Repetition Facilitates Processing: The Processing Advantage of Construction Repetition in Dialogue

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Abstract

Repetitions occur frequently in dialogue. This study focuses on the repetition of lexicalised constructions—i.e., recurring multi-word units—in English open domain spoken dialogues. We hypothesise that construction repetition is an efficient communication strategy that reduces processing effort, and make three predictions based on this hypothesis. Our three predictions are confirmed: repetitions facilitate the processing of constructions and of their linguistic context; facilitating effects are higher when repetitions accumulate, and lower when repetitions are less locally distributed. We measure reduction in processing effort using two surprisal-based measures and estimate surprisal with an adaptive neural language model. Our findings suggest that human-like patterns of repetitions can be learned implicitly by utterance generation models equipped with psycholinguistically motivated surprisal-based objectives and adaptation mechanisms.

SYXU	**S7ZG**	**SVPK**
had a few	*if you look at*	*I think it was just*
it I was	*yes of course*	*like this is*
i'd be like	*look at what*	*like you're not*
were like oh	*if you give*	*so I didn't*
do you get	*and all of that*	*that I know*
and I went	*it doesn't have to*	*it's not even*
I don't like	*right okay so*	*and I was kind of*
a bit more	*something out of*	*and it was like oh*
I know i	*that in itself*	*think of it like*
I was like	*yeah that's fine*	*kind of thing where*

Table 1: Top 10 constructions from three dialogues of the Spoken British National Corpus (Love et al., 2017). Constructions are sorted according to the pointwise mutual information between construction and its respective dialogue (see Section 5 for extraction procedure).

1 Introduction

In language production, speakers select—among a set of possible realisations—the lexical, syntactic, and semantic alternatives that they deem most appropriate to verbalise their communicative intents. For instance, speakers can choose to precede reported speech with *'I said'* or *'I was like'*: *'I was like where is this going?'*, *'I said you don't have to love each other'*. Speakers' choices given such sets of alternatives are influenced, among other things, by their recent linguistic experience. In a dialogue, a speaker may be more prone to choose *'I was like'* if they or their conversational partner have already used it. This is an example of priming: *'I was like'* is repeated more often than expected by chance due to the presence of previous mentions.

Most studies on priming have targeted the repetition of syntactic structures (Levelt and Kelter, 1982; Bock, 1986; Branigan et al., 2000; Reitter et al., 2006b, 2011), explaining repetitions as the result of automatic processing mechanisms (Pickering and Garrod, 2004). Lexical repetitions have also been investigated (e.g., Giles et al., 1979; Brennan, 1996; Niederhoffer and Pennebaker, 2002) and they have been typically explained as the result of social and communicative pressures (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2012; Noble and Fernández, 2015; Doyle and Frank, 2016; Xu et al., 2018) within the framework of communication accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1991). Less is known about the mechanisms underlying speakers' repetition of particular configurations of structures and lexemes, *constructions*, a pervasive phenomenon in conversational language use (Tomasello, 2003; Bybee, 2006; Goldberg, 2006; Sinclair and Fernández, 2021). In this study, we investigate whether conversational partners repeat lexicalised constructions (such as *'I was like'*) throughout a dialogue as a result of two information processing mechanisms traditionally argued to affect priming: 1) *residual activations* due to exposure to local context (Pickering and Branigan, 1998; Cleland and Pickering, 2003) and 2) *implicit learning* of the global statistics of expressions and structures (Bock and Griffin, 2000; Chang et al., 2006; Fine and Florian Jaeger, 2013).

We model the interplay between these two mechanisms, hypothesising that, if they are in place, construction repetition becomes a rational strategy of information transmission (Gibson, 1998; Hale, 2001; Levy, 2008): processing effort is reduced when speakers follow this strategy.

We use *surprisal* to operationalise the processing advantage of construction repetition. Surprisal measures the unpredictability of a linguistic signal, which can be taken as an estimate of the amount of effort required to process the signal (e.g., Jelinek et al., 1975; Keller, 2004; Levy, 2008). We predict that construction repetition has a facilitating effect on processing, observable in the form of a surprisal reduction both for the construction itself and for its linguistic context. To further understand the nature of the processing advantage, we study how it varies across different types of repetition. We predict that the processing advantage of construction repetition increases with the total number of repetitions made in a dialogue, and that it decreases with the distance between repetitions. Our experiments confirm these three predictions, providing new empirical evidence that dialogue partners use repetitions as a communication strategy due to it leading to higher information processing efficiency.

Our findings inform the development of better dialogue models. They indicate that avoiding repetitions in utterance generation (Li et al., 2016; Welleck et al., 2019) may not be the most appropriate strategy. Instead, models should be encouraged to follow human-like patterns of repetitions to be successfully deployed in conversational settings.

2 Background

2.1 Constructions

This work focuses on *constructions*, seen as particular configurations of structures and lexemes in usage-based accounts of natural language (Langacker, 1999; Tomasello, 2003; Bybee, 2006, 2010; Goldberg, 2006). According to these accounts, models of language processing must consider not only individual lexical elements according to their syntactic roles, but also more complex form-function units, which can break regular phrasal structures (Bybee and Scheibman, 1999)

We further focus on fully lexicalised constructions (sometimes called *formulaic expressions*, or *multi-word expressions*). These can be classified based on multiple criteria (Titone and Connine, 1994; Wray, 2002; Columbus, 2013), including transparency, degree of conventionalisation, and communicative function (further distinguishing criteria are presented in Appendix A). Commonly studied types of constructions are idioms (*'break the ice'*), collocations (*'pay attention to'*), phrasal verbs (*'make up'*), binomials, and lexical bundles (*'a lot of the'*). In Section 5, we explain how the notion of lexicalised construction is operationalised in the current study; Table 1 shows some examples.

A common property of constructions is their frequent occurrence in natural language (Bybee, 2006; Carrol and Conklin, 2020). As such, in line with usage-based accounts, they possess a processing advantage (Conklin and Schmitt, 2012). Evidence for this processing advantage has been found in reading (Arnon and Snider, 2010; Tremblay et al., 2011), naming latency (Bannard and Matthews, 2008; Janssen and Barber, 2012), eye-tracking (Underwood, 2004; Siyanova-Chanturia et al., 2011), and electrophysiology (Tremblay and Baayen, 2010; Siyanova-Chanturia et al., 2017). In this paper, we study the processing advantage of the *repetition* of lexicalised constructions.

2.2 Surprisal and Processing Effort

Estimates of surprisal have been shown to be good predictors of processing effort in perception (Jelinek et al., 1975; Clayards et al., 2008), reading (Keller, 2004; Demberg and Keller, 2008; Levy et al., 2009), and sentence interpretation (Levy, 2008; Gibson et al., 2013). Because speakers take into consideration their addressee's processing effort (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Clark and Schaefer, 1989), their linguistic choices can often be explained as an optimal strategy to manage the fluctuations of surprisal levels over time. Surprisal-based accounts have indeed been successful at explaining various aspects of language production: speakers tend to reduce the duration of less surprising sounds (Aylett and Turk, 2004, 2006; Bell et al., 2003; Demberg et al., 2012); they are more likely to drop sentential material within less surprising scenarios (Jaeger and Levy, 2007; Jaeger, 2010; Frank and Jaeger, 2008); they tend to overlap at low-surprisal dialogue turn transitions (Dethlefs et al., 2016); they produce sentences at a uniform surprisal rate in texts (Genzel and Charniak, 2002, 2003; Qian and Jaeger, 2011; Giulianelli and Fernández, 2021); and they keep utterance surprisal uniform in certain contextual units of conversations (Vega and Ward, 2009; Doyle and Frank, 2015a,b;

Xu and Reitter, 2018; Giulianelli et al., 2021). To estimate surprisal, we use GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019) as a model of next word prediction.

2.3 Priming mechanisms

Priming has been widely studied through the analysis of structural repetitions (Levelt and Kelter, 1982; Bock, 1986), whether densely clustered (Branigan et al., 1999; Wheeldon and Smith, 2003; Reitter et al., 2006b), or occurring across multiple utterances and interactions (Hartsuiker and Kolk, 1998; Bock and Griffin, 2000; Branigan et al., 2000; Kaschak et al., 2014).

These two types of priming (often called *short-term priming* and *long-term priming*, respectively) are thought to be the result of different underlying mechanisms (for a review see, e.g., Hartsuiker et al., 2008). Quickly decaying, short-term priming effects rely on an activation-based mechanism dependent on residual traces left by lexical material (Pickering and Branigan, 1998; Cleland and Pickering, 2003). Slowly decaying, long-term priming effects are independent of lexical material and rely on an implicit learning mechanism (Bock and Griffin, 2000; Chang et al., 2006; Fine and Florian Jaeger, 2013). In the current study, we model both mechanisms in order not to constrain a priori the set of possible processes underlying priming.

3 Hypotheses

Does construction repetition come with a processing advantage? Is this advantage due to the mechanisms underlying priming? To answer these questions, we formulate the following three hypotheses.

H1 *Repetition facilitates processing.* We predict 1) repetitions of a construction (i.e., the occurrences that follow its first mention) have a stronger reduction effect on the surprisal of the dialogue turn (i.e., a stronger *facilitating effect*) than first mentions, and 2) a construction has lower surprisal when repeated than when first produced.

H2 *The processing advantage of repetition is cumulative.* We predict multiple repetitions of a construction contribute 1) to a stronger facilitating effect and 2) to a stronger reduction in the surprisal of the construction itself.

H3 *The processing advantage of repetition decays.* We predict that a larger distance between a construction repetition and its previous mention results 1) in a weaker facilitating effect, and 2) in a weaker reduction in the surprisal of the construction.

H1 tests whether repeating a construction reduces processing effort. Comprehenders are known to process written and spoken words more rapidly when they are repeated (for a review, see Bigand et al., 2005), suggesting increased expectation for these words. An increase in expectation (hence reduction in surprisal) due to repetition is compatible with the implicit learning account of priming (Kaschak et al., 2006; Reitter et al., 2011; Fine et al., 2013). However, if repetitions are closely clustered, any surprisal reduction could also be the result of residual activations from previous mentions (Branigan et al., 1999; Wheeldon and Smith, 2003; Reitter et al., 2006b), in line with the activation-based account.

Because **H1** does not distinguish between different repetitions of a construction and their distribution across time, **H2** tests how surprisal reduction effects vary along chains of repetitions in terms of cumulation. Changes in the magnitude of the processing advantage of construction repetition may interact with the number of times the construction has already been repeated (Jaeger and Snider, 2008; Fine and Jaeger, 2016). Cumulative effects propagating over distant repetitions would be evidence in favour of the implicit learning account, whereas cumulative effects taking place locally are compatible with the activation-based account.

The processing advantage of construction repetition may also be determined by the distance between mentions. Inspired by earlier analyses conducted for lexical and syntactic priming with varying results (Reitter et al., 2011; Howes et al., 2010; Healey et al., 2014), **H3** investigates the influence of recency of previous mention on a repetition's processing advantage. Fast decay effects could be taken in support of the activation-based account, whereas slow decay effects would suggest reduction in surprisal is due to sensitivity to the global statistics of expressions and structures in a dialogue, in line with the implicit learning account.

4 Data

We test our hypotheses on the Spoken British National Corpus[1] (Love et al., 2017), a dataset of transcribed spoken open domain dialogues containing

[1] http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk.

1,251 contemporary British English conversations, collected in a range of real-life contexts. We focus on the 622 dialogues that feature only two speakers, and randomly split them into a 70% finetuning set (to be used as described in Section 6) and a 30% analysis set. Table 2 shows basic statistics for the dialogues used in this study.

	Mean ± Std	Median	Min	Max
Dialogue length (# turns)	736 ± 599	541.5	67	4859
Dialogue length (# words)	7753 ± 5596	6102	819	39575
Turn length (# words)	11 ± 15	6	1	982

Table 2: Two-speaker dialogue statistics, Spoken BNC.

5 Extracting Repeated Constructions

We define constructions as multi-word sequences that are repeated within a dialogue. We analyse constructions produced by only one of the dialogue participants as well as those produced by both speakers. To extract a set of constructions from each dialogue, we use the sequential pattern mining method proposed by Duplessis et al. (2017a,b, 2021), which treats the extraction task as an instance of the longest common subsequence problem (Hirschberg, 1977; Bergroth et al., 2000).[2] We modify it to not discard multiple repetitions of a construction that occur in the same dialogue turn. We focus on constructions of at least three tokens, uttered at least three times in a dialogue. Repeated sequences that mostly appear as a sub-part of a larger repeated construction are discarded.[3]

We apply the following further constraints. First, we exclude topic-determined constructions and referential expressions in order to disentangle priming effects from topic coherence effects. To this end, we filter out constructions that include nouns, unless the nouns are highly generic.[4] For example, we discard sequences such as *'playing table tennis'* and *'a woolly jumper'* and retain constructions such as *'a lot of'* and *'the thing is'*. Second, we filter out repetitions that are simply due to a high base frequency rate and not to the speakers' self and mutual priming effects. We measure the association strength between a construction c and a dialogue d as the pointwise mutual information (PMI) between the two:

$$PMI(c,d) = \log_2 \frac{P(c|d)}{P(c)} \quad [1]$$

which measures how unusually frequent a construction is in a given dialogue, compared to the rest of the corpus. We discard all constructions that have a PMI score lower than 1 in their respective dialogue. The probabilities in Eq. 1 are obtained using maximum likelihood estimation over the analysis split of the Spoken BNC. Finally, we exclude sequences containing punctuation marks or which consist of more than 50% filled pauses (e.g., *'mm'*, *'erm'*).[5]

Applying the described extraction procedure to the 187 dialogues in the analysis split of the Spoken BNC, we obtain a total of 3,676 unique constructions and 33,103 occurrences. Further statistics on the extracted constructions are presented in Table 3. Table 1 shows examples of the top 10 constructions extracted from three dialogues, ranked according to their PMI score.

	Mean ± Std	Median	Min	Max
Construction length	3.23 ± 0.52	3	3	7
Construction frequency	3.87 ± 1.93	3	3	58
Constructions per dialogue	206 ± 307	100	3	2023
Words per dialogue turn	31 ± 37	21	3	959

Table 3: Construction statistics extracted from the analysis split of the Spoken BNC. *Construction frequency* is the number of occurrences of a given construction in a dialogue, *Constructions per dialogue* is the number of occurrences of all constructions in a dialogue.

6 Experimental Setup

In this section, we present two surprisal-based measures of processing advantage, the language model that produces surprisal estimates, and statistical tests used to confirm our hypotheses.

6.1 Measures of processing advantage

The *surprisal* of a word choice w_i is the negative logarithm of the corresponding word probability, conditioned on the dialogue turn context t (i.e., the words that precede w_i in the dialogue turn) and on the local dialogue context l:

$$H(w_i|t,l) = -\log_2 P(w_i|t,l) \quad [2]$$

We define the local dialogue context l as the 50 tokens that precede the first word in the dialogue

[2]Their code is freely available at https://github.com/GuillaumeDD/dialig.

[3]We discard constructions that appear less than twice outside of a larger repeated construction in a given dialogue.

[4]We define a limited specific vocabulary of generic nouns (e.g., *'thing'*, *'fact'*, *'time'*); full vocabulary in Appendix B.

[5]The full list of filled pauses can be found in Appendix B.

turn.[6] We use tokens as a unit of context size, rather than dialogue turns, since they more closely correspond to the temporal units used in previous work (e.g., Reitter et al., 2006a), and since the length of dialogue turns can vary significantly (see Table 2). To measure the surprisal of a construction c, we average over word-level surprisal values:

$$S(c;t,l) = \frac{1}{|c|} \sum_{w_i \in c} H(w_i|t,l) \qquad [3]$$

Surprisal estimates provide an approximation of the effort required to process a construction in context. We also measure the surprisal change (increase or reduction in processing effort) contributed by a construction c to its dialogue turn context, which we call the *facilitating effect* of a construction. The facilitating effect is positive when the construction has lower surprisal than its context, and negative when it has higher surprisal:

$$FE(c;t,l) = \log_2 \frac{\frac{1}{|s|-|c|} \sum_{w_j \in s, w_j \notin c} H(w_j|t,l)}{\frac{1}{|c|} \sum_{w_i \in c} H(w_i|t,l)} \qquad [4]$$

The facilitating effect of constructions is more likely to affect the processing of words that are produced immediately before and after the construction itself.[7] We define the locus of the facilitating effect (s in Eq. 4) as the 10 tokens preceding and the 10 tokens following the construction.[8] The tokens exceeding the limits of the current dialogue turn are discarded.[9]

6.2 Estimates of surprisal

To produce surprisal estimates, we use a computational model of next word prediction which implements approximations of both the activation-based and the implicit learning mechanism: it is conditioned on local contextual cues while it learns from exposure to the global dialogue context. We use GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019), a pre-trained autoregressive Transformer language model. We take GPT-2's attention mechanism (Vaswani et al., 2017) over the preceding context of a word as a proxy for the local activation-based mechanism: words in the more proximate dialogue context shape the model's expectations for next words, and thus their contextualised surprisal. As an implicit learning mechanism, we use the Transformer's standard learning rule, back-propagation on the cross-entropy next word prediction error, which has been successful at modelling a wide range of linguistic phenomena (Rumelhart and McClelland, 1986; Elman, 1991; Cleeremans and Elman, 1993; Plaut et al., 1996; Oppenheim et al., 2010; van Schijndel and Linzen, 2018). We rely on HuggingFace's implementation of GPT-2 with default tokenizers and parameters (Wolf et al., 2020), and finetune the pre-trained model on a 70% training split of the Spoken BNC in order to adapt it to the idiosyncrasies of spoken dialogic data.[10] We refer to this finetuned version as the *frozen* model. We use an attention window of length 50, i.e., the size of the local dialogue context, which may span over multiple dialogue turns (see Section 6.1).

Adaptive learning rate When estimating surprisal for a dialogue, we begin by processing the first turn using the frozen language model and then gradually update the model parameters after each turn, using back-propagation with cross-entropy loss. The magnitude of the learning rate is important for these updates to have the desired effect. The learning rate should be sufficiently high for the language model to adapt during a single dialogue, yet an excessively high learning rate can cause the language model to lose its ability to generalise across dialogues. To find the appropriate learning rate, we randomly select 18 dialogues from the analysis split of the Spoken BNC[11] and run an 18-fold cross-validation for a set of six candidate learning rates: $1\mathrm{e}{-5}, 1\mathrm{e}{-4}, \ldots, 1$. We finetune the model on each dialogue using one of these learning rates, and compute perplexity reduction 1) on the dialogue itself (*adaptation*) as well as 2) on the remaining 17 dialogues (*generalisation*). We select the learning rate yielding the best adaptation over cross-validaton folds ($1\mathrm{e}{-3}$), while still improving the model's generalisation ability.[12]

[6]Building on prior work (Reitter et al., 2006a) that uses a window of 15 seconds of spoken dialogue as the locus of local priming effects, we compute the average speech rate in the Spoken BNC (3.16 tokens/second) and multiply it by 15; we then round up the result (47.4) to 50 tokens.

[7]Due to human memory constraints, it is unlikely that the processing of words which are, e.g., 100 tokens (or 30 seconds) away from the construction will still be affected.

[8]This is motivated by the fact that the average length of turns containing a construction is 31 tokens (median length is 21), with constructions being 3 to 7 tokens long—see Table 3.

[9]When the locus s corresponds to the construction itself, the facilitating effect is set to 0.

[10]More details on finetuning can be found in Appendix C.1.

[11]This amounts to ca. 10% of the analysis split. We use the analysis split because there is no risk of "overfitting" with respect to our main analyses.

[12]The cross-validation result can be found in Appendix C.2.

6.3 Statistical modelling

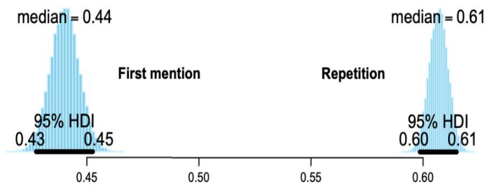
To test **H1**, we split all occurrences of constructions by whether they are the first mention of a construction in a dialogue or a repetition. Our dataset consists of 8,562 first mentions and 24,541 repetitions. Using a Two Sample Bayesian t-test,[13] we compare the distribution of the facilitating effect of first mentions to that of repetitions. We perform the same analysis for construction surprisal values.

H2 and **H3** focus on analysing repetitions only. We label each occurrence with a *repetition index* (the first repetition of a construction has an index of 1, the second, 2, etc.), and with the *distance from the previous mention* in a dialogue, measured as the number of words between the first word of the current occurrence and the first word of the previous occurrence. We fit two linear mixed effect models using *FE* and *S* as response variables, and include multilevel random effects grouped by dialogue and individual speakers.[14] To select the fixed effects of the models, we start with a collection of motivated features—including repetition index and distance from previous mention—and perform an ablation selection procedure, iteratively removing features with the lowest significance, keeping only those that yield a p-value lower than 0.05.[15]

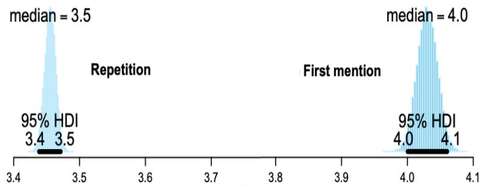
7 Results

We now present the results of our experiments, testing three hypotheses on the processing advantage (facilitating effect and surprisal reduction) of construction repetition. The final linear mixed effect models for both facilitating effect *FE* and construction surprisal *S* include repetition index and distance from the previous mention, which are directly related to our hypotheses, as well as construction length and repetition index within the current turn. The full specification of the best models, with fixed and random effect coefficients, is in Appendix D.

Repetition facilitates processing (H1) Figures 1a and 1b show the posterior distributions of the mean *FE* and *S* do not overlap between groups. For both metrics, highest density intervals of difference between means do not include 0. In sum, we find construction repetitions have a stronger facilitating effect than first mentions, and surprisal of repetitions is lower than that of first mentions. Our first two predictions are thus confirmed.



(a) Facilitating effect (*FE*)



(b) Construction surprisal (*S*)

Figure 1: Posterior predictive distributions for the mean *FE* and *S* according to the Bayesian t-test between first mentions and repetitions.

The processing advantage of repetition is cumulative (H2) The effect of repetition index is positive on *FE* ($7.57\text{e}{-2}, p < 2\text{e}{-16}$) and negative on *S* ($-24.85\text{e}{-2}, p < 2\text{e}{-16}$). Figures 2a and 2b show the opposite trajectories of our two metrics, with a stronger effect of repetition index on construction surprisal. In sum, we find that the facilitating effect of constructions increases, and that surprisal decreases, as previous mentions accumulate. This confirms our second pair of predictions.

The processing advantage of repetition decays (H3) The distance of a construction from its previous mention has a negative effect on *FE* ($-4.29\text{e}{-2}, p < 2\text{e}{-16}$) and a positive effect on *S* ($9.66\text{e}{-2}, p < 2\text{e}{-16}$), also shown in Figures 2c and 2d. Facilitating effect decreases, and surprisal increases, as the current usage of a construction gets further away from its previous mention. Our third pair of predictions is thus confirmed.

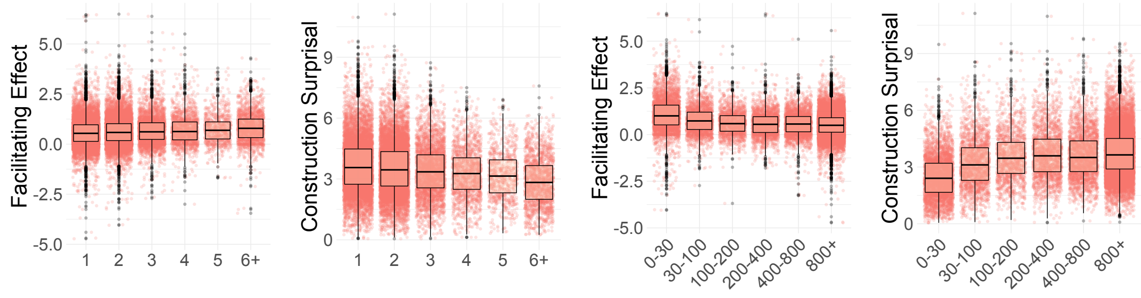
8 Analysis

Having confirmed our three hypotheses, we now further analyse the distribution of *FE* and *S* estimates, the relationship between them, and how their values across repetitions are influenced by additional factors.

[13] We use the t-test implemented in the 'Bayesian First Aid' R-JAGS package (`https://github.com/rasmusab/bayesian_first_aid`) with the default uninformative priors and a credible interval of 95%.

[14] We also try grouping observations only by dialogue and only by individual speakers. The amount of variance explained decreases, so we keep the two-level random effects.

[15] The full list of features can be found in Appendix D.



(a) Repetition Index vs. *FE* (b) Repetition Index vs. *S* (c) Distance vs. *FE* (d) Distance vs. *S*

Figure 2: Facilitating effect (*FE*) and construction surprisal (*S*, bits) vs. repetition index and distance from previous mention (number of words). The first distance bin is the mean length of a turn containing a construction (Table 3).

8.1 Measures of processing advantage

Our first observation is that not only construction *repetition* but also construction *usage* comes with a processing advantage, as measured with both *FE* and *S*—a finding in line with prior work (e.g., Arnon and Snider, 2010; Bannard and Matthews, 2008; Tremblay et al., 2011; Janssen and Barber, 2012). On the one hand, as shown in Figure 1a, the posterior distribution of the mean *FE* spans over positive values for both first mentions and repetitions. The estimated mean *FE* of constructions (Figure 1a) is higher than the mean (0.07 ± 0.82) and median (0.01) *FE* of non-construction sequences in the Spoken BNC dialogues.[16] On the other hand, the posterior predictive mean value of *S* for constructions (Figure 1b) does not include the mean (5.59 ± 2.36) nor the median (5.36) *S* of non-construction sequences.

Our second observation is that the two metrics show similar but opposite patterns in our results. Theoretically—i.e., based on the definition of the two metrics (Section 6.1)—these trends can be predicted a priori: it is more likely for a construction to have a facilitating effect if its surprisal is low; if construction surprisal is high, the context of the construction must be even more surprising for facilitating effect to occur. Empirically, we find that the Kendall's rank-correlation between facilitating effect and surprisal is -0.569 ($p < 2\text{e}{-16}$): although this is a rather strong correlation, the fact that the score is not closer to 1 indicates that there are cases where the two values do not follow the predicted pattern. Some constructions have high facilitating effect and high surprisal:

A So what have you got? what have you got going on with enrichments?
B **I have to do** drama enrichment ***(FE* = 1.32 *S* = 5.46)**

While there are cases where construction surprisal is low and facilitating effect is low or negative:[17]

A But like I always really love strawberries but hate strawberry-flavoured things so I don't
B I don't like strawberries **but I like** strawberry-flavoured things ***(FE* = −0.70 *S* = 2.24)**

These examples show that our measures capture different types of context-dependent processing advantage.[18]

8.2 Other predictors of processing advantage

Other factors that influence facilitating effect and surprisal beyond those directly related to our hypotheses are construction length and repetition index within a dialogue turn. Construction length has the strongest effect on both metrics (*FE*: $30.16\text{e}{-2}, p < 2\text{e}{-16}$; *S*: $-110.90\text{e}{-2}, p < 2\text{e}{-16}$): the longer the construction the stronger its facilitating effect and the lower its surprisal. Table 4 shows a full repetition chain for a construction of length 3; Table 5 (Appendix B) shows a chain for one of length 6. Because constructions, per se, have a processing advantage, and their repetitions facilitate processing (see Section 7), construction repetition is advantageous when constructions occupy a larger portion of processing time (which is proportional to the number of words).

The repetition index of a construction mention *within a dialogue turn* also has an effect on both metrics of processing advantage (*FE*: $14.38\text{e}{-2}, p < 2\text{e}{-16}$; *S*: $-29.48\text{e}{-2}, p < 0.05$).

[16] We calculate *FE* and *S* of all 3- to 7-grams in our analysis split of the Spoken BNC, excluding all n-grams that are equal to extracted constructions. We then sample, for each length n from 3 to 7, s_n non-construction sequence occurrences—where s_n is the number of occurrences of n-tokens-long constructions. The length distributions should match because length has an effect on *FE* and *S* (see Section 8.2).

[17] A negative facilitating effect indicates that the surprisal of the construction is higher than the surprisal of its context.

[18] The examples have been selected among occurrences with *FE* and *S* higher or lower than the mean *FE* / *S* ± std.

Speaker	RI	RI Turn	Dist	Turn	FE	S
A	0	0	-	Drink? that was what he did yeah just just to just to know that I he **might not be** a complete twat but just a fyi	0.40	4.73
B	1 2	0 1	1586 14	Especially for my birthday mind you I **might not be** here for mine and I went what do you mean you **might not be** here?	0.53 0.90	4.01 2.70

Table 4: Repetition chain for the construction *'might not be'* in dialogue SXWH, Spoken BNC, annotated with repetition index (RI), RI within dialogue turn (RI Turn), and distance from previous mention (Dist; in tokens).

Although the identity of the speaker producing previous mentions of a construction does not influence facilitating effect or surprisal,[19] we find strong cumulativity effects for self-repetitions within the current dialogue turn. Only 6.46% of the total construction occurrences have at least one previous mention in the same dialogue turn; yet when this is the case, the magnitude of *FE* and *S* increases with the number of previous local mentions. This interaction between cumulativity and recency (median distance between repetitions in the same turn is 7 words; across turns is 1208 words) indicates that processing advantage increases faster when repetitions are densely clustered.[20]

9 Conclusion

We have hypothesised that speakers repeat lexicalised constructions in dialogues because repetition eases information processing, and have formulated concrete predictions that follow from this hypothesis. To quantify the processing advantage of constructions we have proposed two surprisal-based measures, facilitating effect and construction surprisal, and have analysed how the values of these measures vary as constructions are repeated.

Our experiments on English spoken open domain dialogues confirmed our three predictions: 1) construction repetition reduces processing effort; 2) the effort reduction increases with the frequency of repetitions and 3) decreases with the distance between repetitions. These empirical results provide new evidence that construction repetition in dialogue is an efficient communication strategy. They thus complement prior work on the processing advantage of construction usage (Tremblay and Baayen, 2010; Tremblay et al., 2011; Janssen and Barber, 2012; Siyanova-Chanturia et al., 2017) and contribute to an understudied type of priming, with priming research traditionally focusing on repetitions of syntactic structures (Bock, 1986; Branigan et al., 2000; Reitter et al., 2006b, 2011) and lexical elements (Brennan, 1996; Doyle and Frank, 2016; Xu et al., 2018). Our findings reveal that the information processing efficiency of construction repetition results from a combination of the activation-based and implicit learning priming mechanisms. In line with activation-based accounts of priming, we find that the processing advantage of repetitions accumulates faster when repetitions are densely clustered, and it decays faster within more local distances. However, implicit learning is necessary to explain the fact that both cumulativity and decay effects are still present across distant repetitions.

Besides contributing new empirical evidence on construction usage and repetition in dialogue, this study highlights the importance of a few key desiderata for the design of human-compatible computational dialogue models. First, models should both attend to the local dialogue context and use the global statistics collected throughout a dialogue for on-the-fly adaptation. This would have the natural effect of models being more likely to repeat constructions established as part of the dialogue lexicon. Second, although excessive and unnatural repetitions should be avoided in machine-generated utterances (Li et al., 2016; Holtzman et al., 2019), a certain degree of repetition makes a dialogue sound more natural. Human-like repetition patterns can be explicitly learned by auxiliary modules (Holtzman et al., 2018) or, as our study suggests, they may be implicitly acquired if next-word surprisal training and decoding objectives are complemented with context-dependent surprisal-based objectives. Simple techniques such as those proposed by Wei et al. (2021) and Meister et al. (2020) could be used to operationalise facilitating effect as a psycholinguistically motivated inductive bias to be used in training, and as a word choice criterion in decoding.

[19] All factors related to speaker identity are discarded during the ablation procedure; see Section 6.3 and Appendix D.

[20] Further details can be found in Appendix E.

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Appendix

A Possible Criteria to Distinguish MWEs

Lexicalised constructions can be classified according to multiple criteria (Titone and Connine, 1994; Wray, 2002; Columbus, 2013), including those listed below.

- **Compositionality** This criterion is typically used to separate idioms from other formulaic expressions, although it is sometimes referred to as *transparency* to underline its graded, rather than binary, nature. There is no evidence, however, that the processing advantage of idioms differs from that of compositional phrases (Tabossi et al., 2009; Jolsvai et al., 2013; Carrol and Conklin, 2020). *Therefore we ignore this criterion in the current study.*

- **Literal plausibility** This criterion is typically used to discriminate among different types of idioms (Titone and Connine, 1994; Titone and Libben, 2014)—as compositional phrases are literally plausible by definition. *Because we ignore distinctions made on the basis of compositionality, we do not use this criterion.*

- **Meaningfulness** Meaningful expressions are idioms and compositional phrases (e.g. *'on my mind'*, *'had a dream'*) whereas sentence fragments that break constituency boundaries (e.g., *'of a heavy'*, *'by the postal'*) are considered less meaningful (as measured in norming studies, e.g., by Jolsvai et al., 2013). There is some evidence that the meaningfulness of multi-word expressions correlates with their processing advantage even more than their frequency (Jolsvai et al., 2013); yet expressions are particularly frequent, they present processing advantages even if they break regular phrasal structures (Bybee and Scheibman, 1999; Tremblay et al., 2011). Moreover, utterances that break regular constituency rules are particularly frequent in spoken dialogue data (e.g., *'if you could search for job and that's not'*, *'you don't wanna damage your relationship with'*). *For these reasons, we do not exclude constructions that span multiple constituents from our analysis.*

- **Schematicity** This criterion distinguishes expressions where all the lexical elements are fixed from expressions "with slots" that can be filled by varying lexical elements.*In this study, we focus on fully lexicalised constructions.*

- **Familiarity** This is a subjective criterion that strongly correlates with objective frequency (Carrol and Conklin, 2020). Human experiments would be required to obtain familiarity norms for our target data, and the resulting norms would only be an approximation of the familiarity judgements of the true speakers we analyse the language of. *Therefore, we ignore this criterion in the current study.*

- **Communicative function** Formulaic expressions can fulfil a variety of discourse and communicative functions. Biber et al. (2004), e.g., distinguish between stance expressions (attitude, certainty with respect to a proposition), discourse organisers (connecting prior and forthcoming discourse), and referential expressions; and for each of these three primary discourse functions, more specific subcategories are defined. This type of classification is typically done a posteriori—i.e., after a manual analysis of the expressions retrieved from a corpus according to other criteria (Biber and Barbieri, 2007). In the BNC, for example, we find epistemic lexical bundles (*'I don't know'*, *'I don't think'*), desire bundles (*'do you want to'*, *'I don't want to'*), obligation/directive bundles (*'you don't have to'*), and intention/prediction bundles (*'I'm going to'*, *'it's gonna be'*). *We do not use this criterion to avoid an a priori selection of the constructions.*

B Extraction of Repeated Constructions

We define a limited specific vocabulary of generic nouns to filter out topical and referential construction. The vocabulary includes: *bit*, *bunch*, *day*, *days*, *fact*, *god*, *idea*, *ideas*, *kind*, *kinds*, *loads*, *lot*, *lots*, *middle*, *ones*, *part*, *problem*, *problems*, *reason*, *reasons*, *rest*, *side*, *sort*, *sorts*, *stuff*, *thanks*, *thing*, *things*, *time*, *times*, *way*, *ways*, *week*, *weeks*, *year*, *years*.

We also find all the filled pauses and exclude word sequences that consist for more than 50% of filled pauses. Filled pauses in the Spoken BNC are transcribed as: *huh*, *uh*, *erm*, *hm*, *mm*, *er*.

Table 5 shows a whole construction chain (from the first mention to the last repetition) for a construction of length 6.

C Language Model

C.1 Finetuning

We finetune the *'small' variant* of GPT-2 (Radford et al., 2019) and DialoGPT (Zhang et al., 2020) on our finetuning split of the Spoken BNC (see Section 4) using HuggingFace's implementation of the models with default tokenizers and parameters (Wolf et al., 2020). The finetuning results for both models are presented in Table 6. We finetune the models and measure their perplexity using Huggingface's finetuning script. We use early stopping over 5 epochs.[21] Sequence length and batch size vary together because they together determine the amount of memory required; more expensive combinations (e.g., 256 tokens with batch size 16) require an exceedingly high amount of GPU memory. Reducing the maximum sequence length has limited impact: 99.90% of dialogue turns have at most 128 words.

DialoGPT starts from extremely high perplexity values but catches up quickly with finetuning. GPT-2 starts from much lower perplexity values and reaches virtually the same perplexity as DialoGPT after finetuning. For the pre-trained DialoGPT perplexity is extremely high, and the perplexity trend against maximum sequence length is surprisingly upward. These two behaviours indicate that the pre-trained DialoGPT is less accustomed than GPT-2 to the characteristics of our dialogue data. DialoGPT is trained on written online group conversations, while we use a corpus of transcribed spoken conversations between two speakers. In contrast, GPT-2 has been exposed to the genre of fiction, which contains scripted dialogues, and thus to a sufficiently similar language use. We select GPT-2 finetuned with a maximum sequence length of 128 and 512 as our best two models; these two models (which we now refer to as *frozen*) are used for the adaptive learning rate selection (Section C.2).

C.2 Learning rate selection

To find the appropriate learning rate for on-the-fly adaptation (see Section 6.2), we randomly select 18 dialogues D from the analysis split of the Spoken BNC and run an 18-fold cross-validation for a set of six candidate learning rates: $1\mathrm{e}{-5}$, $1\mathrm{e}{-4}$, $\ldots$, 1. We finetune the model on each dialogue using one of these learning rate values, and compute perplexity change 1) on the dialogue itself (to measure *adaptation*) as well as 2) on the remaining 17 dialogues (to measure *generalisation*). We set the Transformer's context window to 50 to reproduce the experimental conditions presented in Section 6.1.

More precisely, for each dialogue $d \in D$, we calculate the perplexity of our two frozen models (Section C.1) on d and D d ($ppl_{before}(d)$ and $ppl_{before}(D)$, respectively). Then, we finetune the models on d using the six candidate learning rates, and measure again the perplexity over d and

[21] The number of epochs (5) has been selected in preliminary experiments together with the learning rate ($1\mathrm{e}{-4}$). In these preliminary experiments—which we ran for 40 epochs—we noticed that the $1\mathrm{e}{-4}$ learning rate offers the best tradeoff of training time and perplexity out of four possible values: $1\mathrm{e}{-2}$, $1\mathrm{e}{-3}$, $1\mathrm{e}{-4}$, $1\mathrm{e}{-5}$. We obtained insignificantly lower perplexity values with a learning rate of $1\mathrm{e}{-5}$, with significantly longer training time: 20 epochs for GPT-2 and 28 epochs for DialoGPT.

Speaker	RI	RI Turn	Dist	Turn	FE	S
A	0	0	-	[...] I think that everyone should have the same opportunities and **I don't think you should be** proud or ashamed of what your you know what your situation is whether you what your what your race is whether you're a woman or a man whether you live from this pl whether you're in this place [...]	1.21	1.90
A	1	0	80	I well I th I don't think it should **I don't think you should be**	1.40	1.73
A	2	0	19	Well yes perhaps but **I don't think you should be** like um embarrassed about it or I think I think you should just sort of	2.48	1.06

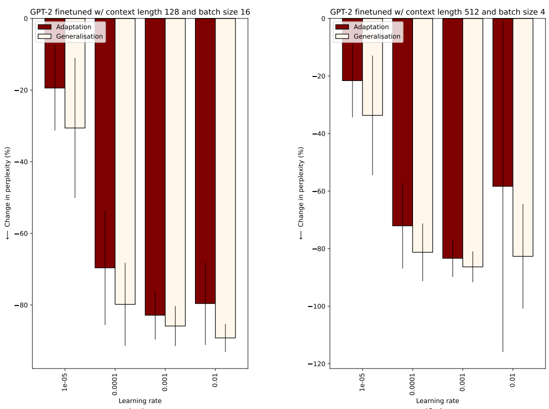
Table 5: A chain of repetitions of the construction *'I don't think you should be'* in dialogue S2AX of the Spoken BNC, annotated with repetition index (RI), RI within dialogue turn (RI Turn), and distance from previous mention (Dist; in tokens).

Model	Learning rate	Max sequence length	Batch size	Best epoch	Perplexity finetuned	Perplexity pretrained
DialoGPT	0.0001	128	16	3	23.211	7091.380
DialoGPT	0.0001	256	8	4	22.262	12886.921
DialoGPT	0.0001	512	4	4	21.728	21408.316
GPT-2	0.0001	128	16	4	23.320	173.761
GPT-2	0.0001	256	8	3	22.212	159.227
GPT-2	0.0001	512	4	3	21.553	149.822

Table 6: Finetuning results for GPT-2 and DialoGPT on our finetuning split of the Spoken BNC.

D d ($ppl_{after}(d)$ and $ppl_{after}(D)$). The change in performance is evaluated according to two metrics: $\frac{ppl_{after}(d)-ppl_{before}(d)}{ppl_{before}(d)}$ measures the degree to which the model has successfully adapted to the target dialogue; $\frac{ppl_{after}(D)-ppl_{before}(D)}{ppl_{before}(D)}$ measures whether finetuning on the target dialogue has caused any loss of generalisation.

The learning rate selection results are presented in Figure 3. We select $1e{-}3$ as the best learning rate and pick the model finetuned with a maximum sequence length of 512 as our best model. The difference in perplexity reduction (both adaptation and generalisation) is minimal with respect to the model finetuned with a maximum sequence length of 128, but since the analysis split of the Spoken BNC contains turns longer than 128 tokens, we select the 512 version. Similarly to van Schijndel and Linzen (2018), we find that finetuning on a dialogue does not cause a loss in generalisation but instead helps the model generalise to other dialogues. Unlike (2018), who used LSTM language models, we find that learning rates larger than $1e{-}1$ cause backpropagation to overshoot, even within a single dialogue. In Figure 3, the bars for $1e{-}1$ and 1 are not plotted because the corresponding data contains infinite perplexity values (due to numerical overflow). The selected learning rate, $1e{-}3$, is a relatively low learning rate for on-the-fly adaptation but it is still higher than the best learning rate for the entire dataset by a factor of 10.



(a) (b)

Figure 3: The adaptation and generalisation performance (defined in Section C.2) with varying learning rate.

D Linear Mixed Effect Models

As explained in Section 6.3 of the main paper, we fit linear mixed effect models using facilitating effect and construction surprisal as response variables and including multilevel random effects grouped by dialogues and individual speakers.[22] To select the fixed effects of the models, we start with a collection of motivated features and perform an ablation selection procedure, iteratively removing features with the lowest significance, and keeping only those that yield a p-value lower than 0.05. We start with the following features: the logarithm of the repetition index, the logarithm of the repetition index *within the current turn*, the logarithm of the distance from the previous mention (computed in three ways: with respect to the previous mention of any speaker, of the current speaker, and of the other speaker), the logarithm of construction length (measures as the number of tokens in a construction), the logarithm of the number of tokens between the current occurrence and the first mention of a construction, and binary features indicating whether the previous mention is by the current speaker, whether it is produced by the initiator of the construction, whether the construction has been already uttered by both speakers, and whether the previous mention is in the current dialogue turn.

The ablation selection procedure yields two models with the following fixed effects: log repetition index, log repetition index within the current dialogue turn, log distance from the previous mention (of any speaker), and log construction length. The best model for facilitating effect is summarised in Listing 1 and the best model for construction surprisal in Listing 2.

E Local Effects of Processing Advantage

Table 7 shows the distribution of repetition indices within the dialogue turn. An index of n indicates that n previous mentions of the construction take place in the current dialogue turn. Figures 4a and 4b show how facilitating effect and construction surprisal vary locally, for repetitions occurring within the same dialogue turn.

	Previous mentions in the current dialogue turn								
Tot	**0**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
33103	30965	1872	188	46	16	11	3	1	1

Table 7: The distribution of repetition indices *within the dialogue turn*.

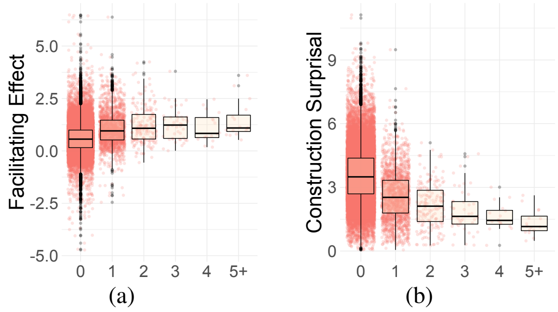


Figure 4: Facilitating effect and construction surprisal (bits) against repetition index *within the current dialogue turn*.

[22] We also try grouping observations only by dialogue and only by individual speakers. The amount of variance (unaccounted for by the fixed effects) explained decreases, so we keep the two-level random effects.

Listing 1: Best linear mixed effect model for Facilitating Effect

```
Linear mixed model fit by REML. t-tests use Satterthwaite's method [
lmerModLmerTest]
Formula:
logFE10 ~ 1 + logLength + logRepIndexInTurn + logRepetitionIndex +
    logDistance + (1 | `Dialogue ID`/Speaker)
   Data: data

REML criterion at convergence: 51869.1

Scaled residuals:
    Min      1Q  Median      3Q     Max
-7.3884 -0.6125 -0.0438  0.5574  8.4443

Random effects:
 Groups                Name        Variance Std.Dev.
 Speaker:`Dialogue ID` (Intercept) 0.006503 0.08064
 Dialogue ID           (Intercept) 0.006100 0.07810
 Residual                          0.478766 0.69193
Number of obs: 24540, groups:
Speaker:`Dialogue ID`, 364; Dialogue ID, 185

Fixed effects:
                     Estimate Std. Error         df t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)         4.056e-01  5.335e-02  2.036e+04   7.603 3.02e-14
logLength           3.016e-01  2.901e-02  2.452e+04  10.394  < 2e-16
logRepIndexInTurn   1.438e-01  1.709e-02  2.451e+04   8.416  < 2e-16
logRepetitionIndex  7.569e-02  6.902e-03  2.360e+04  10.965  < 2e-16
logDistance        -4.290e-02  1.741e-03  2.309e+04 -24.638  < 2e-16

(Intercept)        ***
logLength          ***
logRepIndexInTurn  ***
logRepetitionIndex ***
logDistance        ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Correlation of Fixed Effects:
            (Intr) lgLngt lgRIIT lgRptI
logLength   -0.909
lgRpIndxInT -0.177 -0.008
lgRpttnIndx -0.291  0.067 -0.031
logDistance -0.342  0.030  0.563  0.095
```

Listing 2: Best linear mixed effect model for Construction Surprisal

```
Linear mixed model fit by REML. t-tests use Satterthwaite's method [
lmerModLmerTest]
Formula: S ~ 1 + logLength + logRepIndexInTurn + logRepetitionIndex +
    logDistance + (1 | `Dialogue ID`/Speaker)
   Data: data

REML criterion at convergence: 78900.3

Scaled residuals:
    Min      1Q  Median      3Q     Max
-3.0885 -0.6807 -0.0779  0.6062  6.5359

Random effects:
 Groups                Name        Variance Std.Dev.
 Speaker:`Dialogue ID` (Intercept) 0.01282  0.1132
 Dialogue ID           (Intercept) 0.04292  0.2072
 Residual                          1.43852  1.1994
Number of obs: 24540, groups:
Speaker:`Dialogue ID`, 364; Dialogue ID, 185

Fixed effects:
                     Estimate Std. Error         df t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)         4.866e+00  9.319e-02  1.810e+04  52.215   <2e-16
logLength          -1.109e+00  5.033e-02  2.451e+04 -22.042   <2e-16
logRepIndexInTurn  -2.948e-01  2.964e-02  2.452e+04  -9.943   <2e-16
logRepetitionIndex -2.485e-01  1.197e-02  2.346e+04 -20.761   <2e-16
logDistance         9.657e-02  3.028e-03  2.408e+04  31.889   <2e-16

(Intercept)        ***
logLength          ***
logRepIndexInTurn  ***
logRepetitionIndex ***
logDistance        ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Correlation of Fixed Effects:
            (Intr) lgLngt lgRIIT lgRptI
logLength   -0.903
lgRpIndxInT -0.176 -0.007
lgRpttnIndx -0.289  0.068 -0.030
logDistance -0.339  0.031  0.563  0.096
```