

Original Paper

Analysis of the Documentary *The Firsts in Life* from the Perspective of the Turn-taking System

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Abstract

Turn-taking research is the core and focus of conversation analysis. As a typical feature of dialogue, turn-taking is widely used and makes daily dialogue valuable for research. Documentaries, as a typical multimodal discourse, can spread a lot of information in the story alone. The combination of sound and video in documentaries also greatly meets the needs of turn-taking research. Therefore, on the basis of turn-taking, the author uses this classic documentary, The Firsts in Life, as a corpus and analyzes the conversations in the first three episodes from the perspective of turn-taking systems, and analyzes the pragmatic functions of each dialogue, in order to help readers appreciate this documentary from different perspectives.

Keywords

conversation analysis, turn-taking system, The Firsts in Life

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Modality is an important grammatical category in the field of linguistics and has always been the focus of western schools. Modality originated from modal logic and is based on necessity and possibility. In modal logic framework, Von Wright (1951) firstly divided the modes into four types, namely alethic mode, epistemic mode, deontic mode and existential mode. Also, according to Lyons (1977), we can distinguish the necessity and possibility by analytic propositions and synthetic propositions.

1.2 Research Questions

The main content of this paper is to study the pragmatic function of the turns happened in the

documentary. This article selects the images of the characters shown up in the first three episodes for analysis. In the study, quantitative method and qualitative method will be adopted.

RQ1: What is a turn-taking?

RQ2: How turn-taking realizes the pragmatic function?

2. Theoretical Framework

The application of turn-taking is very wide, in addition to the most important for conversation, it can also be used for the ordering of moves in games, for allocating political office, for serving customers at business establishments (Sacks et al., 1974).

2.1 Previous Studies on Turn-taking abroad

The turn-taking theory was first proposed by the American linguist Sacks. After nearly 50 years of development, a relatively complete theoretical framework has been formed. Before we understand what turn-taking is, we need to figure out what a turn is. Regarding the definition of turn, Sacks and his partners did not make a clear definition in this article. According to them, "turn" in sociology implies an activity and distribution of economic exchanges, which is very similar to the turn in conversation, where the turn of words is also the behavior of verbal exchanges between two interlocutors. But according to the whole text, it is not difficult to see that a turn is a dialogue and can be composed of multiple language forms, including sentential, clausal, phrasal and lexical constructions (Sacks et al., 1974). The examples are like these:

1) Lexical construction

A: How is your day today?

B: Good.

2) Sentential construction

A: I would like to invite you to my house for dinner tomorrow, is that possible?

B: Of course, that would be fine.

3) Phrasal construction

A: Did you buy a gift for Anna?

B: For whom?

But no matter what form of turn-taking it is, it would have an ending point, which is called the Transition Relevance Place (TRP). But in actual conversations, it is often difficult for us to get the exact turn point. The speaker can choose to continue the conversation or stop it at will. In 1981, Edmondson proposed that turn has two meanings, one is that the speaker regards a certain moment in the conversation as an opportunity for him to speak, and the other is what a speaker is saying when he speaks. But in practice the distinction between turns is not clear or simple. For example, we may talk for hours when we are chatting with friends we haven't seen in a long time, which means that what we say is more than one turn. In addition, not all content in the chat process belongs to the turn.

Even so, the analysis of turn-taking did not stop there. The turn-taking system for conversation can be described in terms of two components and a set of rules. The first is the turn-constructive component and the second, turn-allocation component. The latter include two groups: those in which next turn is allocated by current speaker's selecting next speaker; and those in which a next turn is allocated by self-selection (Sacks et al., 1974). This situation usually occurs in the classrooms of schools, and teachers can designate speakers through roll call, eye contact and other methods. The author thinks that turn allocation exists in various occasions where there is a relationship between superiors and subordinates, such as the workplace and the military.

In addition to these two components of the turn-taking, Sacks (1974) also established a series of rules for governing construction and allocation and decrease gap and overlap and even eliminate them.

1) For any turn, at the initial transition-relevance place of an initial turn constructional unit:

- (a) If A selects B in the current turn, then B has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak; no others have such rights or obligations, and transfer occurs at that place;
- (b) If A does not select B, then any other member may self-select, the first starter acquires rights to a turn;
- (c) If A does not select B, then A may continue or not unless another self-selects.

2) If neither (a) nor (b) has operated, and, following the provision of (c), current speaker has continued, then the rule (a)-(c) reapplies at the next transition-relevance place, and recursively at each next transition relevance place, until transfer is effected.

It's worth noticing that these rules actually mean that in the turn-taking mechanism only one person speaks at a time. Gaps and overlaps are common phenomena in turn-taking. This happens when no one chooses to keep the conversation going, or when several people talk at the same time after A has finished speaking. This is when the rules come in handy. Under the constraints of the rules, the two parties can make turn-transfer before the transition relevance place. In this way, the listener will pay attention to what the speaker is saying, and the speaker can also pay attention to the concentration of the listener to avoid this phenomenon.

2.2 Previous Studies on Turn-taking at Home

Liu Hong, who has made outstanding contributions to the development of turn-taking in our country, first made a comprehensive summary of the definition of turn-taking. She defined turn as "A discourse which has and plays a certain communicative function continuously spoken by the speaker at any time, and the end of which is marked by the role exchange of the speaker and the listener or the silence of all parties during the course of conversation" (Liu, 1992). In 2002, Li Yue and Fan Hongya also put forward a similar definition, and they all think that a turn is a utterance with a signal to abandon the turn. Most of the domestic turn-taking research is related to classrooms and films. Bad turn-taking will lead to long blank pauses in classroom teacher-student conversations, thereby hindering students' effective language output (Lai, 2021). Moreover, Yu Guodong (2015) conducted research on the

increment, and he pointed out that the research on it should be based on the sequence position of the increment in the speech response, the language components used by the communicator to perform increment, and achievable social behavior with increment.

3. Analysis of the Dialogue in *The Firsts in Life* from Turn-taking

The total length of the relevant video corpus collected in this study is about 100 minutes, and the research content involves how many turn-taking are there in the dialogues that appeared in the first three episodes of the documentary, and how each turn achieves pragmatic and communicative functions from the perspective of turn-taking mechanism.

3.1 Data Collection

This documentary is divided into 12 episodes in total, and tells the mood and experience of different groups of people at the important node of “the first time” in their lives. In view of the consideration of the length of the article, this paper selects the content of the first three episodes for analysis. The first episode is *the World at First Sight*, an essential life experience for each of us. This episode mainly selects the records of three mothers during childbirth. This article will analyze their conversations with doctors and with their own family members. The second episode is *Joys and Tears of the Childhood*, which contains the pupil’s mental journey from kindergarten to primary school. This episode is slightly different from the previous one, mainly based on the children’s own speeches. The third episode, titled *Love, Sorrow and Dream in Poems*, tells the story of high school students in Mangshui Town, Yunnan Province, who read and write poems. A large number of real and touching scenes in these three episodes outline the real life situations of contemporary Chinese people.

3.2 Research Contents

The first episode focused on the birth of a new life and included conversations between several families in the hospital.

(1) OB: “Are you starting to feel like pooping?”

Wu Lihui: “A little bit.”

OB: “Have we checked your cervical dilation?”

Wu Lihui: “Not yet.”

OB: “How long have you been feeling the pain with three-minute intervals?”

Wu Lihui: “From a while ago...probably happened twice or three times.”

This conversation takes place between the first maternity and obstetrician to be told in this episode. Cervical dilation is something that every mother has to face when giving birth to her child successfully, but it is not easy. Since it is the second time for her to give birth, the doctor directly asked her how she felt after the cervix reached 1 cm without going into too much detail. This conversation is very typical and ideally the way for turn-taking. The doctor asks questions and then stops, the next speaker, the pregnant woman, answers and then stops and only one person speaks at a time. As I have mentioned

before, the unit type could be various. It's clear that the first two answers are in the form of phrases, and the answer in the last sentence is a complete sentence. Wu describes her physical condition succinctly and accurately conveys the information to the obstetrician. At this time, the listener can make the next preparations according to her actual situation.

(2) Wu Lihui is too sore to speak, and pressed on the call light on the wall.

Nurse: "Honey, what's going on?"

Wu Lihui: "I need the anesthetic injection now."

Nurse: "I have applied for it on your behalf. Let's inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. I have called the doctor for you. She'll be right here, alright? "

Wu Lihui: "OK."

Nurse: "Don't grip. Come on, lose your grip."

At this time, Wu Lihui is being tortured by the opening of the cervix and has almost no energy to answer the nurse's words. Her body language and oral language conveyed her pain. The nurse's reassuring words also calmed the mother's emotions to a certain extent.

(3) Doctor: "After we consulted with the experts and heard your opinions yesterday, here's our plan for tomorrow's operation. For the mother's heart surgery, we'll put her under general anesthesia and conduct extracorporeal circulation. The problematic valve will get cleaned along with all the inflamed tissue. After that, we'll implant a prosthetic valve. There's a 30% chance the fetus may die. The stakes are actually quite high."

The husband looked solemn and was silent for a while. And then,

Man: "We all agreed to save the mother first in case of emergency. Thank you for your help. To be honest with you, we've run out of options."

This conversation is about another family, a pregnant woman who has congenital heart disease and is pregnant with twins, so the doctor has to discuss surgery with her family first. There is a gap phenomenon in the turn-taking of this part. The risks of this operation are high for ordinary people, not to mention the patient is a pregnant woman. The man's silence implies his thinking, maybe he is entangled with the operation, worries about his wife, and considers the risks of the operation.

The rhythm of the second episode was significantly more cheerful, telling the story of children going to school for the first time. Like the previous episode, this one also features different families as subjects.

(4) Staff: "Did you cry on the first day in kindergarten?"

The boy: "No."

Staff: "Really?"

The boy: "Really. When your dad sends you to the kindergarten, you can't cry. You just stride...Don't ask your parents to come. You just stride into the kindergarten. This is what courage means."

The little boy on the screen looks like he is 4 or 5 years old, and he speaks firmly about his first experience in kindergarten. This turn shows his bravery and strength, shapes his character, and enables him to communicate better with people.

(5) The girl: "I can't find it."

Her mom: "Then what to do?"

The girl: "I'll tell the teacher tomorrow."

Her mom: "Get everything out and look! Why did you take this out? Can your English worksheet hide in your pens? Where did you put your own worksheet? Do you have no idea?"

The girl: "I put everything in the desk."

Her mom: "In the desk. Then where is it?"

The girl: "I brought it back today. I brought everything back."

The little girl in the picture has already gone to primary school. We may not be unfamiliar with this conversation. Parents may react this way when we can't find homework. The little girl rummages through the items in her schoolbag one by one, while her mother scolds her for not packing her things.

(6) The boy: "I think next time I can get 32 for sure, at least."

The girl: "You can't get that many."

The boy: "Because this week I got 16."

The girl: "Then you add 17 to 16, 16 this week."

The boy: "Oh, I got it wrong. It's 33. It should be 33."

The girl: "You are kidding. You don't have that many."

This conversation takes place between a little boy and a little girl who are classmates. The teacher in the class will give out stars to the children who perform well, and after accumulating 10 stars, the children can go to the teacher to exchange for prizes. The little girl got the prize and happily returned to her seat. Although the little boy did not get the prize, he also said that he would get it next time.

(7) Mu Qingyun: "Mom. Have you had your meal?"

Her mother: "Yes."

Mu Qingyun: "Does it often rain there?"

Her mother: "Yes. What is it? What?"

Mu Qingyun: "Mom, I'll read a poem to you. It's the first poem I wrote. *Child*—The baby bird is the child of the big bird. The cloud is the child of the blue sky. The lamp is the child of the dark night. Before mother left for Guangdong, I put my shoes beside hers. Because, I'm a child of mother's. That's it."

Her mother: "Dear, I'm so sorry. Please, can you forgive me?"

By the end of this turn, both sides were in tears. This girl is a left-behind child, her father died and her mother is working outside. The 12-year-old girl began to take care of herself and had been living alone for 2 years at the time of the documentary. This turn fully expresses how a daughter misses her mother.

Maybe she is too shy to express her feeling face to face, so she chooses to use poetry to tell her mother.

4. Conclusions

In general, the turn of words selected by the author has communicative meaning, and its pragmatic function is used to express one's own feelings. Using the principles of conversation analysis and pragmatics, this paper makes a turn-taking analysis of the dialogues in the first three episodes of the documentary, providing readers with a new perspective for understanding and appreciation. This paper selects the ideal turn-taking, and uses the turn-taking system to analyze it. In most cases, the correct use of the turn-taking system is helpful for the success of the dialogue. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the turn-taking mechanism. But at the same time, this article also has shortcomings. This documentary has a total of 12 episodes, and the dialogues in each episode are far more than those listed by the author. In addition, the analysis of its dialogue also lacks the support of data. But from the full text, it is scientific and feasible to analyze dialogue by turn-taking.

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