Analysis Sheldon's personality in the Big Bang Theory from the Turn-taking Theory

Zhipeng Wang

School of Humanities, Tiangong University, Tianjin, 300387, China

Abstract: In this paper, representative conversations in The Big Bang Theory are taken as the research object. Through revealing features of turn-taking mechanism in The Big Bang Theory, this thesis aims to help audiences thoroughly understand personalities and relationships of characters in sitcoms.

Keywords: Turn-taking; The big bang theory; The characters' personalities and relationships

1. Introduction

Conversation analysis is naturally indispensable part of discourse analysis, which firstly introduced in the 1960s. Sacks and Schegloff put forward the basic theory of analyzing conversation and establish analysis ways of daily conversation. The main research points of conversation analysis are turn-taking. Therefore, turn-taking has attracted many scholars domestic and abroad, some scholars studied turn-taking from daily conversation, some focused on institutional discourse and the others researched turn-taking of semi-institutional conversation, however few pay attention to the humorous conversation. The most obvious feature of situational comedy is that contains lots of humorous lines. A successful sitcom makes the audience have some aftertaste while laughing, rather than feel rough and tacky, which can call it a classic, such as The Big Bang Theory. This paper analyses dialogues in The Big Bang Theory, and then find out how the application of turn- taking system in the shaping personalities and building relationship of main characters.

2. Analysis of Conversations in the Big Bang Theory

Turn-taking as an important component of conversion analysis attracts the attention of scholars. However, Transition Relevance Place(TPR) should be explained in the first place to understand the turn-taking. Yule (2000:27) gave the definition of TPR as "Any possible change-of-turn point is called a Transition Relevance Place or TRP. Within any social group, there will be features of talk (or absence of talk) typically associated with a TRP. TPR means the end of the turn constructional unit constitute a point at which speakers may change. The speaker can keep the floor and continue to talk in this position and can give up the floor and stop talking. When giving up talking, the speaker can choose the next speaker or keep silence and do not choose the next speaker. While listener in this position can choose to be the next speaker or can be silent to let the speaker continue to talk or get other listeners become the next speaker. This position is where the turn-taking happens.

As one of famous and beloved American situational comedies, The Big Bang Theory mainly tells the ordinary life of eight main characters: Sheldon, Leonard, Penny, Rajesh, Howard, Amy, Bernadette and Stuart. The main object of this paper is Sheldon who is different because of his extraordinary intelligence. He is very savvy and nitpicking and must act according to the rules in life. He lacks an understanding of humor and irony and is accustomed to showing his extraordinary IQ (other characters sometimes feel this is very uncomfortable). With the plot development, Sheldon starts to change some habits and gradually learns to respect other people and treasure friendship, and finally marries with Amy. The personality and sensitivity of Sheldon is obvious. This paper analyses several representative dialogue that Sheldon involved with the repaired turn-taking frame, and tries to find the relationship between personality change with the turn-taking.

Example1

T1: Just get a hamburger, you like hamburgers.

T2: I like the hamburgers where we usually have hamburgers. You can't make the assumption that I'll like the hamburgers here.

T3: I'm sorry. Give him a hamburger.

Table 1. Conversation between leonard and sheldon (s1 e5)

Characters		Sheldon	Leonard
Turn-type(times)	initiation	0	2

	response	1	0
	Interruption	0	0
	monologue	0	0
Turn Control	Control rate	50%	100%
Turn-length(words)	Total turns	1	2
	Total words	20	13
	Average	20	6.5
Preference organization	Total preferred answers	1	0
	Total dis-preferred answers	0	0
Turn- taking strategies(times)	Topic shift	0	0
	Paraverbal features	0	0

Leonard and Sheldon come to a new restaurant in which Penny works, when they sit down, the waitress Penny asks for their order. There are two turns in this conversation. Leonard takes the initiation of these two turns, Sheldon only responses once. The turn length of Sheldon is longer than Leonard, which shows the rigid personality of Sheldon, he gets used to the old diet habit and doesn't like to try other new thing, must eat food according to his schedule. As far as preferred and dis-preferred answers concerned, Sheldon has 1 preferred answer while Caroline doesn't have preferred answers. It has been mentioned that these are related to social solidarity.

Example2
P: oh hi
L: hi
S: hi
L: hi
S: hi
P: hi?
L: We don't mean to interrupt. We live across the hall.

Table 2. Conversation between sheldon, leonard and penny (s1 e1)

Characters		Sheldon	Leonard	penny
Turn-type(times)	initiation	0	2	1
	response	2	1	1
	Interruption	0	0	0
	monologue	0	0	0
Turn Control	Control rate	0%	66.6%	50%
Turn-length(words)	Total turns	2	3	2
	Total words	2	12	3
	Average	1	4	1.5
Preference organization	Total preferred answers	2	2	2
	Total dis-preferred answers	0	0	0
Turn- taking strategies(times)	Topic shift	0	1	0
	Paraverbal features	0	1	1

In the first time, Sheldon and Leonard meet their new beautiful neighbor Penny, but Sheldon and Leonard both don't know how to greet Penny. There are three turns in this dialogue. Leonard initiates two times, Penny initiates one time. Sheldon responds twice. Penny responds once. Leonard nearly controls the whole discourse. Leonard has the longest turn length, which is 12 words, Sheldon has 2 words and Penny 3words. The three persons all have preferred answers. Leonard has changed the topic in the conversation. Penny shows some interrogative expression. Sheldon is scientific nerd, he is incompetent in most social activities and does not know how to communicate with strangers. Therefore in this greeting, Sheldon just echo Leonard's word in order to avoid embarrassment.

Example3
P: DO you guys mind if I start?
S: Penny? That's where I sit.
P: So, sit next to me.
S: No, I sit there.
P: What's the difference?
S: What's the difference?
L: here we go.
S: In the winter, that seat is close enough to the radiator to remain warm, and yet not so close as to cause perspiration. In the summer, it's directly in the path of a cross-breeze, created by the window there and there. It faces the television at an angle. That is neither direct, thus discouraging conversation, nor far wide as to create a parallax distortion. I can go on, but I think I've made my point.

Table 3. Conversation between sheldon, leonard and penny (s1 e10)

Characters		Sheldon	Leonard	penny
Turn-type(times)	initiation	0	0	3
	response	2	0	0
	Interruption	1	0	0

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	monologue	0	1	0
Turn Control	Control rate	80%	0%	100%
Turn-length(words)	Total turns	3	1	3
	Total words	88	3	15
	Average	29.33	3	5
Preference organization	Total preferred answers	1	0	1
	Total dis-preferred answers	2	1	0
Turn- taking strategies(times)	Topic shift	1	0	1
	Paraverbal features	1	0	0

Leonard invites Penny to have dinner, and then Penny comes into and visits the house, then sits on the sofa and gets ready to eat food. In fact Penny occupies Sheldon's specific spot. The dialogue between Penny and Sheldon has three turns. Penny starts topic three times, Sheldon responds two times and interrupts once. Sheldon's turn-length is the longest than the other people, cause Sheldon explains the reason why he must sit his exclusive position. Sheldon and Penny both change the topic once. Sheldon uses his body language to show the advantages of his sofa spot. All these things above shows Sheldon has some strange hobbies and is a bit stubborn, rigid, nitpicking.

Example4
P: I do like the one where Lois lane falls from the helicopter, and superman swooshes down and catches her. Which one was that?
S: one
S: you realize that scene was rife with scientific inaccurrancy.
P: Yes, I know, men can't fly.
S: No, let's assume that they can fly. Lois lane is falling, accelerating at an initial rate of 32 feet per second. Superman swoops down to save her by reaching out two arms of steel.

Table 4. Conversation between sheldon and penny (s3 e4)

Characters		Sheldon	penny
Turn-type(times)	initiation	1	1
	response	2	1
	Interruption	0	0
	monologue	0	0
Turn Control	Control rate	80%	50%
Turn-length(words)	Total turns	2	2
	Total words	64	29
	Average	32	14.5
Preference organization	Total preferred answers	2	1
	Total dis-preferred answers	0	0
Turn- taking strategies(times)	Topic shift	1	0
	Paraverbal features	0	0

In the hallway, Sheldon, Leonard and Howard meet Penny, the three individuals invite Penny to watch movie The Superman. There are 2 turns in total. Penny initiates new topic once and Sheldon starts the talk one time. Sheldon responds twice and Penny answers once. Sheldon controls the conversation the whole time. The turn-length is different, Sheldon's turn-length is longer than Penny. Sheldon changes the theme once. In the dialogue, we can find Sheldon is smart and logical and accustomed to showing his extraordinary IQ (other characters sometimes feel this is very uncomfortable).

Example 5
Sheldon: This is just step of your birthday weekend. Now, would you care to join me for an authentic frontier dinner made entirely from scratch.
Amy: I can't believe you did this. It's amazing!
Sheldon: It's not a big deal.
Sheldon: Just to be clear, it was a big deal. I was being modest. You got that, right?

Table 5. Conversation between sheldon and amy (s9 e11)

Characters		Sheldon	Amy
Turn-type(times)	initiation	1	0
	response	1	1
	Interruption	1	0
	monologue	0	0
Turn Control	Control rate	100%	50%
Turn-length(words)	Total turns	2	1
	Total words	46	8
	Average	23	8

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Preference organization	Total preferred answers	1	1
	Total dis-preferred answers	1	0
Turn- taking strategies(times)	Topic shift	1	0
	Paraverbal features	0	0

Amy's birthday is coming, Sheldon prepare a frontier dinner for Amy, When Amy show her surprise, Out of politeness, Sheldon responded to Amy with "It's not a big deal", and then just to be clear, it was a big deal. There are one turn, Sheldon take charge of the whole conversation, and interrupts once. The turn-length of Sheldon is 46 words, which six times than Amy. Sheldon provides a dis-preferred answer and finally changes the topic. All that shows Sheldon doesn't become selfish anymore, he cares about Amy and prepares birthday surprise to her.

3. Conclusion

The total number of turns and the turn-length are closely related with the allocation of speech right in the conversation participants. The one who has more turns and the longest turn length possibly take a higher power position. Topics controlling, different turn types and topic shifting are related with dispositions of the speaker and relationships between speakers and listeners. Speaker who constantly interrupts others and eager to hold the topic tends to have an impatient and straightforward personality. And someone who always gives preferred answers shows support of social solidarity and observes the sequence order yet dis-preferred answers often means that object to social solidarity. So roles with different character structures and relationships will use different turn-taking strategies and their turn-lengths are also different. Through combination of turn taking mechanism and content of the materials, it has been found that those concrete data and analysis can reveal specific personalities and relationships of characters in The Big Bang Theory. We find that the main character Sheldon in the target sitcom has specific and weird personality, so he has unusual turn-taking strategies. The total number and the turn-length is usually greatly long, which means Sheldon always control the turn and tells something he masters to someone doesn't know, in order to show his higher IQ. Sheldon has high frequent to initiate a dialogue and usually interrupts other's conversation, which shows Sheldon has low EQ and doesn't know how to communicate with other persons, although he is a physical professor in university and does some recondite experiments. He is a little bit selfish and doesn't care about others feeling. In sum, the turn-taking strategy is a useful way to analyze personalities and association of characters in The Big Bang Theory.

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