

Power Relations in the Homecoming from the Perspective of Turn-Taking Strategies

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Abstract: In recent years, more and more people have realized that language plays an important role in their daily lives. Taking the British playwright Harold Pinter's play-The Homecoming as corpus, the present paper is designed to investigate the inter-relationship between language and power in social interactions, specifically, how participants of a community use discursive strategy to achieve their own power from the perspective of turn-taking strategies.

1. Introduction

American linguist Zellig Harris first introduced the term “discourse analysis” in his article “Discourse Analysis” which was published in The Journal of Language in 1952. A decade later, discourse analysis became an independent research subject. Since then, the subject in question attracted the attention of scholars from different research fields throughout the world, and at present, discourse analysis has developed into an inter-disciplinary subject.

In recent years, more and more people have realized that language plays an important role in their daily lives. Accordingly, research on discourse and society, specifically, discourse and gender, discourse and race, discourse and cross-culture communication, to name only a few, have been conducted by scholars. Taking the British playwright Harold Pinter's play-The Homecoming as corpus, the present dissertation is designed to investigate the inter-relationship between language and power in social interactions.

There are various definitions of power, among which Weber is a commonly accepted one: “in a social relationship, power is the chance that one could achieve his or her will against others' resistance.”^[1] Kedar studied power and discourse in his Power through Discourse and defined discursive power as “resource to achieve one's goal in a conversation”.^[2] Foucault also regarded power as a kind of resource in discourse. He pointed out that “where is discourse, there is power, and power determines the process of discourse.”^[3] However, power is not fixed, and it is constantly changing in social interactions. The present paper explores how participants of a community use discursive strategy to achieve their own power from the perspectives of turn-taking strategies.

2. Turn-Taking Mechanism

The concept of turn-taking was first introduced by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) in their joint work A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-taking for Conversation. According to Sacks et al, the basic unit of conversation is a turn, and participants of a conversation would speak interactively in turns instead of doing monologue by one of them.^[4] As far as the construction of turns is concerned, Fasold (2000) argues that turns are constructed of, for English at least, word phrases, clauses, and sentences.^[5]

In appreciating drama, turn-taking patterns may help us to understand the plot development and character relations. During the past decades, turn-taking mechanism was frequently applied in dramatic studies. Li Huadong and Yu Dongming (2001) studied power relations, characterization, and plot development from the perspective of turn-taking.^[6]

In this research, a few variables of the turn-taking mechanism are considered, including initiation and control of topics, turn length, turn type, and turn control strategies. Topic refers to the content of a conversation. A play usually contains many topics, and there would be a main topic and a few

related subtopics in each episode. According to Herman, “initiation can signal power, the reality of attentiveness and eagerness to contribute to speech.”^[7] Turn length is another typical variable of the turn taking system. A speaker’s turn length can be identified as the total length of all his turns in his production of a certain text. As Herman pointed, “hyper-dominant speaker may claim turn-length disproportionately to signal power.”^[7] Turn type is the third variable of turn-taking mechanism in the present research. It can be classified as initiative turns and responsive turns, and it is of certain value in revealing power relations of the characters. The last variable of turn-taking mechanism in the present research is turn control strategies. There are many ways to control a turn, including pre-sequence, space-making strategies, paralinguistic features (e.g. facial expression, gestures, silence, and etc.), monologues, and interruptions. In this thesis, interruptions, monologues, and silence are selected as the research target for the convenience of data recording.

The following part is a detailed analysis of the conversations of three groups of characters from the perspective of turn-taking strategies.

3. Power Struggles from the Perspective of Turn-Taking Strategies

3.1 Power Struggle between Father and Sons

The first group of characters is father and sons. There are four characters involved in this group, namely, Max, Teddy, Lenny, and Joey.

Table 1 Turn-Taking Strategies of the Conversation between Max and Lenny

		MAX (Father)	LENNY (Son)
Total turns	31	17	14
Initiation of topics		3	1
Turn type	Initiatives	9	5
	Responsives	9	12
Turn length(words)	Total length	651	168
Turn taking and control strategies	Average turn length	38	12
	Interruptions	0	3
	Monologues	2	0
	Silence	1	5

The conversation in question is between Max and Lenny from ACT ONE. It happens at the very beginning of the play. The turn-taking strategies in table 1 indicate the power relations between these two characters and how they use language to seek and defend their own power.

Max is supposed to be more powerful than the son Lenny, which can be proved through the total turns, initiation of topics, turn type, and turn length of Max. For example, among the total four topics, Max initiated 3 of them; Max also initiated more turns than Lenny, and Lenny is responding for his father for most of the time; and Max speaks a lot more than Lenny. Besides, Max initiates more turns than Lenny. It seems that max is guiding the conversation, but the true situation is something else. For many times, Lenny simply does not respond to his father. For example, when Max asks for the scissors, he initiated three questions but only receives one response from Lenny. All of the above mentioned information proves that Max, as the father, still enjoys certain power over his son, Lenny. However, Max’s power is gradually declining before his grown up son.

For Lenny, he also has a desire to defend his own power against his old man. In responding Max’s long, tedious monologues, Lenny uses either silence strategy or interruption strategy to secure his own solidarity. For example, when Max makes his first monologue, Lenny keeps silent to avoid being involved into Max’s conversation.

To sum it up, turn-taking patterns in the conversation between Max and Lenny reveal the power relations between Max and Lenny. Both of them have the desire to strengthen their own power. The father will not give up his dominance in the family easily; on the other hand, the son would never surrender his solidarity.

3.2 Power Struggle between Brothers

The second group of characters is brothers. There are five characters involved in this group, namely, Max and Sam; Teddy, Lenny, and Joey. In this part, linguistic conflicts of two brothers will be discussed from the perspective of turn-taking.

Table 2 Turn-Taking Strategies of the Conversation between Max and Sam

		MAX	SAM
Total turns(20)		10	10
Initiation of topics		1	0
Turn type	Initiatives	6	3
	Responsives	2	6
Turn length (words)	Total length	365	58
	Average turn length	36	6
Turn taking and control strategies	Interruptions	0	0
	Monologues	2	0
	Silence	0	2

The conversation in question is between Max and Sam from ACT ONE. It happens between Max and his brother Sam in the other morning when Teddy and Ruth came back. Max is the elder brother of Sam, a bachelor. The relationship between these two characters is typical status unequals. Although they inherit the house from their parents together, Max always regards Sam as a lodger of his own house. To this, Sam does not reject strongly, and it seems that Sam accepts that Max is the owner of the house. As a result, Sam is quite submissive to Max.

The above mentioned conversation between Max and Sam contains only one topic, which is initiated by Max. Different from the conversation between Max and Lenny, in which Max could not maintain and finish his topics, Max has a complete control over his topic. The only topic here is about Max's questioning on Sam's behaviour. When Max gets up, he finds Sam is doing something in the kitchen. Then, Max starts to put forward questions to Sam. Their conversation does not stop until Max satisfies himself.

From table 2, we can find that Max initiated far more turns than Sam does. This time, Sam gives immediate and direct responses to Max's initiatives, which shows Max's complete dominance over his younger brother.

Turn length of the two characters also indicates their unequal power relations. The average turn length of Max reaches about 36 words, while the average turn length of Sam is only 6 words. Most of Max's turns are questions and lectures to Sam. On the other hand, Sam gives direct and concise responses to his brother's questions and lectures.

We know that participants of any conversations would not easily give up their power. Instead of it, they would try everything to seek and maintain their power. However, in this case, Sam seems to have few choices to make. When Max gives monologues to lecture on Sam, unlike what he does when speaks with his son Lenny, he leaves no chance for Sam to get involved. For Sam, he does not have the courage, or we may say that he is not powerful enough to interrupt Max. In response to Max's aggressive lecturing, he can only keep silent now and then in order to maintain his last solidarity.

It can be concluded that, between complete status unequals, the more powerful participant still enjoys many choices in using turn-taking strategies to consolidate his power, while the less powerful side has few choices in doing so.

3.3 Power Struggle between Male and Female Characters

The third group of characters is male and female characters. There are six characters involved in this group, namely, Max, Sam, Teddy, Lenny, Joey, and Ruth. The following part will investigate the same topic by analyzing conversations between male and female.

Table 3 Turn-Taking Strategies of the Conversation between Teddy and Ruth

		Teddy (husband)	Ruth (wife)
Total turns	23	12	11
Initiation of topics		1	0
Turn type	Initiatives	3	5
	Responsives	10	3
Turn length (words)	Total length	241	56
	Average turn length	20	5
Turn taking and control strategies	Interruptions	0	0
	Monologues	0	0
	Silence	0	0

The conversation in question is between Teddy and Ruth from ACT TWO.

Teddy and Ruth are husband and wife. However, the husband does not hold a higher status in their relationship. The two characters are largely independent with each other, and they can be considered as status equals. Their conversation takes place after Teddy is annoyed by his father and brothers.

The topic of this conversation is put forward by Teddy. He suggests that they go back to the United States immediately. Although the topic is initiated by Teddy and they keep conversing on this topic, the direction of the conversation is not controlled by Teddy.

We may find that Ruth actually initiated more turns in this conversation and she controls the ongoing conversation. Soon after Teddy initiated his suggestion, Ruth takes over the topic, and keeps asking Teddy for reasons to get back so early.

It seems that Teddy gains an upper hand in this conversation since his average turn length is greatly longer than that of Ruth's. However, if we look into the content of this conversation, it is not difficult to find out that Teddy has longer turn length because he has to answer Ruth's questions and explain himself.

At last, we may say that, by taking control of the topic timely, Ruth gains an upper hand in the conversation with his husband. At the same time, their conversation proves that conversation participants with a longer turn length does not necessarily more powerful than their counterparts.

4. Conclusion

The present part analyzes the conversations of a father and his son, Max and Lenny, two brothers, Max and Sam, and a husband and his wife, Teddy and Ruth, from the perspective of turn-taking strategies. The first conversation is between an old man whose power is declining and a grown up son whose power is strengthening. During their discursive conflict for power, the father tries a lot of initiative turns and monologues in order to maintain his dominance over his son. At the same time, the son uses interruptions and silence to defend his solidarity. The second conversation is between two brothers, and they are typical status unequals. It shows that between complete status unequals, the more powerful participant still enjoys many choices in using turn-taking strategies to consolidate his power, while the less powerful side has few choices in doing so. The third conversation is between two participants of different gender, they enjoy a relatively equal status with each other. In this case, actual application of turn-taking strategies would greatly determine the result of the linguistic engagement.

Together, the three conversations also reveal that: firstly, the more powerful participant is more likely to initiate a topic, but we have to make sure if he or she can maintain and finish the topic successfully; secondly, the more powerful participant usually initiates more turns in a conversation, but we have to check the other party's responses in order to see how much influence he or she can exert against his or her counterpart; thirdly, the more powerful participant normally has longer turn length. However, the one with longer turn length does not necessarily enjoys greater power. At last, silence is the sign of a less powerful participant.

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