

A Brief Analysis of the Main Female Character's Growth from the Perspective of Turn-Taking

—Taking Thelma in “*Thelma and Louise*” as an Example

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Abstract—As a social interaction among people, conversation is a necessity for everyday life; furthermore, it is of vital importance to a vivid reflection of a character in literature works. Turn-taking is one of the main aspects in analyzing a conversation, in which participants engage in a talk by taking turns. This essay tries to study four conversations between the main female character Thelma and other characters in the movie “*Thelma and Louise*” from the perspective of turn-taking system in CA, intending to find out what Thelma’s character originally is and how she grows afterwards.

Keywords—“*Thelma and Louise*”; *Thelma*; *turn-taking*; *growth*

I. INTRODUCTION

Conversation is the most common interaction among people, which involves not only conveying ideas, but also establishing social connections and achieving interpersonal intentions (Xu, 2017). In the 1960s, Conversation Analysis (CA) was first put forward by Harvey Sacks and his co-workers, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. In its beginning, CA was mainly used to analyze daily talks, but gradually “CA has developed into a full-blown style of research of its own, which can handle all kinds of talk-in-interaction” (Have, 1999), that is, meetings, courtroom proceedings and interviews. Afterwards, CA was utilized in analyzing conversations in literature works.

CA aims to analyze the orderly structure and sequential patterns in social interaction. Within its framework, turn-taking system is one of the main issues. As the most important element in turn-taking system, a turn is a basic utterance unit in daily conversation. When a conversation begins, at least two participants are involved. They must take turns to speak, that is, one speaker talks, stops; another speaker starts, talks and stops. So there exists an “a-b-a-b-a-b” pattern of turn-taking. In conversation, the two participants must adopt some techniques to make it go on effectively and smoothly. The process of turn-taking can be divided into three parts: taking the turn, holding the turn and yielding the turn (Stenstrom, 1994).

Thelma and Louise is a 1991 American road film directed by Ridley Scott and written by Callie Khouri. The film became a critical and commercial success, which received six Academy Award nominations. Thelma, a ditzy housewife, sets out for a weekend trip with her best friend, Louise, an independent waitress. They are desperate to take a break from their dreary lives. At a roadhouse bar, Thelma meets a flirtatious stranger, Harlan who wants to rape her; after being

caught on the spot, he continually insults them. Enraged, Louise responds by shooting him dead. Afterwards, the pair flees the scene. On their way of running, they met a series of unfair treatment from different males, a thief who has broken parole, stole Louise’s life savings; a foul-mouthed truck driver who repeatedly makes obscene gestures at them. Finally, being cornered by the police, they ride the car over the cliff to their deaths.

Under the theoretical framework of turn-taking theory (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974), this paper analyzes the features of turn-taking in this overwhelming critical and controversial film *Thelma and Louise* to have better understanding on how the main character Thelma has grown up from an ordinary housewife into a brand new and realistic woman with her own thoughts and opinions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Review of turn-taking

The idea of “conversation analysis” first came into being in the 1960s when Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff found out that “what a doing, such as utterance, [...], depends on its sequential position” (Have, 1999). Since then, CA has been studied by more and more researchers, mainly among sociologists. Some researchers explore how speakers exchange meaning between themselves on a turn-by-turn basis (Maynard & Clayman, 2003). According to Toerien (2013), gender differences should be studied within the existed social world other than the assumed social world when applying CA into the study of gender differences. The early researches apply turn-taking to daily conversation (Levinson, 1983; Gillian & George, 2000), classroom teaching (Sinclair & Coulhard, 1975) and courtroom interaction (Gnisci & Bakeman, 2007). Until the late 1980s, with the rapid development of drama-stylistics, CA theory has been applied in exploring power relations and characterization in literature works.

The theory of CA is made up of two basic concepts, turn-taking system and sequence organization. Analyzing turn-taking data is proved to be scientific and objective in examining how conversations are unfolded in literature works. A turn is “a stretch of talk by one person, before and after which there is silence” (Harris, 1952). Levinson (1983) defines “A turn is a time during which a single participant speaks, within a typical, orderly arrangement in which participants speak with minimal overlap and gap between them.” Conversation is not made up of only one turn. Therefore, alternating between turns built up the process of turn-taking.

As an important component of CA, turn-taking has attracted the attention of many scholars. Since 1980s, with the development of dramatic stylistics, turn-taking analysis is used to reveal characters' personalities and power relationship in literature field, for example, the character in *Death of a Salesman*, American situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory* and Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* (Wang, 2009; Li, 2014; Chen, 2017).

Herman (1995) gives a detailed explanation of what drama-stylistics is and how turn-taking system could promote plot development and character revelation. At home, since it was introduced, turn-taking system has been used in more and more researches. Li Huadong and Yu Dongming (2001) proposed a new quantitative turn-taking analysis method in stylistics of drama with new turn-taking framework, which can reveal the characters' relationships, personalities, value orientation and the development of the plot in the play. Wang Lipeng (2014) drew the conclusion that there was a positive correlation between the power which greatly affects the character's personalities, turn number and average turn length of the character.

B. Review of *Thelma and Louise*

Few films have polarized critics and viewers like the 1991 box-office hit *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991). The film is the story of two friends—Thelma, a timid housewife with an emotionally abusive husband, and Louise, a waitress in a dead-end relationship with a second-rate lounge singer—who leave for a weekend trip to “teach their men a lesson.” Their “pay-back” trip turns out to be a nightmare, with a series of prejudiced treatment from different males. After Thelma is sexually assaulted and Louise kills the would-be rapist, both women step into a road to crime. Finally, their journey ends in a suicide plunge into the Grand Canyon. They strike back against the men they encounter along the way and, in the process, discover in themselves strength they didn't know.

From 1997 to 2017, there are in total more than 40 papers in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (known as CNKI) centering on the study of the film *Thelma and Louise*. These papers mainly revolve around such topics like feminism and feminine consciousness. According to Friedan (1983), “women were defined only in sexual relation to men—man's wife, sex object, mother, and housewife and never as persons defining themselves by their own actions in society. That image, which I called ‘the feminine mystique’.” Since its release, the film *Thelma and Louise* is regarded as the classics of feminism, in which two road heroines are shaped. It symbolizes the awakening of feminine awareness. Zhao Weihua (2016) thought that, “in *Thelma and Louise*, the male images changed the heroines' life track and fate; therefore, the feminist consciousness gradually became more and more intense”. According to Cai Haiyan (2008), the main theme of the movie is to reflect the female characters' determination to embrace them after having searched for their lost dignity and existence. Based on liberal feminism, the idea of “ignoring gender difference, emphasizing gender convergence” should be put forward in the society (Luo Xueqing, 2009).

III. DATA ANALYSIS

A. Research method

Sacks et al (1974) thought that turn-taking system existed in all conversations, which includes turn-construction, turn-allocation and turn-taking rules. Based on the previous researches, a framework for quantitative turn-taking analysis was put forward by Li Huadong and Yu Dongming in 2001, that is, the initiation and control of topics, turn-length, turn-types, interruption and monologue, and turn-control strategies. In order to have a better understanding of Thelma's character and growth, four conversations in the movie will be analyzed by turn-taking analysis framework mentioned above. The number of turns, average turn-length, turn-type and turn-control strategies will be calculated and analyzed.

B. Analysis of four conversations in *Thelma and Louise*

1) Clip 1: Louise called Thelma about their weekend trip

TABLE I. ANALYSIS OF CLIP 1

Characters	Thelma	Louise
Total number of turns	4	3
Total words	30	63
The initiation and control of topics	Less control	More control
Turn-length	7.3	21

The first conversation is from the very beginning of the movie, which is about Louise's calling Thelma about their trip to “ease her nervous breakdown”. As Table 1 shown above, there are 7 turns in total, Thelma takes four turns and Louise takes three turns. Louise initiates the conversation by calling Thelma and asking “whether Thelma already packed”. During this conversation, Louise initiates the dialogue twice by focusing on the topic, their incoming journey; while Thelma initiates the dialogue once by just asking Louise's whereabouts. Among Thelma's four turns, two major turns are just response to Louise's questions. It is clear that the average turn-length of Louise is much longer than that of Thelma. Neither Thelma nor Louise has monologue or interruption. Louise uses paralinguistic features, such as covering one of her ears and moving to a quiet place in order to listen clearly.

From these numbers, it is found that Louise has more control in the conversation. Although they are good friends, they are quite different. Louise is independent, mighty and sharp-tongued; while Thelma is passive, weak and gentle. Therefore, when Louise is informed that Thelma still has to ask her husband if she can go, Louise just says, “Thelma, is he your husband or your father”. At the end of the conversation, Thelma hangs up in a hurry in order to serve her husband breakfast, which can clearly reflect her original identity, that is, a full-time housewife revolving around her husband, and a “caged” canary without her own thoughts but following her husband or her friend.

2) *Clip 2: Thelma called home to her husband Darryl after Thelma and Louise began their journey of escape*

TABLE II. ANALYSIS OF CLIP 2

Characters	Thelma	Darryl
Total number of turns	6	7
Total words	72	97
The initiation and control of topics	Less control to more control	More control to less control
Turn-length	12	14

The second conversation happens after Thelma and Louise begin their journey of escape after Thelma is sexually harassed and Louise kills the would-be rapist. Thelma, who is not yet determined to flee, calls home to her husband, Darryl. As we can see from Table 2, there are 13 turns in the conversation, Thelma takes 6 turns and Darryl takes 7 turns. It is obvious that Thelma and Darryl are well-matched in the number of turns. But it is Darryl who initiates the dialogue by asking where Thelma is, Thelma just follows the topic and speaks directly about her whereabouts. It clearly reflects that those two have unequal status in the family, that is, the husband has more power than the wife. Darryl is irritable, repressive and selfish; while Thelma always listens to her husband and doesn't know her own mind.

In the first six turns, it is always Darryl who takes the initiative by questioning his wife and showing his anger, without listening to his wife's explanation but ordering her to come back home. As for Darryl's fury, Thelma just follows her husband and tries to make an apology in a compromising tone. At the same time, Darryl interrupts Thelma when she tries to explain by saying "Hold on! Hold on! Come on, Kurt, kick it", since he is watching a football game on TV. It is clear that he does not really care what his wife is doing and what she tries to say. When all the attempts and explanations have been ignored, Thelma strikes back. Therefore, in the second half of the conversation, Thelma initiates the conversation and says, "You are my husband, not my father". When facing a more furious roar from her husband, Thelma just responds with a pause and a sentence "Go fuck yourself", and then hangs up. From this slight change of taking initiatives and holding the turns, Thelma begins to show her power, while Darryl apparently loses the power in the dialogue. It is not difficult to find that Thelma already has a preliminary sense of autonomy and resistance. The germination of this consciousness heralds the coming of a great transformation in her character.

3) *Clip 3: Thelma and Louise found the money being stolen*

TABLE III. ANALYSIS OF CLIP 3

Characters	Thelma	Louise
Total number of turns	2	1
Total words	99	44
The initiation and control of topics	More control	Less control
Turn-length	50	44

The third conversation is chosen after Thelma and Louise find that their money has been stolen. In order to flee to Mexico, Louise gets the money from her boyfriend and puts it in Thelma's custody. "Unexpectedly", the money is stolen by

the premeditated thief J.D., who Thelma quickly falls for. The conversation consists of 3 turns in total, Thelma takes two turns and Louise takes only one turn. It is clear that Thelma has the absolute advantage in the dialogue in terms of the number of turns and words. After finding Louise's life savings is gone, the topic is first initiated by Thelma. She expresses her rage over J.D. and apologizes to Louise for her reckless behavior, saying, "Oh, God damn it! I've never been lucky! Not one time! Shit! That son of a bitch burned me. I don't believe it. I don't believe it. Louise? You okay? Louise. I'm sorry, I mean it. Louise, it's okay."

During the conversation, Thelma and Louise perform quite differently. In Thelma's discourse, nearly half of the words are imperative, for example, "Come on", "Stand up", "Move". She is playing a role as a leader who would make the decision. On the contrary, Louise just talks about the seriousness of the problem and her concern over their future. It is not difficult to notice that Louise's spirit seems broken after the incident. She just repeats the words "It's not okay" over and over. Besides the difference in their languages, Thelma and Louise use different paralinguistic features. Louise is squatting on the ground, hiding her face in her hands, and crying helplessly; while Thelma is very firm in attitude and shows no fear by packing their things quickly and dragging Louise away. It is also from this moment that the roles of Thelma and Louise begin to exchange to some extent. Thelma begins to stay strong and positive, which could explain her action afterwards that is, she robs the store to raise money for their following escape.

4) *Clip 4: Police car rounded up Thelma and Louise*

TABLE IV. ANALYSIS OF CLIP 4

Characters	Thelma	Louise
Total number of turns	17	17
Total words	111	105
The initiation and control of topics	More control	Less control
Turn-length	6.6	6.2

The last conversation begins when Louise realizes that they have been finally cornered by the authorities until the end of the film. This clip has a total of 34 turns; Thelma and Louise take 17 turns respectively. There is no distinct difference in their total words and turn-length. However, Thelma initiates the conversation for 15 times, while Louise only has twice. In the whole process of conversation, Thelma seems to have the initiative, which could be demonstrated not only by her suggestion to "get off" when seeing the police cars, her confession to Louise that "the whole thing was my fault", but also by making the final decision for both of them. When Louise asks "You sure", Thelma just answers positively, "Yeah".

It could be found that, in the end of the film, Thelma has taken full control of the conversation. In this respect, Thelma is no longer the immature girl who has to ask her friend for everything just as the beginning of the film. During the three-day-escape journey, Thelma has grown up, turning out to be independent and sober. Rather than be captured and spend the rest of their lives in jail, Thelma proposes that they "keep going". Louise asks Thelma if she is certain, and Thelma says "Yeah". They kiss, then Louise steps on the

accelerator, and they ride the car over the cliff to their deaths. Actually, in Louise's eyes, this is just the first chance Thelma has ever had to really express herself.

IV. CONCLUSION

Social psychologist Brown and Gilman were the first to introduce the word "power" into sociolinguistic terminology (Qu, 2011). It is acknowledged that a person has power over another person because he can control the behavior of the person. Sacks has done a long-term study in the field of CA and put forward the theory of turn-taking model in 1974. The meaning of turn here actually refers to the power and obligation to give a person speaking and what he actually says (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974)). By using the theory of turn-taking to analyze the dialogues in the film, it is clearer to show the power relations among the characters in the film, the character of the characters and the development of plot (Li and Yu, 2001). The movie *Thelma and Louise* is about two friends embark on a road trip with unforeseen consequences. One of the main female characters, Thelma, undergoes great changes in this "journey", developing from a submissive and dependent housewife into an independent and decisive female. Her growth in character and behavior not only depends on everything they encounter along the way, but also is shown in her initiative to control the discourse power. In the beginning, after being married to a disrespectful and controlling man, Thelma is too timid and obedient to take any initiative in the conversation. It is self-evident that Thelma is in the disadvantageous position when it comes to the number of turns, the number of words, the initiation and control of topics, and turn-length. However, as the intensification of conflicts in the movie—being harassed, cheated, discriminated and chased—Thelma gradually transforms into the one who can make the decision and take on the responsibility for her friend and herself. She could take the initiative to start the conversation, and then hold the turn for most of the time. *Thelma and Louise* is a road film in the form of pursuing feminism. The journey depicts in the film can be seen as Thelma's journey of growth. Within a short period of three days, after having experienced all the injustices of society and with the help of Louise, Thelma begins to awaken. Finally, Thelma finds the purpose of life—freedom.

The study has made a contribution to a better understanding of Thelma's growth from the perspective of turn-taking system, since there are few articles of the same type in number. However, further research could be done; for example, analysis of the conversations in the movie based on other theoretical framework may be carried out to complement the present research.

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