility—to *"whether"* the problem indeed exists, thereby reframing the issue in terms of epistemic alignment and

problem definition.

Xiao Bai confirms in line 6 with "还漏" (*still leaking*). The technician then pursues further background in line 7 by checking factual details: "你那个是加到 15 米管子吧" (*yours had the pipe extended to 15 meters, right*?). After Xiao Bai's affirmative response in line 10 ("啊对" – *ah yes*), the technician acknowledges with "嗯" (*mm*) in line 12, and then offers a counter-assessment: "那段时间不应该漏" (*it shouldn't be leaking during that period*). By contesting the very premise of the problem, he challenges the factual basis of Xiao Bai's earlier complaint, thereby undoing the presupposition that necessitates a repair visit.

The following excerpt illustrates how a participant (Li) designs a problem presentation to establish the interlocutor's (Chen's) accountability for a problem, and how the interlocutor manages this implicit attribution through repair initiation and reframing.

[ZXN 00:05-00:39]
01 李: 呃:,我-昨天在您这就是买了盆儿,
02   橡-橡皮树º好像º,
03   .hh[>然后<您跟我说先慢慢浇水,
04 陈: [嗯.
05 李: 然后等[那个-花盆儿,就是-
06 陈: [啊对.
07 李: 它往下渗了,就不用浇了,
08   >但是<我今天给它浇水的时候,
09   它就是(0.2)不往下渗.
10   那个土就是:(.)它一直不渗水.
11   (0.5)
12 陈: <不渗水?>
13   (0.2)
14   呃::(.)[你>是不-<你是不没浇透啊,
15 李: [对.
16 陈: 你-你得>浇好几遍儿<[(0.2)好几圈儿.
17 李: [我-我
18 陈: ang:(.)就是º你º那个圈儿,
19   你得转着-转着<慢点>浇啊,
20   >就是<差不多每次都得浇四五圈儿,
21   (.)而且-你得浇两遍,

In lines 1 and 3, Li's turn design employs the formulations "在您这" (*from you*) and "您跟我说" (*you told me*), explicitly grounding the source of both the rubber tree and the watering instructions in Chen. By framing Chen as the epistemic authority for this information, Li constructs a telling in which Chen is interactionally made accountable for the

subsequent problem reporting (Heritage, 2012). Chen's minimal response "嗯" (*mm*) in line 4 acts as a continuer, passing the floor back to Li and encouraging further telling. In line 6, Liu's "啊对" (*ah right*) provides a confirmatory receipt of Li's prior description. Li continues detailing the watering practice in line 7. The turn-initial "但是" (*but*) in line 8 projects an upcoming contrast. This is realized in line 9, where Li produces the highlighted trouble description "不往下渗" (*not draining down*), which is then reiterated, constituting a clear problem presentation.

The 0.5-second gap in line 11 may foreshadow a dispreferred or non-aligning response. In line 12, Chen initiates repair with a questioning repeat, "不渗水？" (*not draining*?). This other-initiated repair does not address the accountability projected by Li but rather targets the acceptability and factual grounding of the problem description itself. It opens a verification sequence, temporarily shifting the interactional agenda from accountability to epistemic alignment. Following a brief 0.2-second gap (line 13), Chen does not await confirmation but instead produces a diagnostic reformulation in line 14: "你是不没浇透啊" (*could it be that you didn't water it thoroughly enough*?). It undoes the presupposition underlying Li's problem (that "non-draining" is an objective fault) and reframes the issue from one of advice failure to one of inadequate implementation. Chen then elaborates on the correct method across lines 16–21. These turns constitute a re-specification and reinforcement of the original advice. Their interactional function is to recalibrate accountability: responsibility for the problem is systematically shifted from the adequacy of the advice to the adequacy of Li's actions, accomplishing a subtle but significant frame shift from a "problem-with-guidance" to a "problem-with-execution".

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that question-intoned repeat-formatted other-initiated repair in Mandarin conversation constitutes a composite social action. It functions not merely as a mechanism for resolving problems of speaking, hearing, or understanding, but simultaneously accomplishes additional interactional work such as seeking clarification, marking unexpectedness (through displays of surprise or challenge), or implicitly negotiating responsibility attribution. The analysis reveals how participants deploy this specific turn-design within its sequential

environment to manage both intersubjectivity and social relations. These findings refine our understanding of repair organization in Mandarin by foregrounding its intrinsic multifunctionality and embodied social logic, thereby contributing to cross-linguistic research on the interplay between sequential structure and social action. Future research could productively examine the variation and constraints of this practice across different institutional settings.

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