A Study of Power Relation: A Critical Analysis of the Dramatic Language of *Death of a Salesman*

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is one of the great American playwrights whose plays directly reflect the sociopolitical issues of his day. Being affected by two World Wars and postwar American society, Miller’s characters search their identities in a society which, according to the writer, offers nothing to them. The landmark of Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949) depicts the life of a typical American family including a father, Willy Loman, his wife, Linda, and their two sons, Happy and Biff. In *Death of a Salesman* (1949), the power relation can be found among different characters. In fact, each character represents a discourse of his/her society. Due to the importance of this dramatic work, it has been studied by many researchers since the day of its publication. Though works done to date include a vast majority, none of them is completely devoted to the objective analysis of the play based on the stylistic approaches. Thus conducting this research seems to be necessary and significant.

2. Theoretical Framework

Conversation analysis (CA) mostly concerns the language usage in a conversation. The key point in CA is the concept of turn in a turn-taking system in which participants have their rights to speak. This paper is organized based on the CA principles, mostly turn-taking and cooperative principles. In turn-taking, this study uses the model introduced by Mick Short (1996) with his sets of questions leading to the identification of power relation in dramatic dialogues. In cooperative principle, this study would take advantage of Grice’s model regarding maxims introduced by him. He formulates a set of four maxims known as quality, quantity, relation, and manner (Grice, 1975). In each conversation these maxims are required to be observed but there are many reasons for which these maxims are violated. These

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violated maxims lead to new implications of meaning in conversation exchanges. Grice categorizes the failure in cooperative principle as flouting, violating, infringing the maxims and opting out.

3. Methodology

This study aimed to manifest the power relation among characters of *Death of a Salesman* (1949). This has been conducted through focusing on a key passage of the play. The selected passage is an ideologically significant extract in which Willy and Howard, two characters from two different social classes, the employee and the employer, are talking. Employing CA, this study follows a systematic reinterpretation of the text to give a new insight into the power relationship between the interlocutors. Two subcategories of CA have been chosen. In the realm of discourse analysis, the focus of this study has been on turn-taking mechanism; an important subject in the realm of pragmatics; the focus is on cooperative principles. Since the study of the conversation between the two interlocutors has been done through counting the turns, the numbers of words used by each character, the number of the long and short turns, the number of violations of the maxims, the analyses of this part have been done quantitatively. In the other section, since the contextual factors and their influence and reflection on the conversations between characters have been addressed, the analyses have been done qualitatively and the results have been presented.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this excerpt Howard talks 10.4 words per turn and Willy talks 8.8 words per turn. Howard dominates Willy with his 406 words over Willy’s 257 words. Of all turns, 61.7 per cent is devoted to wire recorder. In the first 40 turns, Willy speaks only 95 words while Howard speaks far more, 290 words. Despite their master-servant relationship, Willy never addresses Howard with words which indicate their social distance. He just addresses Howard by his first name. From turn 42 to 68 Willy dominates Howard with his 162 words over Howard’s 116 words. In the selected extract, violated maxims are very significant. From the beginning of this extract interlocutors do not follow the maxims many times for different reasons. The analysis of the dialogues indicates that most of Howard’s failures to observe the maxims is unintentional but most Willy’s failures are intentional for his aim of talking indirectly.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

In this paper we have employed Conversation Analysis to examine the power relations embedded in the context which directly affected the linguistic behaviors of the interlocutors. Results indicated that although power is a social structure that may be under the influence of social status (employee/employer) and economic situation of characters, they are not the only determining factors. Power is influenced by other factors as well. In the excerpt, one of these factors was their close relationships, they have known each other for many years. Studies proved that in some parts of the play the conversation between Howard and Willy was directly influenced by the
economic situation and it affected the power relations between them while in the other parts because of the close family relation and their intimacy, the power relations were not highlighted. This is the reason that the tragic ending of Willy Loman might be unpredictable for the readers.

**Key Words:** Power relation, Conversation analysis, Turn-taking mechanism, Cooperative principle, Pragmatics

**References (In Persian)**

**References (In English)**