Repetition in sitcom humour

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1 Introduction

In his discussion of the aims and challenges that are to be expected for a stylistics of film, Toolan (2014: 459) suggests as a key area of interest 'that of shot composition and combination, the kinds of cut found in a film and the rhythm of their sequencing'. The individual shots of a film, which are themselves the result of multimodal composition, are arranged into particular narrative and aesthetic sequences. The means by which this composition and combination takes place are likened by Toolan to punctuation in written narrative, which is to say that we can regard these sequences from an onomasiological perspective as a specific expression of a certain idea. Accordingly, particular effects of telecinematic discourse (TCD) can be linked to the way in which that rhythm is constructed, which means that establishing a grammar of TCD by analysing the particular film or television series as an audiovisual text or as audiovisual language in use will provide meaningful insights into the aesthetics of telecinematic texts, the manner in which they construct meaning and the ways in which they communicate with their viewership.

Within the body of texts that are produced based on this grammar of film shots, this chapter focuses on the particular subset of the television sitcom. Sitcoms are approached with the premise that they strive to elicit humour in viewers and that they are thus also a subset of humorous texts.

The specific way in which films and television series create humorous effects has received little attention in stylistic research to date, but there are at least some relevant extant studies on the linguistics of telecinematic humour, on the one hand, and on the stylistics of humorous narratives, on the other. Within linguistics, Brock (2004) is, to my knowledge, the only book-length study of humour in fictional television. Other articles on humour in TCD have had a narrow focus on particular aspects of humour, be it its delivery in terms of prosody (Urios-Aparisi and Wagner 2011) or the complex communicative structures in which it operates (Brock 2015; Dynel 2011a; Messerli 2016). While none of these studies can present a fully fledged stylistics of telecinematic humour in and of themselves, they each contribute to the description of TCD more generally, and humour therein more specifically. Works
that are more stylistic in their focus, but do not specifically focus on telecinematic texts, include Chlopicki’s (1987) analysis of humorous short stories, Attardo’s (2001) overview of different types of humorous texts, Ermida’s (2008) study of shorter and longer humorous narratives and Marszalek’s (2013) cognitive stylistic work on humorous texts. The main interest of these studies is to go beyond the analysis of a single humorous instance and to describe the larger structure and the pragmatics of humorous narratives.

In the same vein, I address humour in the audiovisual text of the sitcom as a network of individual humorous instances. However, my focus in this article is not primarily on the larger structures, but on the microscopic construction of humorous instances in the context of the larger narrative. Humour, for this purpose, is understood as a largely cognitive result of incongruity and resolution (see Suls 1972 and Section 2.1 in this chapter), and the individual humorous instance can be analysed in terms of the textual bases that are intended to result in incongruity, resolution and thus a humorous effect in television viewers.

Within the construction of the individual humorous instance as well as the textual cohesion between instances, repetition has an interesting role. On the one hand, repetition is well established as a text-cohesive device (e.g. Halliday and Hasan 1976); on the other hand, at least some forms of repetition may work against the element of surprise that is often named as a prerequisite for humour (e.g. Suls 1972: 85; Morreall 1983: 84). My qualitative and quantitative analyses of sitcom humour describe the status of repetition within sitcom humour, and at the same time use repetition as a particular lens, through which telecinematic humorous texts can be described.

The main question is then how repetition is used in TCD with the intention of achieving a humorous effect on the viewership. As will be discussed in Section 2.2, a broad understanding of repetition will be applied, which includes the recurrence not just of lexical items but also of structural parallelism as well as of such aspects of multimodality as elements of the mise en scène and character gestures. Accordingly, the question needs to be expanded to different types of repetition and the way in which they are combined to construct humorous instances. The answers to these questions are provided here based on a case study on one episode of the US American sitcom Better with You (ABC, 2010–2011), which serves as a randomly chosen representative of the genre of Sitcom with a laugh track (see description in Section 3.1). This genre was chosen because viewings of the data have shown it to be particularly rich both in terms of humorous instances and in terms of repetition. It thus promises to be as an ideal playground for an exploratory study of repetition in telecinematic humour.

Section 2 will lay the theoretical groundwork for the analysis by defining what is meant by humour and repetition as well as by discussing the roles that repetition may be expected to play in telecinematic humour. Section 3 will then describe the data and individual methodological steps that were taken in order to arrive at the findings presented in Section 4. Finally, the results will be put in context and next research steps will be suggested.
2 The role of repetition in sitcom humour

2.1 Telecinematic discourse and humour

While the pragmatics of TCD is not the main focus of this study, it is nonetheless important to briefly describe the communicative setting in which TCD takes place. The audiovisual text is positioned between a collective sender that produces it and a television audience that receives it. Accordingly, researchers have pointed to the different communicative levels or layers that need to be taken into account when describing interaction in this setting: the level between collective sender and audience, and the level between fictional characters (Dynel 2011b; Piazza, Bednarek and Rossi 2011; Messerli 2017). As has been shown elsewhere (Brock 2015; Messerli 2016), this distinction is crucial, as it leads to different audience vantage points and results in different types of humour: The audience is positioned either on the level of the characters or on that of an observer and thus laughs with or about the target of the humorous instance, respectively. Moreover, the layering of communication is in itself a resource for humour construction, for instance when intertextuality is exploited or when the inclusion of the conventionally inaccessible communicative level between sender and audience is used for comic effect.

Another way of describing this participation structure is to say that the telecinematic text is performed by a set of characters framed in a particular way, and that this performance mediates between the collective sender and its audience. This in turn entails that the dialogue spoken by the fictional characters and the multimodal actions around them are designed for a particular television audience. For instance, we can assume that producers and viewers of the television sitcom share the expectation that a humorous response is one of the intended effects of sitcom viewing.

Before I discuss repetition as a pattern in telecinematic texts, I will define and situate my understanding of humour. Humour research is traditionally separated into three main approaches: superiority, relief and incongruity (for comprehensive overviews of the history of humour theory see Keith-Spiegel 1972; Morreall 1983; Attardo 1994). For the purposes of this study, I will follow the incongruity tradition, which is suitable to explain the mechanisms of constructing humour and the most accepted framework within linguistic humour studies (see, for example, Veale 2004; Dynel 2013). Within this research tradition, Suls's (1972) Incongruity-Resolution model is still an adequate explanatory tool for the analysis of those text-immanent stimuli that trigger the cognitive processes of humour.

Humour, in this understanding, is the result of a clash between semantic frames, that is the knowledge structures that are in this case activated by the narrative (see Attardo 1994; Fillmore 2006). In the linear narrative, a first frame – narrative schema in Suls's (1972) terminology – is juxtaposed with a surprising new stimulus that does not fit the same frame. While the cognitive processes involved in humour reception are not a focus of this study, they highlight what elements of the text need to be taken into account when addressing its potential for humorous effect. For Suls (1972), successful
humour will trigger certain expectations in the recipient, in the case of this study the television audience, and every new bit of information will be tacitly assessed with regard to its congruence with those expectations. A non-humorous continuation of the story is the one that fits the activated frame and the viewer expectations; confusion is the result if a new stimulus is both ill-fitting and inexplicable; humour, finally, is the outcome, if a new surprising stimulus appears to be incongruous with expectations, but can then be made plausible by finding some form of cognitive or experiential rule that is able to resolve the incongruity (Suls 1972: 82).

One aspect to which Suls (1972) pays little heed is that of the context in which humour occurs. Apart from the requirement that a given incongruity must be resolvable, it also has to occur in a space in which a humorous reaction, such as laughter, is permissible. Bateson's (1953, 1955/1972) notion of play is one way of approaching this type of interactional framing, which communicates to the participating parties that they do not have to take the performed actions and utterances at face value, but have licence to be amused by them. In the case of TCD, this play frame or joking frame (Norrick 1996) is achieved via a range of different devices, which include the metacommunicative cues available to the television audience even before they start watching (Brock 2004: 161–4). For instance, the sitcom (i.e. situation comedy) genre as a viewing contract between producers and recipients establishes that one of its key purposes is to amuse its viewership and that therefore laughter is admissible or even expected.

When it comes to the construction of incongruities, the complex participation structure of TCD means that viewer expectations can be tied to the represented frame as well as to that of its representation: This means, in the case of the traditional multicamera sitcom Better with You, that viewers can be expected to be familiar with dialogues between couples and in families at home and in restaurants, and with the way sitcom characters usually interact in these and other situations. Quite clearly, multilevel expectations are thus at play at any given moment, which opens up a range of possibilities when it comes to the specific way in which occurring events can be incongruous with the active frame and the ensuing viewer expectations.

The surprising stimuli that create the incongruities are not only situated on different levels of participation. Many incongruity-models of humour have a semantic background, and the prototypical incongruity indeed rests upon the juxtaposition of two similar but incompatible ideas. This notwithstanding, surprise can emerge on other levels as well, for instance, when it runs against expectations regarding the interactional organization of talk (see Stokoe 2008). Moreover, humour in TCD is also a multimodal phenomenon, with expectation-evoking and surprising stimuli being encoded in spoken dialogue as well as in character gestures and facial expressions or even in the telecinematic realization of any given scene. Finally, the resolvability of the constructed incongruities hinges on the audiovisual text offering ways for the viewers to explain to themselves why the incongruous element was present. This could be instantiated, for instance, by introducing a plot element earlier in the narrative and then reusing it in a new context as the incongruous element that will produce a humorous instance.
2.2 Characteristics and descriptors of repetition

There is to date no comprehensive and systematic discussion of the role of repetition in humour, but Norrick’s (1993, 1994, 1996) studies have provided valuable observations on the subject. With those studies as a starting point, this section addresses the ways in which the two concepts affect each other, and it presents those theoretical properties of repetition and the repeated items that have informed my own categorization (see Section 3). Norrick (1993: 387) speaks of a ‘dual nature of repetition’, in the sense that it both indexes automaticity and ‘sets the stage for abrupt variation’ (Norrick 1993). The latter effect also means that repetition in jokes can serve to establish a ‘background script’, which refers to what Suls (1972) calls the narrative schema on which the subsequent incongruity rests.

This duality of repetition in general is mirrored in two opposed effects that repetition has on humour specifically. On the one hand, repetition in this case acts as a facilitator of humour. This is manifest in the examples Norrick (1996) gives for those aspects of humour where repetition is instrumental: (1) hyperbolic accumulation, (2) the signalling that something is intended as humorous, (3) wordplay; (4) making metalingual comments for the purposes of humour and (5) establishing a humorous form of corrective sequence. In all these cases, the humorous potential of repetition is linked to its role as a facilitator of production (following Johnstone 1987) and – together with variation – as a mechanism that can trigger a frameshift and thus establish a humorous incongruity. Coates (2007) adds to this the contribution of repetition to the establishing and maintaining of non-serious talk. She finds repetition to be ‘a striking feature of talk in a play frame’ (Coates 2007: 42). Repetition can render ongoing talk more and more playful, and particular words and phrases can become charged with humorous meaning and be repeated for humorous effect.

On the other hand, Morreall (1983), and Forabosco (2008) name repetition as a factor potentially conflicting with incongruity. Repetition increases familiarity, and at the same time reduces incongruity through repeated exposure (Forabosco 2008: 56). This conflict between repetition and incongruity is also already addressed by Suls (1972) who adds, however, that repeated incongruities may nevertheless retain their humorous potential. Repetition, he explains, may facilitate a positive response precisely due to familiarity and because it can reactivate the positive response associated with the first exposure (Suls 1972: 94).

In terms of its contribution to humour, repetition is thus multifunctional, and it may either facilitate or hinder humorous effect. A similar diverseness exists in the ways repetition is manifest in the audiovisual text, that is, in the range of stimuli that may be repeated and in the parameters that define each instance of repetition itself. In this vein, Alitchison (1994) discusses the different variables that have been considered in linguistic studies of repetition. In particular, she identifies as ‘straightforward variables’ those objective criteria that directly characterize the repeated units rather than the motivations and purposes that may have triggered their presence. They are (1) medium (spoken or written), (2) participants (self-repetition or other-repetition), (3) scale of fixity (exact or partial), (4) temporal scale (immediate or delayed) and (5) size of unit (e.g. phoneme, morpheme, word, etc.) (Alitchison 1994: 18–19).
In the case of sitcoms as an example of TCD, the medium is primarily spoken, although it is worth mentioning that the multimodal artefact may also include writing, for example, in the form of subtitles or writing that is part of the diegetic world. Moreover, speaking in the case of sitcoms is the result of an elaborate process. The spoken performance by actors in front of the camera rests on scripted dialogues that are themselves ‘written to be spoken as if not written’ (Gregory 1967: 191). The duality of communicative levels in sitcoms also means that repetition may both be a representation of repetitive patterns that occur in non-scripted face-to-face interaction and a property of the communication between collective sender and the television audience, that is, a planned and intentional feature of the narrative audiovisual text through which this communication occurs.

These aspects also have an effect on the second variable of participants, which most analysts of spoken conversation include as a criterion in their classification of repetition. It is worth noting that in the case of TCD, the distinction of the two communicative levels is again crucial, because whereas characters can repeat themselves or other characters on the fictional level, the unidirectionality of the communication between collective sender and viewers means that any repetition is by definition a form of self-repetition on this level.

The third aspect of fixity is a gradual category in several respects. First of all, the notion of exact repetition (e.g. Tannen 1989) – also referred to as full repetition (e.g. Kim 2002), verbatim (e.g. Norrick 1996) or total recurrence (Hoffmann 2012) – can be defined as occurring ‘when the original form and meaning is not changed at all’ (Lichtkoppler 2007: 43). Strictly speaking, however, Johnstone (1987: 211) rightly states that ‘repetition is never exact; it always involves some sort of similarity and some sort of difference, whether the difference be linguistic, as in alliteration or syntactic parallelism, or contextual, as when the same thing is said in different situations’. This includes the fact that within the chronological and linear processes of listening and reading, repeated items are inherently different because they are less novel than the item they repeat.

Leaving such ontological concerns aside, it is possible to more confidently label repetition as exact on some levels than on others. For instance, exact lexical repetition can be distinguished from partial lexical repetition based on how exactly repeated words match previously occurring ones. For aspects such as gestures, facial expressions or intonation contours on the other hand, the identification of exactness becomes even more subjective. For instance, there is no hard boundary between different hand gestures or smiles. As a result, I have distinguished between partial and exact repetition only when it comes to lexical repetition.

The notion of temporal scale can be addressed with the question asked by Johnstone (1994: 3): ‘How far apart can the model and the copy get before we don’t call it a repetition?’ As Johnstone points out herself, there needs to be some form of restriction to more local recurrences in order not to make the concept of repetition meaningless (1994: 5). In this study, I have limited the scope for repetition to the individual sitcom episode; that is, repetition is observed as a local pattern, whereas intertextuality is excluded.

The fifth criterion of the size of unit is best addressed on different levels of language. Whereas repetition of individual words or syntactic groups can be distinguished on the lexical level, phonetic repetition can also address the repetition of specific phones,
which may lead to alliterations and rhymes, for instance. In other cases, the individual
gesture, the individual facial expression or the individual camera movement serve as the relevant repeatable unit.

Informed by these descriptors, but primarily driven by the analyses of the data themselves, the following types of repetition were distinguished in the empirical sections of this chapter:

1. Lexical: single word or multiple words; exact or partial
2. Structural parallelism
3. Prosodic repetition
4. Repetition of facial expressions
5. Telecinematic repetition

For each type of repetition and for repetition in general, their functions in humour will be examined based on a close-reading of examples.

2.3 Corpus and methodology

The goal of this study is to describe the role different types of simple repetition play in constructing humorous instances in TCD and thus in achieving a humorous effect on the viewership. As indicated in Section 2.2, the scope for this endeavour is the individual episode, and specifically a case study of the first episode of Better with You. This series was randomly selected as an example of a US sitcom with a laugh track produced in the 2010s. Since it rests on the detailed analysis of a single episode, this case study is not representative of sitcoms in general. However, my exploratory analyses can offer qualitative insights into the interaction between repetition and humour as well as a typology of repetitive patterns in the sitcom episode at hand, whose validity as a general pattern in humour should be tested on larger datasets in subsequent research.

Better with You (ABC 2010–2011) is an American sitcom which ran on ABC for twenty-two episodes. Its main characters are three couples, two sisters with their partners and the sisters’ parents, and its main settings are the living rooms of each of the three couples. The first episode centres on the engagement of the younger sister Mia to Casey, who is introduced first to the older sister Maddie and her long-term boyfriend Ben, and later to the parents who, to Maddie’s surprise, are thrilled about the hasty engagement. For the most part, the sitcom is filmed as a traditional multicamera sitcom, which means that the scenes are performed in a limited number of small studio sets in front of a live audience, which is typically called the taping of the episode. Some scenes are filmed earlier and screened to the audience during the taping (Simpson 2010). In the case of the studio scenes, usually several takes are recorded, which on the one hand offers variation in post-production, when the episode is edited for broadcast, and on the other hand is necessary when audience reactions do not conform to the expectations of the producers. In such cases, the respective scene has to be filmed anew or even rewritten (Simpson 2010).

Better with You is a sitcom that includes pre-recorded studio audience laughter, which offers a methodological advantage: As I have argued elsewhere (Messerli 2016),
studio audience laughter can be regarded as a metacommunicative cue to the television audience that what immediately preceded it is intended to be funny. This is so irrespective of whether audience laughter is understood as the result of unmodified recording of a studio audience actually present during the filming of the broadcast sitcom audience or as a (partially) fabricated extra-diegetic cue that is planted by the collective sender. In the former case, the humorousness of the instance is ratified by another audience, in the latter the humorous intentions are signalled by the collective sender.

Having selected the data, humorous instances were identified using ELAN: a tool for the transcription and annotation of multimodal data, and on the basis of interactional turns which can either be followed by audience laughter or not, and thus be intended to be read as humorous or serious. This methodological step led to the identification of 149 humorous turns (henceforth HTs) in episode 1 of Better with You. The non-humorous turns were not examined any further, but the HTs were subsequently analysed for repetition and categorized according to different levels on which repetition may occur and as they were presented in Section 2.2. The individual repetition types will be discussed and illustrated in detail in Section 4; however, a first broad distinction was made between repetition across turns, that is, the HT at hand contained a unit repeated from a previous turn, and repetition within the particular HT. All HTs were coded for presence or absence of each category, and the coding of the categories was exhaustive but not mutually exclusive. The codebook was formulated in such a fashion that it foregrounds repeated items, that is, to code for presence only those cases in which repetition was considered salient. More generally, the coding was done from the position of a metarecipient (Dynel 2011b), which is to say that the stance of the analyst is similar to that of a particularly attentive and informed member of the target audience of the artefact. The orientation on the perspective of television viewers meant for instance that prosodic repetition was identified based on subjective coder impression rather than more objective measures.

In order to establish the validity of the categories, intercoder reliability was tested based on a comparable sample of the size of 60 HTs, which amounts to 46.3 per cent of the population. Due to the small size of the data considered for this case study, simple percentage agreement was used as a measure for reliability. The comparison of the two raters showed the coding of character gesture repetition to be below 75 per cent (66.7 per cent for intraturn and 70 per cent for interturn character gesture repetition), whereas all other categories were between 80 and 100 per cent and can thus be considered valid categories for the purposes of this study. Accordingly, simple descriptive statistics was done for the validated categories, which allows tentative statements as to the typicality of repetitive patterns in this sitcom episode. The categories where agreement could not be achieved were excluded from any quantification.

In Section 4, I will present the results of this categorization and illustrate the occurrences of repetition based on selected examples. One option for the second methodological step of tying this taxonomy of repetition to specific functions in telecinematic humour would have been another categorization of functions and the automatic establishment of a set of rules that would predict what type of function each instance of repetition may serve in humour. However, the close examination of the
data revealed that the complex multimodal and multilevel construction of humour in sitcoms, even if it may seem generic and perhaps even unoriginal at first glance, is in fact subject to great variation, which extends to the way it makes use of repetition. Thus, while a summative overview of the range of functions will be provided for each type of repetition, this summary cannot rest on simple quantification of another set of functions as categories, and is instead provided qualitatively, based on the discussion of typical patterns and examples. This close-reading of examples will also allow me to present how repetition at different levels work together to construct humorous instances and thus to establish the stylistic means by which sitcoms create humorous effects for their audiences.

2.4 Repetition in the first episode of Better with You

2.4.1 Overview of repetition

Informed by the theoretical discussion of repetition in Section 2.2, the HTs in the data were analysed with regard to the role repetition plays in their construction. The results of the categorization as it is presented in this section do not yet explain how exactly the respective repetitive patterns contribute to the humorous effect of the turns. However, the outcome is a typology of repetition that demonstrates the ways this sitcom episode and perhaps TCD more generally encode specific story segments as audiovisual text. Furthermore, this typology provides the basis and context for the qualitative analysis of selected examples that link the patterns on the text surface to their humorous functions, which is discussed in the second part of each of the subsequent sections. This will be done in the form of a summary of functions observed in the data for each type of repetition, as well as by discussing selected examples.

The first distinction of the typology concerns distance, with repetition occurring both across turns (intraturn repetition) and within turns (intraturn repetition). In this case and in the categorization more generally, individual categories are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the same HT may repeat a unit from another turn as well as from within itself, and it may contain different types of intraturn and/or interturn repetition.

To start with an overview, 112 (75.2 per cent) of the 149 HTs in the first episode of Better with You contained some form of repetition. As Table 4.1 illustrates, this is mostly due to interturn repetition, which was employed in roughly two-thirds of the analysed turns, whereas less than a fourth of all HTs employed intraturn repetition.

2.4.2 Interturn lexical repetition

The most prototypical form of repetition is repeating one or several lexical items, which occurs frequently in the data. For both interturn and intraturn repetition, the exact repetition of a single word is the most frequent pattern, but across turns, multiple words, that is, syntactic groups, are also repeated either verbatim or with some variation in word order or word morphology (partial). Since most HTs are only one or two seconds long, one explanation for the relative scarcity of that type of repetition interturn could be utterance length.

Interturn lexical repetition follows different patterns in HTs, but it often serves the creation of incongruities by means of recontextualization. For instance, words
conventionally activate the particular semantic frames to which their core meaning serves as an access point, but the same words can also be explicitly associated with other semantic frames. Once established, the link between lexical item and semantic frame can be used to reactivate a frame by repeating the lexical item. A simple example occurs at the beginning of the episode, where the word tunnel is described as a place where couples 'fool around'. Thus, when a cab driver later asks one of the protagonists, Casey, about the route he should take, the one-word response 'tunnel' serves as a concise way of saying 'I want to fool around with my fiancée'. While there is no contrast between the core meaning of tunnel and the context of the taxi ride in which it is mentioned, that is, there is one consistent semantic frame, lexical repetition now also reactivates the earlier association and creates a contrast between the taxi ride and Casey's romantic intentions. It is noteworthy that, while in such cases incongruity depends on repetition, the repetitive incongruous element is nonetheless unexpected. Repetition in this case catches the television audience by surprise, because it repeats the word in an unexpected context.

Example 1, which presents three connected HTs, provides an illustration of a similar pattern of exact single-word repetition:

Example 1

Ben gives advice to Casey.

HT 82  Ben: And don't make any jokes about plastic surgery. Five years ago, Mr. Putney's ears stuck out like this. now they're fine. I don't know what happened. Never asked. (whispering) Don't wanna know.

Ben: So stick to the safe topics like wine, theatre, (.) and the Yankees.

[...]

At a restaurant, Casey is introduced to Joel Putney, his future father-in-law. Ben and the other family members are also present.

HT 92  Casey: Joel. .hh I like your ears.

HT 93  Ben: Hey, you know what you're gonna hear with those ears this year? Cheers for the Yankees!

The topic of Mr. Putney's ears is introduced in a scene somewhere in the middle of the episode, in which Ben prepares Casey for the first meeting with his future mother- and
father-in-law (HT 82). Later, in a scene at a restaurant, Casey is indeed introduced to the father, and instead of heeding Ben’s advice immediately blurts out a compliment about Mr. Putney’s ears (HT 92). In the subsequent humorous turn (HT 93), Ben repeats the same word and thus takes up the topic of ears, while recontextualizing it in such a fashion that it links back to the Yankees, which he earlier described to Casey as a safe topic. Example 1 thus presents two different examples of exact interturn single-word repetition, and it illustrates cohesion through repetition – between turns more generally and HTs more particularly. The frame for the humorous instance in HT 92 is evoked by the context, that is, the mise en scène that represents a restaurant interior and character actions that are typical for a first meeting, such as the shaking of hands and the utterance ‘great to meet you, Vicky’, which immediately precedes HT 92. The compliment on Joel Putney’s ears is incongruous because by means of simple lexical repetition it refers back to the earlier scene and thus activates the audience’s knowledge that ears here constitute a taboo subject. Whereas the function of exact lexical repetition in HT 92 is similar to the aforementioned tunnel example, repetition of the word ears in HT 93 serves to motivate the humorous instance, that is, it repeats and emphasizes an element of the earlier interaction and thus cohesively ties in the subsequent incongruity with the larger narrative. This function can be linked to partial lexical multiple-word repetition in particular.

A different function of lexical repetition is illustrated in Example 2, which shows several instances of exact and partial repetition. The repeated item in this case is a syntactic group that was earlier established as a theme and is repeated several times throughout the episode.

Example 2

Maddie, standing next to her partner Ben, explains their living situation to the reception head waitress.

HT 14 Maddie: Mhmmh neither of us want to be married, but we love each other. We’re very happy. (.) It’s a valid life choice.

[...]

The family is discussing Mia’s engagement and the fact that Maddie is not married at the restaurant.

HT 111 Maddie: Hey, our not being married is a va[lid-]

HT 111 Vicky: [valid] life choice. Okay, she said it. Everybody has to drink.

[...]

Maddie asks her sister Mia for relationship advice in a taxi.

HT 137 Maddie: Should Ben and I have gotten married a long time ago? (.) Is my life choice not valid?

One of the recurring themes in the episode is the contrast between the long-term relationship of the unmarried older sister, Maddie, and the hasty engagement of the younger sister, Mia, to Casey. The announced wedding of the younger sister foregrounds that the older sister is still single and leads to a defensive stance. This stance is encoded in the phrase ‘valid life choice’, which is first uttered in HT 14. When Maddie is about to repeat the phrase at the restaurant, her mother interrupts her and repeats the phrase for her (exact interturn multiple-word repetition). The scene also reveals that within the fictional world
Maddie must have been using the same expression repeatedly before, and that her saying it is part of an ongoing drinking game among the others. Towards the end of the episode, in HT 137, Maddie repeats the same phrase again, when she asks, ‘Is my life choice not valid?’, thus transforming what has repeatedly been asserted into a negative question.

The exact repetition of the stock phrase ‘valid life choice’ is interesting because it explicitly includes the communicative level of the characters. Example 1 was firmly situated on the communicative level between the collective sender and the television audience, and there is no indication that anyone on the character level would be aware of the repetition and recontextualization that is taking place. Contrary to this, HT 111 illustrates that ‘valid life choice’ has become a mantra for the character Maddie, and that repetition is not only noticeable to the viewers but also part of the experiential knowledge of other characters. One way to interpret this is to say that, through repetition, this particular phrase becomes charged with humorous potential, which can then be exploited. At the same time, the act of repeating is itself emphasized; that is, it is established that Maddie’s utterances are predictable also for the other characters. The incongruity in this case thus also rests on pragmatic principles of relevance, with repetition leading to a formulaicity that undermines the very validity of the life choice that is encoded in this phrase.

Repetition on the level of characters is also a way of representing some of the functions of repetition that have been observed in conversation (e.g. by Tannen 1989; Norrick 1987). These are affirmation through repetition and other-correction through partial lexical repetition as well as mockery through imitation. In what Goffman (1986/1974) calls say-foring, characters not only repeat multiple lexical items from another speaker, but do so by imitating or ventriloquizing their voice. While these repetitive practices are anchored on the character level, they are nonetheless constructed by the collective sender and serve mostly cohesive functions as they were described earlier, which is to say that they keep or render active a previously activated semantic frame in order to exploit it for (another) humorous instance.

The last function of lexical repetition that needs to be mentioned here is that of a call-back, that is, the speaking character referring back to an earlier humorous instance. This is illustrated in Example 3.

Example 3

Maddie talks to Ben about the advice she has given Casey.

HT 34 Maddie: Some quick thinking on my part. Told him it’s always been Mia’s dream to get engaged at the summer Olympics.

[...]

Casey kneels in front of Mia and reenacts his proposal with Maddie and Ben standing at the other side of the room as an audience.

HT 46 Casey: Mia, baby. I know it’s not your dream proposal. It’s not the summer Olympics.

            *---turns around to look towards Maddie and nods conspiratorially----*

[...]
Mia talks to Maddie in the kitchen.

HT 50 Mia: Not to you! I know you helped, and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it. hh although some of your ideas were a little whacky. Why did you say I thought the Olympics were romantic?

* Casey

HT 34 creates an incongruity between Mia and Casey's engagement and the summer Olympics. This incongruity is simply repeated in HT 46 and explicitly referred back to in HT 50, which leads to two further humorous instances. Each of the three scenes and the repetition that occurs in them is framed as serious on the character level, which is to say that humour takes place solely on the sender-viewer level. While the repetition of HT 34 is not verbatim in the subsequent HTs, the example nonetheless shows all three HTs to be versions of the same humorous instance, which is achieved through lexical repetition both of the topic of the engagement, and of the incongruous element, the Olympics. In these cases it is then not just the premises that are repeated and exploited for humour several times, but the entire incongruity, which essentially means that the same joke is told three times.

On the level of characters, it can be added that this referring back to the previous mention of the same incongruity is encoded as an action that is consciously performed by the speaking character. In HT 46, this is achieved with a character gesture, in HT 50 it is encoded in Mia's utterance, when she asks Maddie an explicit question about her advice regarding the Olympics. Finally, it is noteworthy that on the character level, all three HTs are repetitions, since even HT 34 is framed as reported speech, with Maddie reporting to Ben what she has told Casey earlier. This first occurrence of humour in the story is however not part of the plot, that is, the television viewers do not actually get to see the scene all three HTs refer back to.

2.4.3 Interturn structural parallelism

Interturn structural parallelism, that is, a repetition of morphological and/or syntactical structure, is much rarer in the data and occurs in three different ways in the episode under investigation. In the first case, it co-occurs with lexical repetition and prosodic repetition, which together constitute the mockery of another character as it was described in the previous section.

Secondly, there are cases of structural repetition that serve functions in the represented interaction, and at the same time are cohesive insofar as they motivate the premise of the humorous instance, as Example 4 illustrates.

Example 4
At the restaurant, Mia is announcing her engagement to her parents, Vicky and Joel.

Mia: Well, this isn't exactly the mood that I wanted to set, but, um, (.).
                hh I'm getting married.

HT 101 Vicky: To who?
HT 102 Joel: Whom!
HT 103 Casey: to ↑me:::::!  
*---standing up---*

HT 104 Casey: to, I::::?  
*---raises eyebrows---*

* Casey

As can be seen in this sequence of HTs, the topic of grammar, introduced earlier in the episode (HT 73–75), is exploited for humour. The role of structural parallelism in this case is to motivate the individual humorous instances by tying them in interactionally. The structure of the question in HT 101, ‘to who?’ is matched in HTs 103 and 104 in ‘to me’ and ‘to I’ respectively.

The third function of structural parallelism concerns the structuring of the represented speech production. In these cases, characters list several actions using the same syntactical structure and thus add to the cohesion of the scene. For instance, Ben tells Casey what he should avoid when meeting his future parents-in-law and does so by repeating a construction of the pattern ‘don’t + [verb].

### 2.4.4 Interturn prosodic repetition

Another function that can be linked to representation of speech production is linked to interturn prosodic repetition. In a few HTs, the rhythm and stress patterns of the previous turn are repeated, and the respective HTs are thus characterized as instances of the same action or as separate steps in a clearly structured sequence of events.

Much more frequent, however, is prosodic repetition that is linked to characterization. As McIntyre (2014: 149) states, characterization refers to the way in which ‘the personal qualities of the character in question as well as other aspects such as their social and physical characteristics’ are established for the benefit of the readers, or in this case the viewers. The patterns of characterization have been studied extensively for plays by Culpeper (2001), and Bednarek (2012) offers a specific view of how characters in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* are constructed as nerds, which is done by associating them with selective attributes that fit nerd stereotypes. In a broad sense, the function prosodic repetition serves in characterization can again be captured by cohesion. The same character repeating the same prosodic patterns establishes consistency in linguistic behaviour and forms the impression in the viewers that this is the typical way in which the character talks, thus making it part of character identity and rendering it an affordance for the collective sender for the construction of humour. Repetition in this sense can be found for all main characters in *Better with You*, but is particularly striking for Casey, with the raised intonation in Example 4, HT 103 being a typical prosodic pattern that recurs and fits in with the character’s explicit self-description as an oddball in this same episode.

### 2.4.5 Interturn repetition of facial expression

Characterization is also a key function for the interturn repetition of facial expressions, which often co-occur with prosodic repetition and mutually reinforce the typicality of represented character behaviour. Repeated facial expressions in the data appear to be
exaggerated when compared to facial expressions that occur in spontaneous face-to-face interaction and are often incongruous simply because they do not fit the range of expressions that are typically associated with the respective frame. Related to this identification of characters is the more plot-driven function of character emotions, which are established and emphasized with repeated facial expressions that are motivated by the fictional events of the episode, but are exaggerated or ill-fitting in the context of the active frame.

2.4.6 **Interturn telecinematic repetition**

The final type of interturn repetition that could reliably be identified was telecinematic repetition. Camera work in a traditional multicamera sitcom like *Better with You* can be described as relatively unoriginal, which is to say that there is little in terms of angles or camera movements that would be striking enough that its recurrence would be registered as a form of repetition. However, the mise en scène, that is, the staged surroundings of the fictional characters and the way they are framed by them, is noticeable in many camera shots in the data. Even more so than was the case with repetition of facial expressions, the mise en scène tends to remain static over the period of an HT, which is why it is not surprising that no repetition of this kind occurs in the data intrturn.

Across turns, however, telecinematic repetition is frequent. One of the ways in which it occurs is to do with the juxtaposition of the three couples that are at the heart of the first episode and this sitcom more generally. For instance, the early HTs – HT 1, HT 4 and HT 5 – all show the windscreens of a typical yellow New York taxi, with the driver visible on the right side of the picture and one of the three couples sitting side by side on the rear seats. The noticeable similarity in situation established by this example of telecinematic repetition is contrasted in this case with three parallel but very different conversations that are juxtaposed in a crosscutting sequence and thus telecinematically constructed as occurring at the same time. While the most obvious use of the mise en scène is as a cue for television audiences to allow them to recognize where a particular scene takes place, it is also used to establish visual parallelism between different shots. The functions of telecinematic repetition can thus be summarized as either simply establishing narrative continuity and thus cohesion between individual HTs, which also serves to keep active a particular frame that can be exploited for humour, or as highlighting a similarity on one level that is contrasted with difference on another – thus reinforcing the incongruousness of a particular ill-fitting element.

2.4.7 **Interturn character gesture repetition and semantic repetition**

Before turning to the discussion of intraturn repetition, two additional types of interturn repetition need to be discussed here. First of these is character gesture repetition, which occurs frequently but turned out to be an unreliable category in this case study. The reason for this is likely the subjectivity of what gestures are similar enough to be considered recurrences of previous gestures. The definition of this category in the codebook was adapted multiple times in different cycles of coding, which improved
inter-rater agreement to 66.7 per cent and 70 per cent, respectively. While a study on repetition in sitcoms does not warrant a more detailed subcategorization of character gestures, this seems an interesting avenue for research in its own right, and it seems likely that particular head movements, hand gestures, arm movements, and so on could be distinguished more reliably if analysed separately. For the purposes of this study, however, I will omit character gesture repetition as a separate category, while assuming that it contributes to aspects of characterization and character emotion as they have been discussed before.

The second type of repetition that I have neglected so far in the data analysis is semantic repetition. Initial views of the data showed that semantic repetition, that is, the repetition of ideas or repetition referring to the same referent, did indeed occur frequently. The categorization during pretests revealed, however, that in this broad sense, semantic repetition was present in all HT. Accordingly, it is more useful for this study to discuss semantic repetition as a general feature of sitcoms and sitcom humour rather than as an aspect that can be present or absent in individual HTs, while a more in-depth qualitative analysis of individual instances of semantic repetition needs to be done in a separate study.

**2.4.8 Intraturn lexical repetition**

Intraturn repetition is limited to the space of the individual turn and can therefore not directly contribute to text cohesion. This also means that it can be discussed on the basis of the individual HT, in which all repeated occurrences are situated by definition. A first important use of intraturn repetition in the data is for reasons of emphasis, and in particular emphatic reinforcement of a frame or of the incongruous element, that is, one of the two key elements involved in the construction of humour. Typically, this effect is achieved by employing lexical repetition, as is the case in Examples 5 and 6:

**Example 5**

*At the restaurant, Ben has just shaken hands with Casey who he is meeting for the first time.*

HT 19  Ben: Oh-hoh tough-**tough**? I’m not**tough**, uhuhuhm I mean, I work out a little.

**Example 6**

*Casey offers to reenact his proposal to Mia for Maddie and Ben.*

HT 44  Maddie: Oh no. no, no. it’s really okay.

Ben is characterized in the series as a white-collar character who likes crossword puzzles rather than physical activity. In HT 19 (Example 5), he responds to Casey – who addressed him as ‘tough guy’ – by echoing the term ‘tough’ and repeating it twice more. Humour in this example hinges on the juxtaposition of salient aspects of Ben’s personality, which are also encoded in his physical appearance, with the notion of toughness. In this case, lexical repetition has the purpose of unmistakably communicating the concept of toughness in order to emphasize the contrast between strength and weakness on which this HT rests.
Example 5 also serves as another illustration of the importance of the distinction of communicative levels. On the level between collective sender and television audience, humour is the goal, and repetition serves an emphatic function. On the character level, on the other hand, the individual instances of lexical repetition are plausible because they have an identifiable function within the represented dialogue. Whereas Ben's first iteration of ‘tough’, repeated from Casey’s ‘tough guy’, acknowledges the attribute, the second instance uttered with question intonation doubts it, and the third instance rejects the complement: ‘I'm not tough.’

Similarly, Example 6 shows Maddie’s reaction in HT 44 to Casey’s offer of reenacting the proposal, with the repetition of the word ‘no’ amounting to an overly clear refusal. Here, too, the main function is emphasis – in this case the overly emphatic refusal of the offer – which is motivated by the experiential, privileged knowledge shared by the television viewers and Maddie. Contrary to Casey, the viewers and Maddie know that the performance of that proposal was informed by insincere advice. This piece of advice in turn was given in an attempt to prevent the couple from an overly hasty commitment to marriage. As is the case in Example 6, emphasis is often the function of intraturn lexical repetition. In other cases, this emphasis serves the reinforcement of the active frame and premise for humour, much like was observed for lexical repetition across turns.

One function of repetition observed in the literature in connection to humour is that of punning and more generally of wordplay. Interestingly, this use of repetition is largely absent from the first episode of Better with You. In fact, there is only one such instance in the data, and it is marked by subsequent turns as unsuccessful humour.

Example 7
Ben gives advice to Casey.

HT 77 Ben: Uh., let's see. call them ‘Mr. and Mrs. Putney’. h even though they'll say, 'call us whatever' oh, an- an- and don't try and make a joke and actually call them ‘whatever’.

HT 78 Casey: Why would I do that?
HT 79 Casey: That's stupid.

In Example 7, the character Ben reports how he exploited the ambiguity in the utterance ‘call us whatever’ for a joke (HT 77). This form of wordplay subsequently receives a negative evaluation by Casey (HTs 78 and 79), and several humorous instances are constructed based on the assumption that Ben's attempt at a humorous reply can be interpreted as an unsuccessful joke.

2.4.9 Intraturn structural parallelism and prosodic repetition

When it comes to repetitive patterns within individual turns, structural parallelism and prosodic repetition are frequent and often occur together. Eleven of the sixteen occurrences of intraturn structural parallelism are accompanied by prosodic repetition, and three of the remaining five instances are accompanied by lexical repetition.
A first function of this kind of repetition is similar to what has been discussed for interturn repetition: Repetition establishes a list and the items of the list are identified as part of the same group through similarity in syntactic form. This list then serves as the premise for humour. Either the pattern is established with two similar instances using structural or prosodic repetition and then broken with variation that creates the incongruity; or the pattern is established and broken at the same time, in the sense that while it is structurally identical, this repetition is contrasted with opposition on the level of meaning.

Example 8

_In a taxi, Ben and Maddie talk about Mia's new boyfriend Casey whom they are about to meet for the first time._

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maddie:</td>
<td>I know, baby, I know. But I have a good feeling. My sister says he's totally different from other guys she's dated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HT 6 Ben:</td>
<td>↑Yeah, but she said the same thing about Nate and Mike. (.) and Emma.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Toolan (2016: 25) states, repetition can be regarded as 'the source of patterning.' Even within short HTs, presenting two similar and one different unit is a way of stressing the incongruity between the established pattern and the different last item. Example 8 shows this function based on prosodic repetition. In HT 6, Ben talks about Mia's former partners, and prosodically establishes a pattern by alternating non-stressed syllables in prepositions and conjunctions with the stressed one-syllable names Nate and Mike. The third item of the list is separated with a pause and is different in terms of phonology. This prosodic repetition emphasizes the similarity of the first two items of the list, which are two typical male names, and their difference to the final name, which is typically female. Thus, the expectations already in place because of societal norms as well as due to the shared experience of the viewers with the character Mia, namely that Ben will now provide a list of male names, are reinforced by the first two names, whose similarity is established as a pattern with the help of prosodic repetition. The final item runs counter to expectations and is thus incongruous and the trigger for the intended humorous effect on the television audience.

Example 9

_Maddie tells Ben how she thinks she dissuaded Casey from proposing too soon._

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HT 34 Maddie:</td>
<td>Some quick thinking on my part. told him it's always been Mia's dream to get engaged at the summer Olympics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddie:</td>
<td>So he'll have to wait till the next ones in 2012. Stuff like that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HT 35 Ben:</td>
<td>So quick thinking. (.) not good thinking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In HT 35 in Example 9, Ben repeats the noun phrase _[adjective]+‘thinking’,_ which emphasizes the fact that he is contrasting two different types of thinking. The similarity in structure thus serves to highlight the contrast in meaning, which in turn reinforces the incongruity on which humour is based here.

_Prosodic repetitiveness often also leads to a noticeable rhythmicality in the respective character utterance. In Example 10, the mother's reaction to learning about_
her youngest daughter's surprise engagement is positive, which is emphasized by the rhythm established through prosodic repetition. As was mentioned for structural parallelism, prosodic repetition is also often accompanied by repetition on another level. Thus, in Example 10, Vicky not only stresses every other syllable but nods her head in the same rhythm and further reinforces the established pattern.

Example 10
Vicky reacts to the news of Mia's and Casey's wedding.

HT 107 Vicky: There's going to be a wedding.
            $\text{-nods-} $ $\text{-nods-} $ $\text{-nods-} $
            $ \text{Vicky} $

On the character level, this form of rhythmic stress emphasizes the represented character emotion, which in this case runs counter to the (inferred) expectations of the other characters and to viewer expectations. Viewers at this point must base their expectations on the projections of the daughters about their mother and thus are likely to expect a negative reaction to the news of the engagement. In other examples, excitement is similarly encoded in rapid repetition of stress patterns.

2.4.10 Intratum repetition of facial expressions

Intratum repetition of facial expressions is substantially less frequent in the data than its interturn counterpart. When I have stated in Section 2.4.9 that intratum prosodic repetition and structural parallelism often occur together, this tendency of cooccurrence with other types of repetition is even clearer in the case of intratum repetition of facial expressions, and there are no cases in this episode where it would occur on its own. In fact, based on this case study the function of a repeated facial expression must be rendered as reinforcing the repetitiveness of the utterances it accompanies. For the most part repetition of this type co-occurs with either intratum prosodic repetition or intratum structural parallelism or both (ten out of eleven instances). In the only other case, it reinforces repetition on the lexical level.

3 Discussion

The presentation and discussion of occurrences of different types of repetition in the humorous turns (HTs) of the first episode of Better with You has demonstrated first of all that repetition is very frequent in this episode of an US American sitcom. This holds true even when purely semantic repetition is disregarded and only formal repetition is included; that is, when linguistic, paralinguistic and nonlinguistic signifiers on the surface of the multimodal text are repeated. It can further be hypothesized based on the data analysed here that sitcoms with a laugh track in general, of which Better with You is an example, will also make frequent use of repetition to construct HTs. However, this hypothesis will have to be verified on a larger dataset. Moreover, the analysis has shown how different types of repetition contribute to the construction of humour, which was understood as the result of incongruity and resolution (Suls 1972).
The method of analysis has distinguished between two general loci of repetition, which can be linked to the distance between repeated occurrences: Whereas interturn repetition refers to repetition across greater distances in the text – at least from one conversational turn to the next, but potentially from any earlier moment in the same episode – intraturn repetition refers to locally repeated occurrences within the same, often very short, turn. This distinction in the categorization also mirrored a difference in functions for TCD humour that will be discussed further in Sections 3.1 and 3.2.

### 3.1 Functions of interturn repetition in sitcom humour

In the case of interturn repetition in HTs, humour cohesion has been shown to be one key function of lexical repetition, and of exact single-word repetition in particular. This matches the understanding that lexical repetition in general is a key contributor to text cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976; Toolan 2016). In the case of the HTs analysed here, cohesive lexical repetition often serves to reactivate a frame that was introduced earlier in the episode and can be used later as the premise for further humorous instances. As a consequence, individual HTs and the audiovisual text in general appear to be connected, which also means that the fictional story appears to be coherent rather than a series of only loosely linked jokes. This property of sitcoms is already an important factor when it comes to characterizing them as a genre of humorous text, since other popular comedy and humour genres are different in this regard. Stand-up comedians, for instance, do of course connect their punch lines, but generally their overall routines are far less cohesive than the comparatively closed narratives of sitcom episodes; and jokes, the traditional objects of humour research, while cohesive, are typically far less complex in their structure simply because of their brevity. It seems to be characteristic for telecinematic humour, on the other hand, that it is constructed by creating humorous instances that work individually, but at the same time are cohesively linked to one or several previous humorous instances. Thus, one important effect of interturn repetition is that it is instrumental in establishing cohesion as well as coherence of the humorous text and the humour therein.

Apart from the cohesive effects, which also motivate the individual humorous instances diegetically, there is also a link to economical joke telling. Establishing viewer expectations takes time, and given the fact that in this case 149 HTs occur within twenty-two minutes, finding shortcuts to activating the desired frame are key for the collective sender. In this sense, reactivation of a frame and variation of the incongruous element is one successful strategy to create new incongruities and thus new instances of humour in an economical fashion.

When it comes to repetition as part of the incongruous element rather than the active frame, the example of the stock phrase ‘valid life choice’ demonstrates how a phrase can become charged with humorous potential. However, the close examination of each case of this type of lexical repetition shows on the one hand that the same incongruous element can recur in different situations and following different expectations: Incongruous elements remain surprising despite their repetition, because the moment in which they occur is unexpected for the television viewers. On
the other hand, humour in these cases does not depend just on the phrase as such but also on the very fact that it is being repeated and becomes formulaic, which in the case presented here was rooted on the character level. For characters and viewers alike, repetition itself is in this case incongruous with their expectations because it does not fit conversational norms.

Other, less frequent functions of interturn repetition in sitcom humour include imitating and mocking other characters, as well as call-backs to humorous instances made before – that is, cases of repetition where both the frame and the incongruous element are repeated. These latter cases pose a challenge to the incongruity-based understanding of humour because they essentially amount to the retelling of the same joke, and should therefore no longer surprise audiences and thus result in an unsuccessful attempt at humour. The methodology used here does not allow an answer as to whether these repeated incongruities do indeed fail to amuse the viewers. However, the audience laughter does mark them as intended to be humorous, and we must assume therefore that the collective sender trusts for them to be just as successful at producing a humorous effect on the audience as any other of the humorous instances. One possible explanation for some cases is metahumour, which is to say that in these cases humour does not depend on the apparent incongruity of the utterance of the character, for example between romance and the summer Olympics (see Example 3), but on the way in which that repetition is framed. For instance, in HT 46 in Example 3, it seems that the presented discrepancy in knowledge between the two characters is crucial for the humorous incongruity. The data analysed here has only provided few examples of this kind, and this interaction of repetition and humour needs to be examined in more detail elsewhere.

While these functions were mostly observed for lexical repetition and to a lesser extent for structural parallelism, interturn prosodic repetition is often motivated by characterization. Repeated prosody establishes typical intonation patterns for the major characters. These prosodic aspects are sometimes reinforced by repeated facial expressions; they become part of the typical behaviour of the character and are then used repeatedly as an incongruous reaction to different situations. In terms of the mechanism by which incongruities are constructed, prosodic repetition thus operates similarly to the stock phrases mentioned earlier, which is to say that the repetitive intonation patterns maintain their humour potential because they are juxtaposed with different frames.

Finally, telecinematic repetition is used to establish a similarity between individual scenes and HTs, which is typically done by repeating aspects of the mise en scène. Repetition of this type often suggests a similarity between the situation in which characters find themselves, which is used in contrast with differences that are encoded on a different level. In other words, the similarity in the scene established by interturn telecinematic repetition highlights the incongruity in character behaviour and utterances.

3.2 Functions of intraturn repetition in sitcom humour

The functions of intraturn repetition in sitcom humour are different because they are confined to the individual HT and thus not directly connected to overall humour.
cohesion in an episode. One function of intraturn repetition concerns emphasis of the active frame, which essentially ensures that audience expectations are aligned with the design of the humorous instance and trigger the incongruity-resolution processing that may lead to successful humour uptake. As such, this function of intraturn lexical repetition can be understood as a humour-specific realization of the capacity of repetition to facilitate comprehension (see Norrick 1987; Tannen 1989). In other cases, intraturn repetition also represents some of the functions that are usually associated with repetition in conversation, for instance when lexical repetition functions as a confirmation, or when the syntactical structure of an answer matches that of the question, which serves both interactional and interpersonal functions as they were described by Tannen (1989).

Key to the construction of humour is the way in which intraturn structural parallelism establishes a pattern through repetition. In some cases, this pattern leads to expectations of continuation, which the subsequent stimulus does not meet, thus creating an incongruity. In other cases, these processes happen simultaneously, but on different levels; for example while the repetitive syntactical structure establishes similarity, there is at the same time incongruity on the semantic level. This is similar to how telecinematic repetition is used across turns.

While character identities are established over time, and thus with the help of interturn rather than intraturn repetition, structural and prosodic intraturn repetition often occur together to encode and highlight a particular character emotion, which is exaggerated or does not fit the frame in which it occurs. This highlighting of affective character reactions is often supported by repetition of facial expressions. Generally, facial expressions are repeated within HTs only when repetition also occurs on another level. The main function of this form of multimodal repetition within turns thus seems to be to reinforce the repetitiveness in character behaviour as well as the functions of the other type(s) of repetition it accompanies.

4 Conclusion

This study has provided evidence from the first episode of Better with You for the range of different types of repetition that are employed in the construction of incongruities and thus of humour. It has linked these cases of repetition to different functions, which was done based on the discussion of selected examples and by linking these observations to the functions of repetition in texts and conversation as they have been observed in previous research. These findings and their discussion show on the one hand that repetition in sitcoms can be theorized based on a combination of existing textual and conversational research, which means that sitcoms and TCD more generally need to be understood as multilevel and multimodal texts that need to be conceptualized both as a form of represented face-to-face interaction and as a mediated form of communication between a collective sender and an audience. On the other hand, humour in TCD also needs to be regarded separately and with a focus on its typical features that distinguish it from other humorous texts as they are more commonly studied in humour research.
Apart from the individual HTs that were analysed here, some further observations can be made for repetition in this episode of a sitcom more generally. For starters, semantic repetition, which was only discussed marginally here, appears to be omnipresent in sitcom humour. The functions of lexical repetition that were analysed here can thus be regarded as a small subset of a more general pattern of motivating individual humorous incongruities by tying the active frame to others that were previously activated or by reiterating the same semantic incongruity in a new context. Moreover, one key aspect of repetition in general is the overall rhythm it creates. Looking at the entire episode from a distance, its structure resembles that of a HT that employs structural and prosodic repetition: audience laughter, occurring every 6.5 seconds on average, serves as punctuation to the series, with a few longer gaps between laughs (upward of 20 seconds) serving as caesurae, whereas at other points short HTs with gaps between laughter of sometimes less than a second form rhythmic clusters. Such larger patterns based on the repetition of humorous instances themselves as well as the complex construction of entire sitcom scenes out of interturn and intraturn repetition of different types need to be examined based on a larger corpus of sitcom data. A larger study of this sort will also provide further evidence that can corroborate the findings of this case study on Better with You and offer more assertive answers to the question how sitcoms and TCD in general construct humorous instances with the help of multimodal and multilevel repetition.

In terms of these larger structures, one final function of repetition in sitcom humour that needs to be mentioned in closing here is that of maintaining the play frame. The frequent occurrences of HTs serve as a constant flow of communication from the collective sender to the television viewers that they, like the recorded studio audience they hear, are meant to laugh at the interactions that are staged for them onscreen. The sitcom episode as an audiovisual text thus also reinforces its humorousness by repeatedly communicating its own humorous intentions.

Appendix. Transcription conventions (based on Jefferson 2004; Mondada 2014)

[ ] overlapping speech
( ) gap between utterances
.hh audible breathing
Stress
: indicates lengthening of the previous sound
↑↓ shift to high or low pitch
.,?! punctuation indicates usual intonation
* ± $ ^ symbols to identify participants
*----* delimits action/facial expression by participant
*-----* action continues on subsequent line(s)
*---* action ends
HT 34 numbers in left-hand column list humorous turns in the data sequentially from 1–149.
Notes

1 In their seminal General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), Attardo and Raskin (1991) speak of script opposition to describe the same clash between frames.

2 Apart from the term other-repetition (used, for example, by Tannen 1987), the repetition of another speaker's utterance (or an element thereof) is also referred to as allo-repetition (e.g. Tannen 1989) or second-speaker repetition (e.g. Norrick 1987).

3 Transcription conventions are presented in the appendix. As a general rule, only those aspects were transcribed which are directly relevant to the subsequent discussion of repetition and humour in each case.

References


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Television series