
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discourse Analysis of Conflict Talk in The Painted Veil

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ABSTRACT

Conflict talk is one of the most important topics of discourse analysis. This paper, based on the conversations of the film *The Painted Veil*, is concerned with the sequential organization of conflict talk in the film. Initiating moves, oppositional moves and terminating moves of conflict talks are discussed and analyzed in order to explore how conflict talks show the characteristic of the roles in an art work.

KEYWORDS

Conflict talk; conflict; discourse analysis; *The Painted Veil*.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 02 October 2024

PUBLISHED: 28 October 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.11.5

1. Introduction

The earliest study of "discourse analysis" in the British and American schools can be traced back to the study of J.R. Firth, the founder of the London School in the 1930s, who explored the meaning of speech in context. The term "discourse analysis" was first proposed by the American sociologist Z. Harris in 1952. Since then, research on discourse analysis has gradually emerged. "Discourse analysis can be used to describe, understand and explain how language works in social communication, and can reveal the important role of language in social activities (Huang, Xu, 2006)". In recent years, more and more scholars have tried to analyze different types of discourse.

The movie *The Painted Veil*, adapted from S. Maugham's novel *The Painted Veil*, tells the story of how a 1920s English couple finally finds love and happiness after an affair, cholera, and other trials. The anticipation analyzed in this paper is taken from the very lines of dialogue of that film. There are many scenes of conflict in the movie, and these scenes play a great role in highlighting and expressing the characters. The following paper will analyze the conflicting discourses in *The Painted Veil* in order to reveal the character and psychological traits of the main characters.

2. Literature Review

Conflict talk that is, in the conversation, one party's words and the other party's words conflict. This conflict is manifested in the communication of one party against the other party's words, behavior, or on someone/something the two sides hold different opinions, and then occurs discourse conflict. (Zhao, 2004)

Folklore methodology scholars, such as H. Sacks, have summarized some typical features of conversational structure through in-depth analysis of various conversations in society. Folklore methodology theories of conversation analysis include, but are not limited to, adjacency pairs, turn, conversation moves, desirable structures, and correction mechanisms.

J. Sinclair and M. Coulthard proposed in 1975 that the word step (move) is one of the descriptive units for analyzing spoken discourse. A move is the smallest free unit of discourse and is composed of one speech act or more speech acts. The conflict

discourse analysis in this paper will use the move as a unit to explore how the pattern of initiating move, developing move and ending move of a conflict discourse can be realized in real examples.

3. Methodology

Conflict discourse often consists of the following three parts: the initiating move, the oppositional move and the ending move (Zhao, 2010). Among them, we believe that "oppositional move" can also be translated as "developmental move" to emphasize its actual status and role in the overall structure. The constituent elements of each move in conflict discourse can be regarded as a specific speech act in the theory of speech acts proposed by J. Austin, such as "commitment", "statement", "elaboration", "decision" and so on. H. Sacks (1972) analyzed the structure of conversation based on the fact that people always speak alternately in a conversation and came up with the concept of an adjacency pair. The concept of "adjacency pair" plays an important role in revealing the structure of conversation. On this basis, A. Pomerantz (1978) points out that there is a preference organization in adjacency pairs. Preference organization means that at least one of the possible respondents is preferred, i.e., the hearer's response meets the speaker's expectation of the utterance, and one is dispreferred, i.e., the hearer's response is not what the speaker expects. For example, in the case of an invitation, it is obvious that acceptance is desirable and refusal is undesirable; similarly, agreeing with the other person's point of view is desirable and rejecting the other person's point of view is undesirable. Clearly, the "desirable structure" of the reply often helps to defuse the conflict, whereas the "undesirable structure" "contributes to the conflict". The most typical adjacency pairs are ask/answer, greet/greet, offer/approve or reject, apologize/soothe, etc. (Suo, 2000).

3.1 Initiating Move

The following two patterns of initiating moves are included in the conflict discourse-containing sessions of *The Painted Veil*: Request-Rejection and Statement-Denial.

3.1.1 Request-Rejection

One of the common patterns of conversations is that one of the two parties makes a request, while the other indicates acceptance or rejection.

Example (1):

WALTER. I hoped that if I was going, you would want to go.

KITTY. Surely it's no place for a woman. It would be madness for me to go. Why should I?

WALTER. To cheer and comfort me?

KITTY. No, I won't go. In fact, it's monstrous of you to even ask me.

WALTER. Fine. Then I shall file my petition for divorce tomorrow.

The above dialog occurs when Walter, the male protagonist, learns that his wife Kitty is cheating on him and decides to make a desperate attempt to take her with him to the cholera area in order to break up her and her lover and at the same time get back at her. After Walter informs Kitty of this decision, Kitty immediately objects.

In this conflict discourse, the hearer's outright rejection of the hearer's request (despite the ostensibly euphemistic way in which the request is made) makes the conflict extremely direct and strong, and the positions of the two parties in the conversation are not negotiable. A clear "undesirable structure" is used, leading to a conflict effect.

In the beginning of this conflict, the dialogue shows the selfish, capricious side of the heroine's character, a kind of self-centered psychological trait that only cares about herself. She marries the hero, but does not love him, and has an affair with the other men, never considers the husband's mood and situation; also do not think of a wife's responsibility, even though the husband's requirement is reasonable: the husband wants his wife to accompany to work abroad. But Kitty, at the thought that this was not favorable to herself, immediately refused and, without hesitation, even blamed her husband. On the other hand, Kitty's fearless refusal also demonstrates her boldness of speech and behavior, and her not sticking to traditional rules, and it is precisely this recklessness and naivete that is the source of her charm, as well as the root cause of her suffering and tragedy later on.

3.1.2 Statement-Denial

Often in communicative dialog, one party takes a position on something and then the other party expresses his or her ideas. When the listener expresses an attitude that is negative, it tends to have a conflictual effect.

Example (2):

KITTY. Thank goodness for those nuns. They do so much for so little in return.

WALTER. I suppose you could look at it that way.

KITTY. You suppose?

WALTER. I think it might be a bit more complicated than that.

KITTY. They take in desperate children and give them a chance at life. What could be so complicated about that?

WALTER. They also go to young mothers in their homes. They ask them to give their babies to the convent. They offer them money to support their families to persuade them to do it. They're not just here to run an orphanage, your nuns. They're turning those children into little Catholics. None of us are in China without a reason.

KITTY. Still, on the whole...I think that what they're doing is a pretty good deed, don't you?

In the above example, one party states his own opinion and shows his own attitude, but the other party holds a different opinion and attitude, and raises a direct objection, i.e., adopts the "undesirable construction", thus leading to discourse conflict.

The initiating move of this type of conflict discourse clearly shows the disagreement between the two sides of the dialog, and in this context, it can especially reflect the difference between the characters of the male and female protagonists: the female protagonist is emotional, while the male protagonist is rational. The heroine sees the nuns helping children and taking care of orphans and sees them as warm-hearted, kind and noble, while the hero sees that the nuns are actually trying to achieve their missionary goals by raising orphans. Although both the hero and heroine are good at heart, their perspectives on problems are very different, making it difficult for them to get along with each other, which also shows that the great difference in their personalities and ways of doing things leads to the heroine's feeling of loneliness and isolation after her marriage, and then having an affair, as well as a series of tragedies brought about by it.

3.2 Developmental Move

After the initiating move of conflict discourse, the conflict tends to develop further as the argumentation between the two parties in the conversation continues, and there are various types of developmental moves that generally occur in the dialog between the two parties in the development of the conflict discourse, as the corpus in *The Painted Veil* continues to be exemplified in the following section.

3.2.1 Interruption

P. Brown (1980) suggests that interruptions are not only a violation of the rules of the turn taking but also a violation of the norms of language and social behavior, which can vary depending on the speaker's purpose and personal communicative strategies. Thus, the more interruptions there are, the more heated the situation becomes, the greater the conflict between the parties, and the discourse may not even develop naturally.

Example (3):

KITTY. But Charlie and I have fallen in love. He wants to marry me.

WALTER. Really? I knew that you weren't the cleverest girl... ..but I didn't know you were actually a fool...

KITTY. Yes. Well, if it makes you feel better to hurt me, then go ahead. But you might as well get used to it. We love each other. And we're sick to death of the secrecy and compromise and the rest.

WALTER. Now you curse the day that you ever met me.

KITTY. Stop mocking me.

WALTER. There's no other response for such pathetic behavior. It's comic. When I think about how hard I have tried to make you happy. Debasing myself, acting as though I was as thrilled as you by the latest gossip. And as ignorant of the world as you are—

KITTY. I don't have to listen to this. Shut up !

WALTER. If you interrupt me again, I'll strangle you. Sit down.

In this dialog, Kitty interrupts twice because of her shame and anger, and she doesn't want to hear Walter scolding and insulting herself. This mechanism of interrupting shows Kitty's inner resistance to Walter, an attitude of not accepting him fundamentally, which side-steps the sadness and anger of the hero who tries hard to please his wife but gets cheated on in return. In addition, in this conversation, the direct manner of speech and behavior such as "Shut up!" undermines the listener to a certain extent, violates the principle of politeness, and thus deepens the conflict.

Example (4):

CHARLIE. Kitty. I'm in London for three weeks. Perhaps we could ...

KITTY. Goodbye, Mr. Townsend.

CHARLIE. Goodbye, Mrs. Fane.

Example 4 of the above dialog occurs at the end of the film, when Kitty returns to London to raise her children alone after Walter's death, and encounters her old flame, Charlie, on the street, who wants to rekindle a passionate relationship with Kitty, but Kitty, whose heart is in her husband's, interrupts Charlie indifferently and firmly and refuses his potential request. This indifference is in marked contrast to Kitty's initial attitude, indicating that Kitty truly loves Walter, and that her previous affair with Charlie is worthless and meaningless in the face of her true love for him. Kitty's quick interruptions during the conversation reflect her inner determination and eternal loyalty to her husband.

3.2.2 Repetition

In this kind of developmental move, both sides of the opposing sides repeat their previous words several times, always insisting on their own point of view, arguing, in the process of communication to form a kind of stalemate.

Example (5):

NUN. Is it possible you are with child?

KITTY. No.

NUN. Oh, yes.

KITTY. No.

NUN. Yes.

KITTY. I mean...I suppose it's possible.

The dialog in Example 5 takes place after the heroine vomits and faints at school and the nuns speculate that she is probably pregnant, Kitty is shocked and cannot believe that this is the case and therefore denies it at the beginning of the dialog, but the knowledgeable nuns insist that Kitty, the heroine, must be pregnant. The conflict between the two is realized by the repetition of the dialogue structure "A-B-A-B".

This development is not only an argument between the heroine Kitty and the nun, but also a conflict within the heroine's heart. It is not the right time for the heroine to be pregnant with a child, and the denial she insists on at the beginning is in fact denial of the existence of the child, because the child may be the child of Charlie, her former lover, rather than Walter, whom she loves now, so deep down the heroine is in fact denying the effect of the shadow of the past on the present. This repetitive structure of developmental moves fully reveals the heroine's inner conflicts and struggles.

3.3 Ending Move

The end of the conflict talk is the key to discourse analysis. Conflict discourse may be resolved by the concession of one party or the harmonization of both parties, or in some other way. In fact, different ending moves may affect the overall analysis of the conflict talk. Gao (2007) summarized 7 ways of ending conflict discourse: changing the topic, compromising, intervention by a third party, one side's winning, withdrawal, suspension of objective circumstances, and witty humor.

3.3.1 One Side Wins

The most common situation in conflict talk is when one of the communicating parties wins.

Example (6):

KITTY'S MOTHER. I thought by now you'd know when a young man was in love with you.

KITTY. The point is whether I'm in love with him, and I'm not.

KITTY'S MOTHER. You'd better be careful, young lady. Time can run out, you know.

KITTY. Oh, stop it, mother. Honestly. The very idea that a woman should marry any Tom, Dick, or Harry... ..regardless of her own feelings is simply prehistoric.

KITTY'S MOTHER. How much longer do you expect your father to go on supporting you?

The above conversation takes place at the beginning of the movie, at Kitty's home, where Kitty's mother asks her daughter if Walter is interested in her, but Kitty dismissively states that she doesn't care if Walter likes her or not, that she doesn't like Walter anyway, and that she must marry whoever she likes, and that the practice of marrying someone you don't like is really outdated. However, her mother asks her rhetorically how long she really wants her father to keep her. The mother's rhetorical question seems to change the subject and violate the association criterion of the principle of conversational cooperation, but in fact it uses the association criterion to produce a conversational meaning: Kitty should not be willful any more, but should find a good match and get married as soon as possible, not to add burden to the family.

This ending move of Kitty's mother shows her dissatisfaction with her daughter, which makes the headstrong Kitty to marry Walter, whom she does not know well and does not like, in order to save her face in front of her mother, thus leading to the tragedy that follows.

3.3.2 Third Party Intervention

The intervention of a third party in a conflict talk often stops the continuation of the discourse conflict. One common situation is that the third party, as an outsider, puts forward a more objective and reasonable opinion, so that both parties can analyze the situation calmly. Another situation is when the third party agrees with one of the parties, causing the other party to be at a disadvantage and have to compromise.

Example (7):

WALTER. I would recommend barricading the bathing area. Cut off all access to the river.

YU. How far do you expect people to walk for water?

WALTER. I've no idea. Upriver, at least a half-mile above the burial ground.

YU. That's too far.

WALTER. Nevertheless.

ASSISTANT. I agree with Dr. Fane. It's necessary.

The above dialog occurs after the hero Walter tests the water source in the infected area and finds that the water source has been contaminated, and asks for an immediate blockade of the downstream water, while the regimental commander Yu opposes on the grounds that it is inconvenient for the residents to get water, after some arguments, Walter's assistant says that he agrees with Walter's request and that the blockade of the water source is necessary, and the regimental commander has no choice but to comply with the request.

The above dialogue occurred because both sides are quite tough, not giving in to each other and insisting on their own views. If the argument continues, the matter may reach a deadlock and no unanimous decision can be made. The conflict was resolved when the doctor's assistant affirmed one side's opinion from the point of view of objective necessity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Implications for Character Development and Plot Progression

The analysis of conflict talk provides insights into the characters' personalities, relationships, and the overall narrative structure:

1. Character Revelation: The ways characters initiate, develop, and resolve conflicts reveal their inner traits, motivations, and growth throughout the story. For instance, Kitty's character arc from self-centered and impulsive to more thoughtful and loyal is reflected in her changing discourse patterns.
2. Relationship Dynamics: The conflict talk between Walter and Kitty effectively illustrates the evolution of their relationship, from misunderstanding and resentment to eventual mutual understanding and love.
3. Plot Advancement: Conflicts serve as crucial plot points, driving the narrative forward. Major decisions and turning points in the story often stem from or are revealed through these conflict talks.
4. Thematic Exploration: The conflicts touch upon broader themes of the story, such as cultural differences, personal growth, and the nature of love and commitment.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its focus on a single film. Future research could benefit from: 1) Comparative analysis with other films or literary works to identify broader patterns in conflict discourse. 2) Quantitative analysis of conflict talk patterns to supplement qualitative findings. 3) Exploration of cultural and gender influences on conflict discourse in intercultural contexts like those presented in *The Painted Veil*.

5. Conclusion

Conflict plays an irreplaceable role in literary works, and it helps to promote the plot development and show the characters' personality. This paper analyzes the dialogues in the movie *The Painted Veil* as the corpus, covering the main structure of conflict move: the initiating move, the developmental move and the ending move, which reflect the conflicts between different characters and show the psychological characteristics of the characters' personalities in the film from different levels. In the conflict talk, a certain move structure adopted by a character is not accidental, but is determined by the character's style of speech and behavior.

Discourse analysis of conflict helps us to better understand the positioning of characters in art works, so as to better grasp the overall pulse and central idea of the work.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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