

Dramatic Conflicts Presentation of *The Merchant of Venice* in Discourse Structure

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Abstract—From the point of view of conversation analysis, this thesis tries to elucidate the dramatic conflict of *The Merchant of Venice* which is the classic masterpiece of Shakespeare. Selecting two scenes in the first show (in the Venice court) of fourth act, via three-section discourse structure theory in discourse mode, starting with distribution, type and pattern of supporting move and challenge move, and with the help of pragmatics and sociolinguistics theories, this thesis gives linguistic explanation to its dramatic conflicts. Analysis shows that significance of drama not only depends on the content of characters' talking, but also relates to communicative system of discourse. Discourse analysis will help to give well-founded linguistic interpretations to drama, so as to build the dramatic criticism on a relatively objective and reproducible foundation. Analysis also shows that Western Discourse Theory can also be used for appreciation of dramatic works.

Keywords—*The Merchant of Venice*; discourse structure; supporting and challenge moves; dramatic conflict

I. INTRODUCTION

With the completion of discourse analysis, especially the improvement of discourse analysis theory, the dramatic text has gotten a little progress. But it is still not widely developed now. (Herman, 1995; Short 1996; Thornborrow 1998), and it is rarely to see that modern western linguistic theory is applied to analysis of drama. Now, the author uses this relatively young but important part of discourse theory — the discourse structure to explain the dramatic conflicts in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The discourse theory applied to explain natural discourse is also appropriate to the analysis of dramatic text. Although imaginary dramatic text is different from natural discourse in true life in some respects, "The drama is a literature form which is most like natural discourse (Short, 1996:168)". The common point of natural discourse and dramatic discourse is that they share the same discourse system and comply with similar discourse rule. Conflict is a basic factor of drama which is mainly expressed in the behavior of drama characters, but the communicative behaviors are mostly finished by language in the drama. From the "Dramatic language is usually regarded as the discourse which is used for communication between characters and driven by the actors" (Barranger, 1996: 365), it can be seen that the discourse is a big part of drama, obviously, dramatic conflict

will largely reflected by the linguistic conflict among characters, that is also the hot point on which critical pragmatics focuses (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). At the same time, the type of discourse behavior and characteristics of turn-talking could also provide the information that is available for reference.

II. DISCOURSE STRUCTURE THEORY

As described by Burton (1980), discourse mode or discourse structure means the assumption in former move and the communication expectation that it has established. Discourse is a cooperatively verbal activity which involves two or more people. An entire verbal communication behavior consists of three moves namely three-section type (IRF): initiation, response and follow up (Tsui 1994), such as:

A: What did you do last weekend? (initiation)

B: I went to the park, and finished my homework. (response)

A: Excellent! (follow up)

According to the linguistic system theory of M.A.K. Halliday, discourse is an open system which is available to be selected by the parties involved. At any point of the discourse, the first speaker always has a set of discourses available for selection. Each of selection opens another set of selection system for the next speaker. Selection can be divided into two types, i.e., the supporting discourse structure or challenge/query discourse structure. To admit the assumption in former move for ensuring progressive development of discourse is to support discourse mode. The response of B in above example maintains the discourse mode, that is to provide the information needed by A, and satisfy the discourse assumption and expectation established by the first speaker, so as to get the existing topic developed; it shall be pointed that negative response (e.g. I do not know) and perfunctoriness (e.g. Wait a moment) also belong to supporting move, because they finally provides the information needed, to maintain normal discourse structure (Tsui, 1994: 221). The challenge move is an initiation move that challenges the pragmatic premises of former move or response move; it can be divided into two types: (1) query the pragmatic assumption in former discourse; (2) ignore the former move, and start new initiation behavior. When the response of B is "Why do you ask this?", it belongs to (1),

because B presents challenge against the pragmatic premises of initiation behavior of A, hindering smooth development of the topic; and when the next move of B is "I have a party tonight", it belongs to (2), because B ignores the question of A, and starts a new initiation move.

III. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

A. Textual Analysis

According to discourse structure theory, this paper analyzes two sections on the court of Venice in the fourth act of *The Merchant of Venice*. The reason to select this act is that it is the climax of the drama and it completely presents the cruelty of Shylock. More attention is paid to how the challenge move deviating from normality causes dramatic conflict and how to lay a foundation for gradual promotion of conflict when conversation mode remains normal. In the sections selected, T, SM and CM are separately the initials of turn-talking, supporting move and challenge move.

- Section 1

T1 Portia: The Jew shall be merciful a little. T2 Shylock: Why? Please tell me the reason (CM1). T3: We shall do something merciful as per the guidance of God. I hope you could make concessions legally, but if you insist on your request, the court of Venice is disinterested to judge that merchant to be guilty (SM1). T4 Shylock: I'll be responsible for what I did, as long as the law executes punishment as it rules (CM2). T5 Bassanio: No, I'm willing to pay off the money for him now, even doubled; if he is not satisfied, I'll pay ten times of the price, pledged with my hands, head and heart; if he is still not satisfied, that is the intentional harm. May I ask you the respected judge to be flexible slightly, and stop this cruel devil from accomplishing his animal desire of killing (CM3). T6 Portia: No one is allowed to change the existing laws in Venice (CM4). T7 Shylock: Wise judge, I admire you (SM2). T8 Portia: Please show me the receipt of the loan (CM5). T9 Shylock: Here you are, respectful doctor (SM3). T10 Portia: Shylock, they are willing to pay you three times of the price (CM6)! T11 Shylock: No, no, even the whole Venice (CM7).

- Section 2

T12 Portia: The law promises you one pound of fresh of that merchant's body. T13 Shylock: Knowledgeable judge! It is an excellent judgment. Come on, ready (SM4)! T14 Portia: Hold on (SM5), you are not entitled to take any drop of blood from him on this receipt. So in case any drop of blood drops when cutting one pound of fresh, all your property will be confiscated (CM8)! T15 Gratiano: Ah, unprejudiced judge (SM6)! T16 Shylock: Ah, I'm willing to accept the repayment. Pay me 3 times of the price on the receipt, and then free that Christian (CM9). T17 Bassanio: Here is the money (SM7). T18 Portia: Wait a moment (SM8)! The Jew must be impartially treated. He is not allowed to accept other compensations except for the punishment stated on the receipt. Why not do it yet (CM10). T19 Shylock: Can't I just take my capital back (CM11)? T20 Portia: Mr. Jew, you will take no money, except for the fresh that you'll take at the

risk of your life (CM12). T21 Shylock: Well, I will quit this lawsuit (CM13).

B. Summary and Discussion

This section starts with three parts, distribution, type and pattern of supporting and challenge moves to analyze the relationship between the normal or abnormal action move of discourse structure and the dramatic conflict.

1) Distribution of challenge move and supporting move:

Totally there are 13 supporting moves and 14 challenge moves in the sections above. According to three-section conversation mode, originally, CM is the response of Shylock to the initial behavior of Portia, but he sends the challenge response to Portia for the clarification message, which made conflict visible. In CM2, Shylock ignores the advisement of Portia, and presents challenge response. He highlights to execute according to the law, so the conflict is intensified. CM3 is the initial behavior of Bassanio, and the negative response to Shylock as well. He points out the cruelty of Shylock, and violates the politeness principle. CM4 is a negative response of Portia to Bassanio. On surface, she violates politeness principle to Bassanio, but suggestively she highlights the majesty of laws. That lays a good foundation for the behavior that Shylock must cut the fresh according to the law and without blood drop. CM6 is another move after Portia has read the receipt, and she plays mouse and cat game with him. Seemingly, she provides Shylock with a solution of paying Shylock 3 times of price instead of cutting fresh, but he walked into a trap after insisting on execution as per the law. At that moment, it seems that Shylock prevails in the development of the plot, but actually Shylock finds no way back. The conflict is further intensified. In section 2, the request of Shylock is satisfied. When cutting the fresh of one pound, the challenge move of Portia CM8 makes the hope dash to pieces, the conflict is greatly intensified. A favorable turn happens in this plot, i.e. when hearing the fresh cut off must exactly weigh 1 pound and there must be no blood drop, Shylock flinches in the challenge move CM9, CM11 and CM13. Fresh cutting — 3 times of price repaid — capital — giving up lawsuit, all of these compromises indicate the trend that Shylock was defeated in the conflict fight. But Portia is still impartial. Now that Shylock adheres to enforce the law impartially, she must ensure that Shylock is impartially treated. At this moment, the plot comes to the climax, and the conflict is sublimated.

Then an analysis is made on how the supporting move presents its auxiliary effect to promote plot development. In SM1, Portia provides the message needed by Shylock, satisfying his pragmatic desire of the message which is established in challenge move, so the topic is developed. SM2 is the protection to Portia's reputation by Shylock. Portia says the law is inalterable, and that just meets Shylock's satisfaction. In consequence, Shylock admires Portia's judgment, and submits the receipt to Portia in SM3 and SM4. He always says "Respectful doctor" and

"Knowledgeable judge" when fresh cutting is allowed. The more Shylock has eagerly attentive behavior, the more his cruelty is highlighted, and also the conflict between the merciful people and him is intensified. SM6 is the initial move of Gratiano, and also the protection to the words of Portia, but this indicates the happiness of the just men when plot has favorable turn. In the supporting moves of this section, there are two perfunctorinesses, Hold on in T14 and Wait a moment in T18. Although the structure of discourse is maintained, both of them belong to di-preferred response (Pomerantz, 1984, Tsui, 1994: 165) that threatens face. They didn't satisfy the requirements of opposite side, and it is just an expedient of Portia. The conflict still exists, which may be further intensified.

2) *Type of challenge move and supporting move:* "Challenge means the face threatened" (Tsui, 1994:166) means conflicts. The 13 challenge moves above threaten the face in different extent, and it reflects the dramatic change of drama. As stated before, challenges are classified into two types: response, which queries the premise in former move; no response, which starts a new move. Response move in these two scenes are CM1, CM2, CM3, CM4, CM7, CM8, CM9, CM10, CM11, CM12 and CM13. Among which, CM3, CM4 and CM7 are negative assessment to the response, and other 8 response moves have queried different premises, and have different threatening degrees to the face of speaker. CM1, CM2 and CM7 are the queries to request of last speaker.

Request is a kind of verbal behavior which has some causative property. Therefore, execution of this behavior may threaten the face, and it involves politeness. Thus, in communication, the speaker usually does not directly show request to the other person, but reduces the causative property generated. The central behavior of these two sentences "the Jew shall be merciful a little" "Shylock, they are willing to pay you three times of the price!" is "Shylock, please just be merciful to accept these 3 times of the prices, and do not claim for that one pound of fresh". Portia shows this via an indirect request way, and decreases the command imposed on Shylock, but in CM1, CM2 and CM7, Shylock shows more and more queries to Portia. "I'll be responsible for what I did, as long as the law executes punishment as it rules" has more query than "Why should I be merciful", and "No, no, even the whole Venice" also has the stronger power than the "I'll be responsible for what I did". This indicates the dramatic change that Shylock is gradually dominating the conflict. CM8, CM9, CM10, CM11, CM12 and CM13 are the challenges of Shylock and Portia to each other. Their central behaviors are significantly different from before. Portia pushes Shylock to execute according to the receipt, but Shylock flinches from previous "Excellent judgment! Come on, Ready!" to the latter "I'm willing to accept three times of the price" then to "Just take the capital back" and to the final "I will quit this lawsuit", which reflects the trend of characters' willing and desires conflict, as well as the dramatic change that Shylock is gradually suffering a setback.

CM5 and CM6 belong to the second type that includes two circumstances: response absent and follow up absent.

The CM5 belongs to the follow up absent, and CM6 belongs to response absent. As to discourse structure, follow up move is not essential in some circumstance, but the response is obligatory in any circumstance, because it satisfies the expectation of former discourse and keeps the discourse structure coherent. Initial behavior exists but response is absent, evaluative discourse exists but the follow up is absent, these are the conflicts of discourses. Absence of response violates the core of Cooperative Principle-The Maxim of Relation (Leech, 1983), influences the continuity of the verbal communication and also indicates the conflicts among characters.

Support means to protect face, so as to promote the successful development of the plot. Supporting move can be divided into three types: maintaining normal discourse structure; negative response and perfunctoriness. SM1, SM2, SM3, SM4, SM6 and SM7 belong to the first type, and SM2, SM3 and SM4 are the compliment of Shylock to Portia, which comply with the politeness principle, but they also reflect the ruthlessness of Shylock, thus, dramatic conflict becomes sharp, these also lay foundation for intransigence of Portia. The SM5 (Hold on) and SM8 (Wait a moment) belong to perfunctoriness, and leaves time for subsequent discourse turn.

3) *Pattern of challenge move and supporting move:* From the points of view of characters who are challenging and challenged in discourse structure, discourse mode deviating from norm also provides the information about conflict parties, and functions of characters. Challenging and challenged moves most frequently happens between Shylock and Portia, these make the conflict parties clear. Portia was challenged by the other party for 6 times and Shylock was challenged for 7 times, thus this will be a close game. In section 1, three moves of Shylock are challenged. The destroyer in T4 is Bassanio, and in T7 and T9 is Portia. His discourse expectation is resisted by different people, and it proves that he is opposed by many people, but he prevails in this section. In section 2, three moves of Shylock are suffering counterattack from Portia, and his discourse structure is distorted repeatedly. The degree of conflict between Shylock and Portia is much more than the times of discourse conflicts between them, thus they have different functions from other people in presence. Bassanio has only one turn of challenge, and his function in the drama is entirely different from Shylock and Portia. It can be seen that patterns of challenge move coincide with the parties in the dramatic conflict and roughly reflect various functions of different characters in confrontation.

In the supporting move, Portia was supported for 4 times, and Shylock was 3. The reason why Shylock supports Portia is that the initial judgment satisfies him, making his "Contract of One Pound of Fresh" realized. In order to achieve a favorable turn afterwards, Portia keeps protecting the face of Shylock during the process that she deliberately asks Shylock for giving up fresh cutting. In section 2, Gratiano praises Portia because she finds the flaw of the receipt, which is going to disable the merciful desire of

Shylock. So it is clear that mutual support and face protection among various characters are based on various purposes and reflect various standpoints and functions of characters in the drama.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Merchant of Venice indicates that Shakespeare's multiline plot constituting technique is being mature. The two subjects "Contract of One Pound of Fresh" and "Portia's Three Caskets", which are previously uncorrelated are integrated to a new entity. This thesis tries to analyze two sections of "Contract of One Pound of Fresh" via western discourse analysis theory to provide pragmatic reference to dramatic conflict. With the help of sociolinguistics and critical pragmatics theories, and in the respect of distribution, type and pattern of supporting and challenge moves, the paper starts with the normality and abnormality of discourse mode to explain the conflict of characters in the selected dramatic discourses. It proves that significance of drama not only depends on content of characters' talking, but also relates to communicative system of conversation. Moreover, assessing the dramatic text under the theoretical framework of conversation analysis can make the dramatic criticism have more rational and objective factors and applying the conversation analysis theory into the appreciation of dramatic works will have a brilliant future.

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