A Discourse Analysis of Power Relations in the Homecoming

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Abstract: The Homecoming, one of the most important works of Harold Pinter, was first published in 1965. It receives heated discussion from scholars all around the world, and feminism, menace as well as its absurdity nature are among the most popular research subjects of this play. However, scholars rarely investigate power relations of the play from the perspective of discourse analysis. Through analyzing conversations of the play from the perspectives of turn-taking, cooperative principle, and speech act theory, the present research aims at revealing how conversation participants apply linguistic strategies to seek and maintain their own power, and proving that language plays a critical role in human society and it largely constructs social reality.

1. Introduction

Harold Pinter is one of the most influential British playwrights of modern times. In awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Swedish Academy noted, "that he occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama-Pinteresque". The Homecoming is one of his representative works. The present paper applies some fundamental linguistic theories, including turn-taking, cooperative principle, and speech act theory, to analyze the dialogues of the play. It is aimed at revealing how conversation participants of the play apply linguistic strategies to seek and maintain their own power; and it is also expected that the present research will help to shed some light on the effectiveness of discourse analysis to the interpretation and appreciation of plays.

2. Research Background

The Homecoming has received criticism from various perspectives since its publication, and feminism, menace, and the absurdity nature are the most popular topics in studying Pinter as well as the play itself, yet there is not any article or thesis completely devoted to revealing conflicts and power struggle of the play from the perspective of discourse analysis.

2.1 Discourse Analysis

The term "discourse analysis" was first used by American linguist Harris 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.

Halliday (1970) investigated the relationship between language structure and its function and developed the famous systemic-functional grammar, which is very influential to discourse analysis. Also in the 1970s, theories like Conversational Analysis, Speech Act Theory, Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Politeness and Face theories began to be applied to Discourse Analysis. Presently, Discourse Analysis has been taken up in a variety of social science disciplines.

As more and more people have realized that language plays an important role in their daily lives, research on discourse and society, specifically, discourse and gender, discourse and race, discourse and globalization, discourse and employment, discourse and environment, discourse and cross-culture communication, to name only a few, have been conducted by scholars.

2.2 Language and Power

The relationship between discourse and power has long been the research target of scholars of

discourse analysis. "Discourse establishes, sustains and changes power relations" (Leeuwen, 1993: 193) Kedar studied power and discourse in his Power through Discourse and defined discursive power as "resource to achieve one's goal in a conversation". (Kedar, 1987: 8) 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." (Foucault, 1984: 3)

However, power is not fixed, and it is constantly changing in social interactions. According to Fairclough (1989: 258), "discourse is a form of 'social practice'; it is socially constitutive and socially conditioned; it sustains, reproduces and transforms social relations and power relations." That is to say, language is the site of power struggle for dominance and control; it could both establish differences in power and challenge power. In actual human interaction, the one who enjoys power would try to maintain his dominance and control; while the one with less power would not easily surrender himself, instead of it, he would struggle to gain his own power.

The paper in question explores how participants of a community use discursive strategies to achieve their own power from the perspectives of turn-taking, cooperative principles, and speech act theory.

3. Analysis of the Character Relations in The Homecoming

Language not only reflects power relations of different participants in a conversation, but also contributes to the construction of their power relation. During the process of people's using language to seek power, many discursive strategies have been proved to be effective. In this part, the author focuses on three linguistic perspectives in order to reveal the discursive strategies of different characters in the process of conflict and struggling for dominance.

3.1 Power Relations from the Perspective of Turn-taking

According to Sacks et al (1974), 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. Fasold (2000) argues that turns are constructed of, for English at least, word phrases, clauses, and sentences. During the past decades, turn-taking mechanism was frequently applied in dramatic studies.

In this part, a few variables of the turn-taking mechanism are considered, including initiation and control of topics, turn length, turn type, and turn control strategies.

The conversation in question is between Max and Lenny from ACT ONE.

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	3	0
		Silence	1	5

It happens at the very beginning of the play. Conflicts arise from the first moment when Max wants to find the scissors while Lenny focused on reading his paper. Obviously, Lenny does not want to be disturbed by his father. However, Max keeps speaking with Lenny, and Lenny tries everything to get rid of his nagging father.

Between these two characters, the father Max is supposed to be more powerful than his son Lenny, and this 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 three of them; Max also initiated

more turns than Lenny, and Lenny is responding for his father for most of the time; besides, from turn length we may easily find that Max speaks a lot more than Lenny.

However, Max's power is not solid and unchallengeable, and Lenny is not a hundred percent submissive. Actually, 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. Although Max initiated three topics, he could not maintain and finish any of them. At first, he asks for the scissors from Lenny, but Lenny is inactive to help his father, and Max is forced to change his topic into talking about his old history as being bad when he was young before he can achieve his original goal to get a scissors. Max's second topic does not maintain very long before it is interrupted by Lenny abruptly. Then, Max tries another topic to horse race, and Lenny is still disinterested in it. At last, Lenny directly shows his attitude and asks Max to change his topic.

From their conversation, we can find that 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. When Max asks for the scissors, he initiated three questions but only receives one response from Lenny. Besides, although Max holds a substantial part of the total turn length, 80% of his turn length is contributed from his monologues.

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. When Max makes his first monologue, Lenny keeps silent to avoid being involved into Max's conversation. While making his monologue, Max deliberately gives chances to Lenny to get involved. However, Lenny keeps silent to Max's monologue until he could not bear it anymore and interrupted his father rudely. When Max makes the second monologue to talk about horse race, Lenny interrupts him again. This time, Lenny does it more politely.

To sum it up, turn-taking patterns of Table 1 reveals the power relations between Max and Lenny. That is, the old father still enjoys a declining power over his son; at the same time, the power of the grown up son is getting stronger and stronger. Both of them have the desire to strengthen their own power.

3.2 Power Relations from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle

Grice introduces the theory of cooperative principle, which is made up of four conversational maxims, namely, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relevance, and the maxims of manner. The existence of such maxims makes us communicate with each other better, not only when speakers obeyed these maxims, but also when they violated these maxims. Through cooperative principle, the real intention of speech participants can be disclosed. Therefore, cooperative strategies can also contribute to the establishment and maintenance of one's power in daily communication. The following part tries to examine how speech participants use cooperative strategies to seek and maintain their power.

At the very beginning of the play, Max has a conversation with Lenny:
Example 1
MAX. What have you done with the scissors?
Did you hear me? I want to cut something out of the paper.
LENNY. I am reading the paper.
MAX. Did you hear me? I'm talking to you! Where is the scissors?
LENNY. Why don't you shut up, you draft prat?
(Pinter, 1966: 1)
It is quite obvious that Lenny violates both the maxim of quantity and the maxim of relevance. Here, Lenny's power lies in that he does not want to be disturbed. Therefore, to his father's first two questions, he simply gives no response at all. Then, his final response to the question, "where is the scissors?" is "I'm reading the paper?" Thus, both the maxim of quantity and quality are violated. Lenny tries to tell Max that he is busy at the moment, and he does not want to be disturbed.

On the other hand, Max's power is best embodied in his wish to get the scissors. In order to achieve this power, he also violates the maxim of quantity in that he actually provides more

information than needed. Max not only asks the question for three times, "What have you done with the scissors?", "I said I'm looking for the scissors. What have you done with them?", "Did you hear me?", but also tells his purpose for getting the scissors, "I want to cut something out of the paper." The purpose of Max's words is to get an answer from Lenny so that his wish can be fulfilled.

Max violates the Maxim of quantity in order to get a response from his son. However, Lenny simply violates both the maxim of quantity and the maxim of relevance to avoid his father's question. Therefore, power relation between these two characters is obvious, that is, the old father is losing his dominance over his son, Lenny.

Max and Sam had a conversation when Sam came back home from work:

Example 2

SAM. Yes. Look what he gave me. He gave me a box of cigars.

MAX. Come here. Let's have a look at them.

SAM. Want to try one?

Max and Sam light cigars.

The best one.

MAX. From what point of view?

SAM. Eh?

(Pinter, 1966: 7)

In the play, Sam is regarded as a lodger of Max's house, which determines Sam's inferior position in his relationship to Max. The two brothers have already lived together for about fifty years, and it proves that Sam acknowledges Max's superiority completely. Otherwise, it is unlikely for them to stay together under one roof for so long. Throughout their conversation, we find that both of them are cooperative with each other in that we find no violation of cooperative principle. The reason for their cooperative attitude lies in that Max and Sam have already established a relatively steady power relation with each other, and the motivation for their linguistic conflicts is not strong.

Lenny first encounters with his sister in law at middle night, and they have a conversation as below:

Example 3

LENNY. My name is Lenny. What's yours?

RUTH. Ruth.

She sits, puts her coat collar around her.

LENNY. You must be connected with my brother in some way.

RUTH. I am his wife.

LENNY. What, you sort of live with him over there, do you?

RUTH. We are married.

(Pinter, 1966: 31)

Lenny is a pimp, and it is not difficult to understand that he tries to flirt with his sister in law. This can be proved from Ruth's reaction when she meets Lenny, "she sits, puts her coat collar around her". In front of her impolite brother in law, Ruth behaves herself cooperative enough in order to maintain her basic politeness. However, in responding to Lenny's excessive insult, Ruth violates the maxim of relevance in order to protect herself. When Lenny asks: 'What, you sort of live with him over there, do you?", Ruth answers: "We are married." By saying so, Ruth avoids answering Lenny's humiliating question. At the same time, she reclaims her legal right to live with her husband, Teddy.

The cooperative strategies between Max and Lenny reveal that the father is losing his dominance against his grown up son. From conversation between Max and Sam suggests that participants without a strong motivation to struggle for power are more likely to follow the cooperative principle. The other example prove that the more powerful participants of a conversation are more likely to violate the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner; on the other hand, through violating the maxim of quality and the maxim of relevance, the less powerful side of a conversation could effectively defend themselves.

3.3 Power Relations from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory was first introduced by Austin and further developed by Searle. Speech acts may imply the social status of the speaker. For example, in making directives, the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something. Normally, only the more powerful speaker would enjoy the right to use directives. The following part is an investigation into power relations of the characters from the perspective of speech act theory.

The conversation in question is between Max and Lenny from ACT ONE.

Table 2. Speech Acts of the Conversation between Max and Lenny

	Max (Father)	Lenny (Son)
Representatives	1	4
Directives	4	2
Expressives	2	0
Commissives	1	0
Declaractives	0	0

The conversation takes place when Max finds that Lenny is talking to somebody. Table 2 shows the details of speech acts between the father and his son. During this conversation, Max wants to know who is talking to Lenny, but Lenny is unwilling to tell the truth to his father. So, he keeps asking Lenny for answer:

Example 4

MAX. What's going on here? You drunk?

He stares at Lenny.

MAX. What are you shouting about? You gone mad?

MAX. Is Joey down here? You been shouting at Joey?

MAX. I want an explanation, you understand? I ask you who you got hiding here?

(Pinter, 1966: 34)

The illocutionary act of the four questions is that "tell me who you are talking with", Max uses these four directives in order to get the answer from Lenny. On the other hand, Lenny tries to cheat his father by answering: "I was thinking aloud", "I was sleepwalking", and etc. However, these representatives do not stop Max's questioning. Then, Lenny put forward two directives: "Look, why don't you just pop off?" and "Get out of it, leave me alone, will you?" The illocutionary act of these two directives can be understood as "don't ask me again". Obviously, Lenny annoyed his father. Max uses two expressives to show his unsatisfaction: "You are thinking so loud you got me out of bed", and "I hate this room", the real intention of Max is that "you woke me up, I am not happy with it". Besides, Max even makes a commissive to warn his son: "you will lie in your own blood".

Although his power is declining, Max is still the more powerful one against his son. This can be proved through Max's application of directives, expressives, and commissives to get the answer he wants and to show his unsatisfaction respectively. At the same time, Lenny also put forward two directives against his father, which shows that Lenny is not completely powerless.

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

Table 3. Speech Acts of the Conversation between Teddy and Ruth

	Teddy (husband)	Ruth (wife)
Representatives	12	15
Directives	3	0
Expressives	0	2
Commissives	1	0
Declaractives	0	0

It takes place when they get to home at middle night. From Table 3, we may see that both of

them prefer representatives to communicate with each other. Teddy makes three directive sentences only because he wants Ruth to have a rest.

When they come into the room, Ruth suggests that she is a little bit tired, and Teddy tries to persuade her to have a rest:

Example 5

Ruth: I'm tired.

TEDDY. Then sit down.

TEDDY. Why don't you go to bed.

TEDDY. Go to bed. I'll show you the room.

(Pinter, 1966: 19)

To persuade Ruth, Teddy applies a commissive sentence: "you will be perfectly all right there (in the bed room) without me". We may find that the relationship between Teddy and Ruth is relatively equal. Meanwhile, participants of a conversation with equal power relations are more likely to apply representatives in their verbal exchanges; on the other hand, directives and commissives are less likely to take place.

The above examples prove that power relations of characters can be reflected through their speech acts, and we may come into a conclusion that the more powerful participants of a conversation are more likely to apply directives and commissives to seek and maintain their superiority, while the less powerful participants usually make representatives in the conversation.

4. Conclusion

The present research shows that linguistic conflicts occur frequently between the characters of The Homecoming, which prove that conflict is an important theme of the play. Besides, linguistic conflicts are actually a process of power struggle among the characters, and the paper reveals how characters of the play apply linguistic strategies to seek and maintain their own power. It also proves that turn-taking mechanism, cooperative strategies, and speech acts are all of their own significance in constructing and defining power relations of conversation participants. Meanwhile, the research reaffirms that language not only reflects social reality, but also contributes to the construction of social reality. Just like Foucault (1984) said, "discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized." That is to say, language plays a critical role in human society and it largely constructs social reality. Moreover, the paper also proves that power is not fixed, instead of it, power can be gained through successful linguistic strategies.

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