

# Character revelation and dialogue interpretation through Politeness theory and Conversation analysis in dramatic discourse: The case of Woody Allen's Death Knocks

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## **Abstract**

This article intends to demonstrate how Politeness Theory and Conversation Analysis can be applied to discover the personality traits of characters in dramatic discourse and hence interpret the theme of plays. To this end, Nat, the character in Death Knocks by Woody Allen, has been put in the spotlight. The application of Politeness Theory to this play revealed that how reversing social power roles of characters can create irony which in turn can lead us to the theme of the play. Adjacency pairs, topic shifts and topics of the conversation also revealed important information about the character and the theme of the play.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis, dramatic discourse, Politeness Theory, Conversation analysis, Characterization, theme, irony.

## **1. Introduction**

The application of linguistic theories to literary texts has always been a controversial issue. However, linguistic stylisticians have been using discourse theories to liaise linguistic and discourse analysis theories with literature since 1960s (Abdesslem, 2001). In this connection, pragmatic stylistics, as an intersection discipline between linguistics and literature, has been considered as a way of textual interpretation in which the language used in the text has been used as a point of departure in interpreting literary texts (Simpson, 2004). Pragmatic stylistics has also been used as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of literature and in showing how such language works within a text (Carter, 2010).

According to Carter and Simpson (2005), one of the advantages of the application of discourse theories to literature is that they can provide interpreters with a descriptive framework against which they can assess their claims.

The early stylistics of 1960's had put the analysis of poetry in the spotlight to the exclusion of other literary genres. This was partly due to the influence of New Criticism and Practical Criticism, as well as Russian Formalism (Culpeper, Short, Verdonk, 2002:3). Nevertheless, in the late 1970s and 1980s; discourse analysis theories such as Politeness Theory and Conversation Analysis have particularly helped stylisticians to interpret fictional dialogues; however, stylisticians have neglected the genre of play. This may be due to the fact that

spoken conversation has been viewed as a 'debased' and 'unstable' form of language (Culpeper, et al.; 2002:3).

Considering the dearth of research in dramatic discourse, the current study aims to show how applying the principles of Politeness Theory and Conversation Analysis can help one in understanding the character traits and interpreting *Death Knocks* by Woody Allen. The aim is to demonstrate how the author by reversing social power roles can create irony, and how irony, in turn, can lead us to interpreting play and understanding the personality trait of characters.

## 2. Politeness Theory

The basic notion of Brown and Levinson's (B&L) Politeness Theory is "face", which has been defined as "the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for him self". In their framework, face consists of two related aspects: 1) negative face: wanting your actions not to be constrained or inhibited by others; 2) positive face: the positive consistent self-image that people have and their desire to be appreciated and approved of at least by some other people. The action people take to preserve both kinds of face for themselves and the people they interact with contributes to politeness. In B& L's (1978;1987) model, politeness has been defined as "redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of face-threatening acts (FTAs). By redressive action, they mean action that gives face to the addressee.

B&L (1987) argue that in human communication, either spoken or written, people tend to maintain one another's face continuously. They contend that, in daily conversations, people adapt their conversations to different situations and avoid making each other embarrassed or uncomfortable. They define FTAs as acts that infringe on the hearer's need to maintain his/her self-esteem. In this connection, they hold that certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those that run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker. Therefore, they distinguish between acts that threaten negative face and those that threaten positive face. B&L enumerate acts such as orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats, warnings and dares as acts that threaten one's negative face. However, they incorporate acts such as expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, complaints and reprimands, accusations and insults as acts that threaten one's positive face. To them, politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTAs.

B&L (1987) sum up human politeness behavior in three strategies: negative politeness, positive politeness and off-record indirect strategy. Positive politeness is orientated towards the positive face of the hearer, or the positive self-image that he claims for him self. The positive politeness strategy shows that one recognizes that his/her hearer has a desire to be respected. It also confirms the fact that the relationship is friendly.

Nevertheless, the negative politeness strategy is oriented toward partially satisfying the hearer's negative fact. That is to say, it consists in assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee's negative-face wants and will not interfere with his/her freedom of action. Some examples are: "I don't want to bother you but..." or "I was wondering if ..." (Talib, 2008:14).

Off-record indirect strategies are not directly addressed to others. They also might be referred to as hints. In this relation, B&L cite the following example: "Damn, I'm out of cash, I forgot to go to the bank today". In this example, the person may be intending to get the hearer to lend him/her cash. By the same token, Talib (2008:15) enumerates three off-record strategies: 1) Give hints: "It's a bit cold here"; 2) Be vague: "Perhaps someone should have been more responsible"; and 3) Be sarcastic, or joking: "Yeah, he's a real Einstein".

Assuming that each conversation participant has a knowledge of some sort of the intrinsic FTAs, s/he is expected to be able to evaluate the situation and use the most appropriate politeness strategies in the situation at hand. To this end, the speaker needs to take three sociological variables into consideration: 1) The "sociological distance" between speaker (S) and hearer(H) ; 2) The "relative power" between S and H; 3) The "absolute ranking of impositions" in the particular culture.

The evaluation of the three above-mentioned factors by the speaker helps the speaker to determine the possible amount of face threat a speech act can cause to hearer. It is noteworthy that distance evaluation varies from culture to culture and from situation to situation.

Politeness Theory is not without its drawbacks. One of its drawbacks is that it does not consider discourse as a dynamic process. For instance, "A speaker can choose to use a strategy that can be classified as off-record, while being on-record". People may assess face-value differently, and their mood will play an important role in their assessment. Fraser (1990:231) noticed that "participants vacillate in their social distance...relative power... and the specificities of an act content or the circumstances cause a change in the ranking of degree of imposition".

Although Politeness Theory suffers from above-mentioned drawbacks, it has proved to be useful for stylistic analysis purposes particularly in dramatic discourse. The aim of the current paper is to show how violation of our expectations of politeness( impoliteness) can reveal the speakers or hearers evaluation of his/her social power, and therefore shed light on personality trait of Nat in the Death Knocks and help us to interpret the play. To Culpeper (2002:83), "impoliteness is particularly interesting because it generates the disharmony and conflict between characters which generates audience interest and often moves the plot forward".

### **3. Politeness Theory and Death Knocks**

Death Knocks consists in a series of conversations exchanged between two characters Nat Ackermans and Death. At the very beginning of the play, Woody Allen provides the reader with a detailed description of Nat Ackerman's house as follows:

The carpeting is wall-to-wall. There is a big double bed and a large Vanity. The room is elaborately furnished and curtained, and on the wall there are several paintings and a not really attractive barometer.

This elaborate description indicates that Nat is living a comfortable and luxurious life. Suddenly Death enters Nat's house and they start the following conversation:

Death: Jesus Christ. I nearly broke my neck.

Nat: Who are you?

Death: Death.

Nat: Who?

Death: Death. Listen—can I sit down? I nearly broke my neck. I'm shaking like a leaf.

Nat: Who are you?

Death: Death. You got a glass of water?

Nat: Death? What do you mean, Death?

The use of phatic communion or, as Simpson(2005:42) defines it “the kind of ritualistic linguistic behavior which characterizes the beginnings and endings of conversations” can help the reader to reveal the sociocultural relationship of the characters in this play. In this respect, Laver (1975) has developed a three-way typology for analyzing phatic communion: the first category is ‘neutral tokens’ which refer to factors concerning the context of conversation. For example, giving comments on weather in English. The two other types are ‘self-oriented’ tokens and ‘other-oriented’ tokens. Self-oriented tokens refer to factors related to the speaker, whereas other-oriented tokens refer to factors related to the listener. Examples of the former category, as stated by Simpson (2005: 44), can be ‘Hot work ,this’ or ‘My legs weren’t made for these hills’; while examples of the latter typology can be ‘How’s life?’ or ‘Do you come here often?’

Laver contends that the choice of each of these categories hinges on the relative social status of the participant in the conversation. He asserts that:

... In an ‘upwards interaction, where a nonsolidary inferior speaks first to an acknowledged superior, he may choose the self-oriented category, but not the other-oriented category. In a ‘downwards’ interaction, where a nonsolidary superior speaks first to an acknowledged inferior, he may choose the other-oriented category, but not the self-oriented category.

(Laver, 1975: 224)

What is striking in the initiative conversation exchanged between Nat and Death is that Death uses self-oriented phatic communion ‘I nearly broke my neck’ which indicates that he considers himself lower in rank and power than Nat. Furthermore, Death asks for permission to sit down which is not consistent with our expectations for the people who are more powerful socially. Again, contrary to our expectation, Nat disregards Death’s question, i.e., ‘Can I sit down?’, and asks him ‘who are you?’ These points to the fact that Nat has been bewildered and shocked, and cannot believe that Death is there.

The power relationship between Nat and Death is against our expectation since we normally consider Death to be more powerful than human beings. As Leech (1985:47) asserts, “breaking social norms, invites explanation, much in the same way that foregrounding

through linguistic deviation invites interpretation". Accordingly, breaking the social norms in this conversation can lead us to conversation implicature and therefore to the theme of the play: Human beings can never truly believe in death for themselves even when they touch it to the flesh, and all the time they consider themselves more powerful than death.

As the conversation moves on, we see that Nat is still bewildered and in a state of disbelief.

Nat: If this is some joke .....

Death: What kind of joke? You are fifty-seven? Nat Ackerman? .....

Politeness Theory, through analyzing the socio-cultural relationship between Nat and Death, helps us to infer that how the thought of death is far-fetched to human beings. The following conversation also shows that Nat considers him self socially higher than Death:

Nat: I don't want to go yet.

Death: You don't want to go? Please don't stand in. As it is, I'm nauseous from the climb.

Nat: What climb?

Death: I climbed up the drainpipe. I was trying to make a dramatic entrance. I see the big windows and you're awake reading....

Nat: You broke my drainpipe?

In this extract, Nat threatens Death's positive face by criticizing and disapproving his behavior (You broke my drainpipe?). This is again due to the fact that he considers him self more powerful than Death. Here we infer that Nat still does not believe that he is going to die, and this disbelief tends him to have ironic behavior, and this ironic behavior, in turn, leads us to another important trait of human nature, that of being materialistic.

In the following conversation also Nat threatens the Death's positive face by declining to lend his newspaper to death which is again due to the fact that Nat is denying the power of Death and considers him self higher in rank and status.

Nat: I was reading.

Death: You must have really been engrossed. (Lifting newspaper Nat was reading)

Can I borrow this?

Nat: I'm not finished.

Death: Er—I don't know how to put this to you, pal ...

Nat: Why didn't you just ring downstairs?

Death: I'm telling you, I could have, but how does that look? This way I get a little play going. Something. Did you read Faust?

Nat: What?

Death: And what if you had company? You're sitting there with important people. I'm Death—I should ring the bell and traipse right in the front? Where's your thinking?

Nat: Listen, Mister, it's very late.

Death: Yeah. We'll you want to go?

Nat: Go where?

Death: Death.....

Nat: Now, wait a minute. I need time. I'm not ready to go.

Death: I'm sorry. I can't help you. I'd like to, but it's the moment.

Here, Nat threatens the Death's positive face twice. Once where Death politely asks Nat 'Can I borrow this?', and Nat declines his request by saying 'I'm not finished', and another place when Nat Criticizes Death by saying 'Why didn't you just ring downstairs?' Overall, ironically Death is more polite and uses off-record redressive strategies . For instance, in the above conversation, when Nat says that 'I need time. I'm not ready to go', Death says 'I'm sorry. I can't help you. I'd like to, but it's the moment.'which is an off-record declining of Nat's request. However, Nat threatens Death's negative face by using bold on-record, without redressive action order when he says 'Give me some time. Another day.'

As the conversation goes on, Nat continues holding the upper hand by being on-record and threatening the negative face of Death. He tries to convince Death to play cards with him.

Nat: Come on. Be a sport. We'll shoot for a half hour.

Deaath: I really shouldn't.

Nat: I got cards right here. Don't make a production.

Death: All right, come on. We'll play a little. It'll relax me.

Nat: (getting cards, pad, and pencil): You won't regret this.

Death: Don't give me a sales talk. Get the cards and give me a Fresca and put out something. For God's sake, a stranger drops in, you don't have potato chips or pretzels.

Nat: There's M&M's downstairs in a dish.

Death: M&M's. What if the President came? He'd get M&M's too?

Nat: You're not the President?

Nat threatens Death's negative face by ordering 'come on. Be a sport', and continues threatening Death's negative face by using bold on-record strategies like 'Don't make a production.' As they are playing, Death asks for potato chips or pretzels. At this point, Nat threatens his positive face by declining his request by telling him 'There's M&M's downstairs in a dish.', and when Death asks him 'What if the President came? He'd get M&M's too?', he ironically answers that 'You're not the President?' This ironic reply indicates that Nat

considers the power of president higher than Death, which, in turn, reveals the ideology and the nature of all human beings in relation to death.

They go on playing cards, and finally Nat wins the game. Throughout the game, Nat continues threatening the positive face of Death. Finally at the end of the conversation, when Death wants to leave Nat's house, he picks up the newspaper Nat was reading.

Nat: Out. Out. That's my paper. (He takes it back.)

Here, again Nat threatens Death's positive face by challenging his want.

Generally speaking, Politeness Theory helped us to discern the sociocultural power relationship between Death and Nat and in this way led us to interpreting the play and revealing the personality traits of the characters. The goal of the next section is to show how the principles of Conversation Analysis can help us to reach the same inferences about the theme and the characters of *Death Knocks*.

#### **4. A brief overview of Conversation Analysis**

Generally speaking, the emphasis of Conversation Analysis trend in discourse analysis is on discovering the structures of talk which produce and reproduce pattern of social action. One central conversation analysis concept is 'preference'. It means that at specific points in conversation, certain types of utterances will be more favoured than others. For instance, the socially preferred response to an invitation is acceptance, not rejection. Some conversational features which conversation analysis has focused on include: 1) openings and closings of conversations; 2) adjacency pairs (e.g. greeting-greeting, compliment-compliment response); 3) topic management and topic shift; 4) conversational repairs; 5) showing agreement and disagreement; 6) introducing bad news and processes of trouble-telling; and 7) mechanisms of turn-taking (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999:20).

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) suggested a list of principles for the organization of turn-taking in conversations. They observed that the central principle which speakers follow in taking turns is to avoid gaps and overlaps in conversations, and that, although gaps do occur, they are brief. Another common feature of conversational turns is that usually one party speaks at a time. To facilitate turn-taking, speakers observe a number of conventionalized principles. For instance, speakers themselves may show that they want to give up the floor in favour of another speaker. They can do this by directing their gaze towards the next speaker and by synchronizing their gestural patterns with the final words. They may alter pitch, speak more softly, lengthen the last syllable or use stereotyped tags such as *you know* or *that's it* (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999).

It has been stated that a quantitative analysis of the length of the turns, topic-shift and topic-control, turn-allocation and turn-taking and hesitations and incomplete turns can reveal the personality trait of the characters, their relative power and their interest in a particular conversational topic (Bennison, 2002).

Conversation analysis, like other discourse analysis trends, has not been without its critics. The most important factors which have been ignored by conversation analysis are those of context, society and culture (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999). It has predominantly been criticized for ignoring context, society and culture. However, despite these shortcomings, some scholars, like Bennison (2002), have applied this theory for analyzing dramatic discourse. In the following section, it has been demonstrated that how the concepts of adjacency pairs, topic-shifts and hesitations can shed light on the socio-cultural relationship between the characters, and help us in interpreting *Death Knocks*.

## 5. Conversation analysis of Death Knock

### 5.1. Adjacency pairs

Analyzing *Death Knocks* using conversation analysis frame work can also lead us to the conclusion that Nat ironically imposes his social power on Death, and this irony leads us to interpreting this dramatic discourse as follows: We human being cannot believe in death even if we see it, and we think that we are more powerful than it.

The initial conversation exchanged between Nat and Death attests to the fact that, at the first sight of Death, Nat has been embarrassed and shocked, and is in a state of disbelief.

Death: Listen – Can I sit down? I nearly broke my neck. I’m shaking like a leaf.

Nat: Who are you?

Death: Death. You got a glass of water?

Nat: Death? What do you mean, Death?

Death: What is wrong with you? You see the black costume and the whitened face?

Nat: Yeah

Death: Is it Halloween?

Nat: No

Death: Then I’m Death. Now can I get a glass of water—or a Fresca?

Nat: If this is some joke -----

In this conversation, our expectation of adjacency pair (request-response) is not fulfilled. When Death asks for a glass of water (a request), Nat totally ignores his request, and replies ‘what do you mean, Death?’ This irrelevant part shows that he is totally wrapped up in his own world, and is in a state of disbelief.

As the conversation goes on, in another place the adjacency pair compliment-response has been left stranded.

Death: ---- This is a nice place. You do it yourself?

Nat: We had a decorator, but we worked with her.



Death: (Looking at picture on the wall): I love those kids with the big eyes.

Nat: I don't want to go yet.

First, Death adores Nat's house, normally Nat should have thanked him, but he does not. Then again Death compliments the painting on the wall; however, Nat is so overwhelmed with his thoughts that he does not respond to Death's compliment.

The fact that Death renders flattering and complimentary comments on Nat's beautifully decorated house, whereas he has come to take his life, intensifies the satiric point and changes the situational irony to a technique in order to reveal Nat's imbecility, stupidity and ignorance of human destiny and his vanity of his clinging to transitory and trivial matters. His constantly asking Death that what he wants from him makes him petty and pitiable since it is evident what Death wants from man: to follow him to the other world regardless of his being in perfect health or in youth or whatsoever. In other words, Death's casual treatment of Nat and his irresponsiveness to Nat's redundant and funny questions and even to his wonder is quite natural and all these points imply and reinforce Nat's, and as a result man's, pettiness and his helplessness in the face of his fate. Death's mission is obvious and inevitable and Nat's wonder inconsequential. The respected author should extensively elaborate on the ironic tone and satiric mode that the violation of politeness rules procures in a variety of statements. In many cases the situational and dramatic ironies blend to underscore human disposition. Under these circumstances, the question is who is more powerful and the discrepancy between the socially accepted norms and the metaphysical truth magnifies human restricted and narrow perspective: Death is for others as far as Nat is concerned.

## 5.2. Topic-shifts

In this play, both Nat and Death shift the topics of conversation. When Nat shifts the topic of conversation, it can be inferred that how wrapped-up in his world he is; however, Death shifts the topic of conversation as a kind of politeness strategy. Initially Death changes the topic of conversation:

Nat: What do you want with me?

Death: What do I want? What do you think I want?

Nat: You must be kidding. I'm in perfect health.

Death: (unimpressed) Uh-huh. (Looking around) This is a nice place. You do it yourself?

As the author has playtized Death as the one having inferior social power in this conversation, here Death has used topic-shift as a discourse strategy of politeness. This is because Death does not want to be direct and aggressive; thus, he temporarily shifts the topic of conversation to avoid directness and aggression. Furthermore, Death Uses Uh-huh to upgrade Nat's idea about his health. However, Nat changes the topic of conversation because he is bewildered.

### 5.3. Hesitations and the use of an in-group marker

Another important feature of conversation exchanged between Death and Nat indicating that Death has the lower social power can be the use of hesitations by him.

Death: Er----- I don't know how to put this to you, pal

As Bennison (2002: 73) argues, hesitations can reflect "a character's state of mind, in that they usually imply discomfort: unease, powerlessness or embarrassment, for example." The use of "Er" implies discomfort and powerlessness in Death.

Another striking feature in this excerpt is the use of in-group marker *Pal* by Death. In this relation, Simpson (1997) states, this type of in-group marker is used to minimize the social distance between speakers.

### 5.4. Topic of conversation

Examining the topics Nat predominantly talks about, one can gain informative insights into his character. His topics mainly revolve around materialistic subjects which can create irony (he is going to die, but still pursuing materialistic desires) in the play, and provide the reader with more evidence that Nat cannot believe that he is going to die.

Death: I'm sorry. I can't help you. I'd like to, but it's the moment.

Nat: How can it be the moment? I just merged with Modiste originals.

Death: What's the difference, a couple bucks more or less?

Nat: Sure, what do you care? You guys probably have all your expenses paid.

Nat suggests that Death play with him. When Death accepts his suggestion, Nat says:

Nat: You want to play a tenth of a cent a point to make it interesting?

Death: It's not interesting enough for you?

Nat: I play better when money's at stake.

Death: whatever you say, Newt.

Here, ironically playing over money is more interesting than playing over his soul. This again reveals the materialistic character of Nat, and the power that he tries to impose on Death by giving suggestions and threatening the negative face of Death. Death also submits to his want.

The following conversation reveals the materialistic trait of Nat more than previous ones:

Nat: I never knew that.

Death: Why should you know? Who are you?

Nat: What do you mean who am I? Why ----- I'm nothing.

Death: Not nothing. You're a dress manufacturer. Where do you come to knowledge of the eternal mysteries?

Nat: What are you talking about? I make a beautiful dollar. I sent my two kids through college. One is in advertising, the other's married. I got my own home. I drive a Chrysler. My wife has whatever she wants. Maids, minkcoat, vacations-----

## 6. Conclusion

Following Bennison (2002:67) stating that "... a plural approach to linguistic analysis involving many different linguistic frameworks is necessary if one is to capture the richness of character", this article demonstrated how Politeness Theory and Conversation Analysis can give us insight into character's personality trait and interpreting dramatic discourse. Therefore, it can provide literature teachers with new insights into analysing literary texts in language classrooms.

It was also shown that how breaking the norms of conversational power relationship can create irony and how this irony can lead us to interpret the theme of dramatic discourse. However, it is not claimed that the proposed analysis and interpretation is the only one.

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