

Tangoing with Sexuality; Stylistic Analysis of the Development of a Lesbian Identity Using Conversation Analysis and Politeness Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore character development in the BBC-series *Last Tango in Halifax* through a multimodal analysis using conversation analysis and politeness theory. It analyses the expression of homosexuality by one of its characters, and how language reflects the growth in character and confidence. Both the content (written) and manner of speech (spoken) are examined, and a decrease in politeness strategies and normal non-fluency markers could be observed over the course of the series.

KEYWORDS

Politeness theory, conversation analysis, multimodal stylistics, telecinematic discourse, stylistics.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines discourse concerning sexuality in the TV-series *Last Tango in Halifax* written by Sally Wainwright in 2012. The TV-series narrates the story of an elderly couple who meet again after 60 years apart and get married and the lives of their respective adult daughters, who each have their own set of problems. One of those is Caroline, head of a private school and presented as a career woman. Caroline has been married to John for eighteen years, but he has cheated. After three months, he returns asking Caroline to take him back and regrets his mistake. In the meantime, Caroline has started a relationship with her colleague Kate, thus having to come out as a lesbian at the age of forty-six. Due to the conservative views of her mother and her own discomfort with her sexuality, this proves to be rather difficult. This paper hypothesises that as Caroline grows more comfortable with her identification as a lesbian, her speech will reflect this. The multimodal analysis will use politeness theory and conversation analysis. It is expected that over the course of the TV-series her use of politeness strategies will decrease, that fewer markers of normal non-fluency will be present, and that she will employ more precise lexis when discussing her sexuality.

MULTIMODAL

A multimodal approach offers a new way of including a broader range of compositional structures and this paper aims to demonstrate that such an approach is feasible. One advantage of this approach is that it allows for a

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more systematic comparison of repeated performances, but it also allows consideration of the performance. This analysis hopes to offer a suggestion concerning methodology for future analysis of TV, film and drama. A previous attempt was done by McIntyre (2008), and this paper aims to take a next step using conversation analysis. Beyond dramatic performances, this methodology might also hold promise for fields such as forensic stylistics and forensic speech science, as it combines principles from both fields. Effectively, this paper is a case-study into a new approach to multimodal stylistics analysis.

MODELS

The main model of politeness has been provided by Brown and Levinson (1987). Their theory consists of two elements: the theory of face and a set of politeness strategies. The first to formally define face was Goffman in 1967. In Brown and Levinson, it is defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (61). Brown and Levinson explain politeness using this concept of face. There are two types of face: positive face and negative face. Positive face is defined as the desire to be respected and appreciated by others, and to have a positive self-image. Negative face is the desire to not be inhibited or impeded by others, or the claim to personal preservation (65-67). A face-threatening act (FTA hereafter) is a speech act that could possibly damage either or both speakers’ and/or receiver’s faces. A FTA could take the form of a request (negative face) or refusal (positive face). Politeness strategies such as being bald on-record and doing nothing to redress the FTA, positive politeness, negative politeness, or being off-record by being indirect, can serve to minimise the FTA, but speakers can also opt out of using politeness strategies. Being indirect generally involves flouting one or more of the Gricean maxims (1991).

METHODS

Conversation analysis (CA hereafter) will be the method used in this paper. The primary writing on CA was done by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson in the 1970’s. CA concerns itself with the structure of conversation; turn-taking, overlaps, latching, non-fluency markers, fillers, self-repairs, pauses, changing in pitch, intonation, volume, etc. In general, scripted speech aims to mimic

natural speech, making CA a suitable model for analysis. However, certain elements of natural speech do not appear in scripted speech, and film conventions such as the ‘code of realism’ are used to determine how to create realistic speech on screen (Field 70; Kozloff 33). Any element that creates unintelligibility or redundancy, such as overlaps, false starts, repair sentences, repetition or abrupt topic shifts are avoided (Kozloff 18). Consequently, turns have different functions on a meta-level, as they do not serve a communicative speaker-to-speaker purpose, but have a dramatic function. The turns are meant to be informative or entertaining to the audience and ought to follow the economy maxim (Kozloff 18). Since TV-series usually lack the normal non-fluency features, those will be the units used for conversation analysis, because when they are present in dramatic dialogue “they are perceived by readers and audience as having a meaningful function precisely because we know that the dramatist must have included them on purpose” (Short 2013: 177). Additionally, pauses and changes in voice are deliberately incorporated into the character’s speech (Kozloff 94). Both excerpts have been transcribed using the transcription system found in Appendix A. Two excerpts were chosen to compare Caroline’s language use throughout the series. The first excerpt is from the first episode of the first series and the second was taken from the first episode of the third series. These excerpts were chosen because here Caroline’s sexuality is explicitly discussed. These are most useful because “when we listen to two characters talking on stage we are meant to deduce, through what they say, what the author is telling us about them” (Short 1994: 950). Each excerpt will be analysed individually first, then the general development will be discussed.

EXCERPT

1

Excerpt 1 is the first time the viewer sees Caroline and Kate interact. John, Caroline’s husband, has returned to the house, telling her he wants to move back in and repair their marriage. Caroline has asked Kate to meet in her office to discuss their relationship. Caroline starts the conversation by stating that John has returned in turn 3. Kate enquires what this means in turn 6. Presumably, she wants to know what this means for their relationship, but does not ask explicitly. Caroline explains that she is considering rebuilding her marriage for the sake of her two sons. She then turns to the most crucial part of the conversation in turn 15, where she terminates her liaison with Kate, and briefly discusses her sexuality. This turn is a substantial FTA to Kate’s positive face. By analysing this turn in detail, it becomes clear that Caroline is uncomfortable with discussing her sexuality.

15. Caroline: Look (..) I'm very (..) >fond< (..) of you. (..) (A) You know that. (..) (B) I just (..) <don't think I can do this anymore> (..) (C) obviously we can be (..) friends. (..) [hhh] (D) But u::m (..) the other thing it- (..) it's not me. (..) (E) <I mean, it's not not me> (..) (F) <I'm just not> (..)°ready(.) to go there° (G)

This phrase has been split up in seven parts from A to G marked with the letter between parentheses, to avoid confusion as to which part of the turn is being discussed. Caroline starts her turn (A) with a compliment, appealing to Kate’s positive face and protecting her own positive face. She then gets to her point, breaking up with Kate, in phrase C. She hedges this with the word “just”, to mitigate the FTA. She hedges again in phrase G, and phrase B can be considered a hedge as well. The hedging is a marker of her own discomfort, especially combined with her gratuitous use of politeness strategies and other characteristics discussed in the following paragraphs. Additionally, she makes this statement (phrase C) in epistemic modality, rather than boulomaic or deontic modality. This both softens the statement, but also reflects her hesitance. In phrase D, she offers friendship and uses the word “we” in an attempt to create common ground, again protecting her own positive face by offering the next best thing to a romantic involvement. However, this could also be a threat to Kate’s positive face, as it signals she is only interested in friendship. In phrases E, F, G she repeatedly flouts the maxim of manner by being purposefully vague as she avoids precise lexis. The implication being that she is not ready to embark on a homosexual relationship because she is uncomfortable with her sexuality.

One of the most notable features of turn 15 is the avoidance of precise lexis. She never explicitly states that she is ending their relationship, but says “I just don’t think I can do this anymore”, “the other thing”, and “to go there” when discussing it. Additionally, rather than speaking of “love” or “like”, she uses the word “fond” to describe her feelings for Kate in phrase A. Later in phrases E and F, she once more avoids precise lexis. rather than using words such as “gay” or “lesbian”, she uses the phrasing of E and F. Function, rather than content words are used mainly, making these utterances as obscure as possible. It is only because of the successful implicature in C and D that it can be understood that she is referring to her sexuality. Another significant feature of turn 15 is that Caroline pauses twelve times, and it is around words and phrases where she avoids precise lexis that these pauses are most pronounced. Additionally, she rushes over the phrase “I mean, it’s not not me”. This, combined with the previously discussed topic avoidance

and politeness strategies, signals her discomfort and insecurity with the topic of her sexuality.

EXCERPT

2

In the next excerpt discussed most speech features have changed considerably. At this point of the series, Caroline and Kate have established their relationship despite the social backlash received. Caroline's mother, Celia, has celebrated her own second marriage and now Caroline is engaged. She appears to have overcome most of her difficulties regarding her sexuality and now visits her mother to deliver the news. In the first turn, where Caroline breaks the news to Celia, she starts with explicitly acknowledging the possible FTA towards Celia's positive face by stating "I know you won't like this". In the second part of her turn she starts stuttering and her speech speeds up significantly. This serves to communicate the nervousness Caroline feels when making the announcement. However, when looking at turn 7, where she makes the announcement, it can be observed that she uses precise lexis and is direct. This is in contrast with excerpt 1 where she has always avoided precise lexis. Later in 21-28, Celia asks if Caroline will be the father, which is a FTA to Caroline's positive face, because it carries the presupposition of a heteronormative family structure and thus implicitly expresses disapproval. Caroline reacts to the FTA in a bald on-record fashion, stating that the child will have two mothers without any signs of reluctance or awkwardness such as non-fluency markers or topic avoidance.

In turn 25, Celia explicitly states the presupposition made previously which is another FTA towards Caroline's positive face and is a negative assessment of Caroline's future (an expression and a consequence intricately linked to her sexuality). The illocutionary class of this statement is an expressive, but the perlocutionary effect is a mixture of a judgement and a warning. It implies that Caroline cannot and should not raise a child with Kate. She opposes her mother's challenging move in a direct manner and defends herself by attacking her mother's positive face ("It's perfectly normal"). This statement is a FTA towards Celia's positive face, as it is an unmitigated opposition to her presupposition of heteronormativity.

21. Celia: What will it call you when it arrives the baby will you be its dad.
22. Caroline: No!↑ I'll be its mum. (..) I'll- eh (.) It'll have two mums!
23. Celia: Won't it get confused?
24. Caroline: No.↑
25. Celia: A child needs a f:ather
26. Caroline: Mum (.) gay couples bring up children all the time. It-it's perfectly normal.

27. Celia: No it's not normal↓ is it? That's not the right word.=

28. Caroline: =It's becoming increasingly normal! It'll have two very responsible mature loving parents.[And] that's all that matters.

In turns 37-43 Celia discusses the source of Caroline's sexuality. Caroline reacts negatively, using bald on-record statements and challenging moves. In turn 40 Celia flouts the maxim of manner. The implicature is that the marital issues of Caroline's parents were the cause of her sexuality, making her father the one responsible. She disagrees with this, which is emphasised by her raised voice and the indignation expressed by the stress on "expectation" and air quotations. Celia ignores this FTA by reacting as if it were a supporting rather than challenging move. She does this by treating it as if its illocutionary effect is the same as its intended perlocutionary effect. The illocutionary effect is a question, whilst the intended effect is a mixture of a complaint and a criticism. Caroline is not "fazed" by this reaction and reacts with a challenging move. She curtly tells her mother that she thinks it is all "bollocks" and then proceeds to make a joke. All of this is very confronting towards her mother and creates a sense of confidence in her language. She even jokes about her sexuality, strengthening the confident stance she takes.

37. Caroline: <I thought you thought it was your fault↑>

38. Celia: My fault? >N:o?<

39. Caroline: <Kate said that when you went round to her house to apologise °after you'd fallen out with Alan you said you were worried it was all your fault,°>

40. Celia: YES! Because of (.) your dad being ineffectual as a ma:n. So I projected things. (.) ideas and expectations onto you,

41. Caroline: <OH! SO THAT'S MY DADS FAULT↑> that you projected >°expectations°<? ((Caroline uses her fingers to make quotation marks as she speaks the word "expectations"))

42. Celia: >°Yeah in a sense°< (..) >In a very obvious sense?< I thought you were in a rush. ((Celia turns away))

43. Caroline: Yeah but you do know that's all bollocks↑ °don't you? <I was born this way (.) to quote Lady Gaga.↓>°

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In conclusion, there are fewer markers of non-fluency present, less topic avoidance observable and fewer politeness strategies used as the series progresses when Caroline discusses her sexuality. Overall, her way of speaking is more confident and decisive when comparing excerpt 1 to excerpt 2. Especially the difference in number of pauses in her speech is notable. In excerpt 2

Caroline stands her ground against her mother despite her initial stuttering. Additionally, her nervousness is caused by her mother's reaction to her announcement, whilst in excerpt 1 the source of her nervousness stems from her own discomfort. This is reflected in the fact that she acknowledges the imposition on Celia's face and the stuttering that is present only in the first turn of excerpt 2. Once it is clear Celia will not react badly in turns 8-17, Caroline's manner of speaking becomes more relaxed as she slows down and stutters less. When she later defends herself in this excerpt, there are barely any normal non-fluency markers present. Additionally, she raises her voice when defending herself, whereas in excerpt 1 she lowered her voice when discussing her sexuality. When comparing Caroline's lexis there is less topic avoidance in excerpt 2 than in excerpt 1. She no longer avoids the word "gay" as can be seen in turn 26 of excerpt 2. Moreover, she does not flout maxims or raise implicatures, nor are there any other signs of topic avoidance when discussing her relationship with Kate. In terms of politeness, Caroline employs fewer politeness strategies in excerpt 1 compared to excerpt 2. She is bald on-record and, in some instances, such as turns 41 and 43, it could be argued that she is being impolite. This is also reflected in the fact that many of her turns are now challenging. Thus, it can be concluded that Caroline's language does indeed reflect her character development and the tango she has danced with her sexuality throughout the series.

The multimodal approach illustrates that the dialogue reflected character development not only in what was said, but also in how it was said. The change in *what* became clear through the application of politeness theory, indicating a decrease in concern about face-needs when talking about her sexuality. The change in *how* can be seen through conversation analysis focusing on normal non-fluency markers. The disappearance of excessive pauses and other markers remove the hesitance from her speech and mirror the metamorphosis she undergoes as a character. Thus, the multimodal elements contribute as much to the understanding of a performance as the

Appendix A

Transcription system set					
<>	High speed	(!)	Sarcasm	=	A speaker continues a turn without a pause
>>	Low speed	CAPITALS	Relatively loud volume	?	Higher rise in intonation
.	Drop intonation	<u>underlined</u>	Emphasis	(..)	Long pause
,	Slight rise intonation	!	Exclamation	:	Lengthened sound; shorter
(.)	Relatively short pause	[hhh]	Breathing	::	Lengthened sound; longer
↓	Dropping pitch	↑	Rising pitch	-	Cut-off or self-repair

linguistic element. A possible venue for further studies would lie in including visual aspects, but due to space and time constraints, this was not feasible in this paper. Nevertheless, this multimodal approach was effective for analysis and showcases its potential. Not only does it illustrate how stylistics can contribute to our understanding of TV, but also does it offer a suggestion for real world application in forensics.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

During the time of the research Margaux Haimé was an undergraduate student, writing this paper to meet a requirement for a stylistics course. She proposed the topic, and received guidance from Dr. P. Canning. Dr. Canning proposed using CA, and provided feedback and guidance. Full transcription is available in the original paper and was done by the student.

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