



Volume: 01/ N°: 01. June (2021),

p47 /62

## *Literary Discourse and Conversation Analysis: A Study of Turn-taking principles in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child.*

**Amel Benia \***

*Mohamed Boudiaf University - M'sila, (Algeria)*

*Amel.benia@univ-msila.dz*

### **Abstract :**

*The Bourgeoning research in Discourse and Conversation Analysis has expanded its scope to literary studies and literary discourse. Indeed, the analysis of literary works as an organised discourse by looking at language's formal features and its functional significance promises to yield productive and interesting interpretations of literary texts. This paper, therefore, aims to analyze three main conversational exchanges from Toni Morrison's God Help the Child (2015) by using Conversation Analysis. It draws specifically on turn-taking and topic control*

### **Article info**

*Received*

*20/04/2021*

*Accepted*

*01/06/2021*

### **Keyword:**

✓ *Literary  
Discourse;*

\*Corresponding author

*principles developed by Emanuel Schegloff, Harvey Sacks, and Gail Jefferson in order to examine identity construction and how to explain how the protagonist constructs her identity and moves from being a “child” to being an “adult.” The protagonist process of identity construction is made visible through conversational interactions. Hence, the examination of turn-taking and topic control in these exchanges support the other narrative techniques used by the writer and further informs the interpretations of the text.*

- ✓ Conversation Analysis;
- ✓ Turn-taking; Topic control;
- ✓ Identity construction

## **1. Introduction**

Ever since the classical ages, the arts of rhetoric and poetics have been close disciplines, the one affecting the other. Nevertheless, there has been a sharp division and a troubled relationship between the disciplines of Linguistics and Literature which is often unaccounted for. An interference of the one field within the other is unsolicited and undesirable by both linguists and literary critics in account of theoretical and practical difficulties. But in the second part of the 20th Century, there has been an open-mindedness towards interdisciplinary approaches whereby both disciplines can inform rather than disrupt each other.

In 1958, the Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson presented a paper to the Indiana Style Conference entitled “Concluding Statement” on the subject of Stylistics, in which he states:

If there are some critics who still doubt the competence of linguistics to embrace the field of poetics, I privately believe that the poetic incompetence of some bigoted linguists has been mistaken for an inadequacy of the linguistic science itself. All of us here, however, definitely realize that a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant

anachronisms. (Jakobson, 1960, p. 377)

This would eventually become one of the most cited pieces about “the relationship between linguistics and literary studies” as Carter and Simpson attest (2005, p.1). Jakobson’s statement entails that the two disciplines are in core inseparable. A full-fledged linguist should acknowledge the poetic functions of a language. Likewise, a literary critic must recognize that linguistic techniques can in fact assist and inform interpretations of literary texts.

This being said, the stylistic study of literary texts provides interesting and productive methods of interpreting literary texts by “looking systematically at the formal features of a text and determining their functional significance” (Wales, 1989, p.438). The use of linguistic devices and approaches permit the world text to be placed at the center of the analysis. Mary Louise Pratt (1979) explains that the works of sociolinguists such as William Labov and Emmanuel Schegloff, in addition to pragmacists H. Paul Grice and John Searle address the general principles of language use that can describe the interaction of both writers and readers with literary language (xiii). That is to say, Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics are some of the areas of linguistic inquiry most concerned with language, and therefore, the ones that may have better affinity with the analysis of literary texts.

Just like Pragmatics, Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of language in relation to social context. The burgeoning research in discourse analysis has expanded the scope of this field to literary studies and literary discourse in specific. In this regard, the linguist Michael Hoey (2005) proposes that the analysis of a literary work as an organized discourse can generate a variety of useful readings of a literary text (121). In the same vein, such analysis at the level of discourse “allows insights into the semantic structures of whole texts and how structures produce textual meanings” (Carter &

Simpson, 2005, p.10). Dialogue in particular offers a fertile ground for discourse analysis such as dialogues found between characters in prose fiction. The exchange extends even to dialogue “between plays, poems as well as dialogic interaction between authors, narrators, implied readers and actual readers” (10). Be that as it may, the justification of the use of principles developed by linguists in the analysis of literary discourse need not be further justified.

Although natural dialogue and fictional dialogue are distinctly different, they still share structural and functional principles. Michael Toolan (2005) argues that

There are also literary conventions at work governing the fictional representations of talk, so that the rendered text is quite other than a faithful transcription of a natural conversation. However, certain structural and functional principles govern fictional dialogue, as they do natural dialogue, and in the former case as in the latter any witness (a reader or hearer) must recognize and attend to those principles in order to comprehend the dialogue. (193)

He further demonstrates how some of the principles used by conversational analysts in the systematic study of naturally occurring conversations can be “applied illuminatedly in the stylistic and structural study of a fictional conversation within a literary text” (193). This can be best achieved through multiple ways such as phatic communion principles and politeness phenomena. It can also be achieved by looking into the sequences of conversational turns between pairs of individuals and how they direct and manage the topic as this paper aims to establish.

Jack Sidnell (2010) defines Conversation Analysis as “an approach within the social sciences that aims to describe, analyze and understand talk as a basic and constitutive feature of human social life.” (p. 01). Interestingly, this field has its roots in sociology rather than linguistics and the growth of Conversation Analysis as a field of analysis is largely attributed to Emanuel Schegloff, Harvey Sacks,

and Gail Jefferson. Their work made Conversation Analysis “the dominant approach to the study of human social interaction” (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013, p. 01). Their piece on turn-taking entitled “A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation” (1974), remains by far the most cited paper in the history of the Linguistic Society of America’s main journal Language (Joseph, 2003). Indeed, the three attest in their essay that “the organization of taking turns to talk is fundamental to conversation, as well as to other speech-exchange systems” (Sacks et al, 1974, p.696). since such a concept is fundamental, it renders an analysis of conversation in literary discourse all the more interesting.

This paper, therefore, draws specifically on turn-taking and topic control principles in order to examine identity construction and how characters allocate themselves to different categories of identity. For the purposes of the analysis, three main conversational exchanges from Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child* (2015) will be used as an example. The Nobel Prize Laureate is well known for the richness of her prose and dialogues, and the interactions used from her novel prove this claim. The examination of turn-taking and topic control in these exchanges support the other narrative techniques, mainly Magic Realism, used by Morrison in order to explain how the protagonist constructs her identity and moves from being a “child” to being an “adult.” In this story, Bride’s body is “textually foregrounded as the privileged site for the construction of her identity, and it will also be through her body that the signs of an identity crisis will appear as symptoms of a past trauma” (Martín-Salván, 2018, p.1). The conversation analysis of the three excerpts will in fact provide further textual insight on this particular issue and inform a literary interpretation.

Indeed, we can gain insights into identity through the organization of discourse, merely because dialogue tells us what

people say and what they don't. In other words, "when we study conversation, we are investigating the actions and activities through which social life is conducted" (Drew, 2005, p. 83). Identity is not a fixed group of properties that each individual carry throughout his/her lifetime. Rather, it's a mutating social, cultural, and psychological construct that unfolds through everyday life interactions and experiences. And so, identity "is produced and sustained by human agents in interaction with one another" (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990, p.533). On this basis thereof, an analysis of the patterns of discourse in ordinary and fictional conversations can help us understand how individuals allocate themselves to specific categories of identity.

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, explain that the rules for conversation include a large number of delicate mechanisms of controlling the allocation of turns in a way satisfactory to all participants. According to Schegloff (1973):

The basic shape of turn-taking system allocates, in giving somebody a turn, the right to produce a single turn-constructive unit — that is to say, a single lexical, phrasal, clausal or sentential construction. Thereafter a variety of rules come into play, whereby the turn can shift, though, clearly, there are ways in which current speakers can get to produce more than a single one of those units and can pile up pretty sizable turns indeed. (p.12)

Obviously, the conversational harmony is not always prevalent as battles for the floor are a normal and significant part of conversation. In fact, Schegloff (1973) maintains that "speakers possess some very specific verbal weaponry with which [they] wage such battles" (as cited in Pratt, 1977, p.101). Those battles are enacted through violations of turn-taking such as interruption, overlapping, and speeding up the flow in order to maintain the floor of conversation.

Participants in a conversation take turns naturally in a systematic sequence and frequency. Their understanding of the

contexts of the interaction is what permits this natural turn-taking. Sacks et al explain that

It is systematic consequences of turn-taking organization of conversation that it obliges its participants to display to each other in a turn's talk, their understanding of other turns' talk. More generally, a turn's talk will be heard as directed to a prior turn's talk, unless special techniques are used to locate some other talk to which it is directed. (1974, p. 728)

Schegloff (2007) further supports this by explaining that a sequence is implemented through a conversation and can be thought of as made of "adjacency pairs" (p. 13) When a speaker initiates the first action, the recipient is expected to respond with a second action that is relevant to the first one and one that paves the path to an expectation of the next action to be performed. In other words, "the production of the first part of an adjacency pair produces a context for the second part by making it conditionally relevant" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p.61). Examples of adjacency pairs include question/answer, offer/acceptance, assessment/agreement, acceptance/rejection, to name a few.

The aforementioned principles of conversation are going to be the main elements that inform the analysis of the three conversational excerpts from *God Help the Child*. The story revolves around the life of Lula Ann Bridewell, who goes by the name Bride. She is born dark blue to fair-skinned parents, which deprives her of familial affection, especially motherly affection. Bride goes as far as accusing an innocent woman, Mrs. Sofia Huxley, of molesting children in order to win her mother's love and acknowledgement. As a successful career woman, she experiences an illusory return to childhood where she imagines her body shrinking and changing to that of a little girl. This illusion accompanies her throughout the story until she accepts herself for what she is and faces her repressed traumas.



Although she is deprived of family affection, she has a faithful friend Brooklyn, and a lover Booker who later on abandons her when he learns she is trying to help Sofia. This event starts “a series of mishaps that will lead her to question her self-constructed identity and to address her past, particularly her troubling relationship with her mother” (Martín-Salván, 2018, p.1). For this reason, she embarks on a journey in order to look for Booker, and that’s when she meets the child named Rain, whom she learns, was molested and abused. The intertwined subplots of wounded childhood and repressed traumas shed light on the importance of various interactions between the characters in order to come to terms with their past and accept their lived presents.

In the following conversation, Bride meets Mrs. Sofia Huxley after she has been released from her twenty-years sentence, following Bride’s incriminating testimony against Sofia. It is worth noting that Bride attempts to interact with Sofia prior to the following exchange, but Sofia does not recognize the adult Bride. The latter visits her at her apartment, and she knocks on Sofia’s door:

“Yes?” Her voice is shaky, the humble sound of someone trained to automatic obedience.

“Mrs. Huxley. Open the door, please.”

There is silence then, “I uh. I’m sorta sick.”

“I know,” I say... “Open the door.”

She opens it and stands there barefoot with a towel in her hand. She wipes her mouth. “Yes?”

“We need to talk.”

“Talk?” She blinks rapidly but doesn’t ask the real question: “Who are you?”

I push past her, leading with the Louis Vuitton bag. “You’re Sofia Huxley, right?”

She nods. A tiny flash of fear is in her eyes. I’m black as midnight and dressed in all white so maybe she thinks it’s a uniform and I’m



an authority of some sort ... "Come on. Let's sit down. I have something for you."

"What do you want me to do?" she asks....

"Nothing. I don't want you to do a thing."... I answer the question a normal person would have posed. "I saw you leave Decagon. No one was there to meet you. I offered you a lift."

"That was you?" She frowns.

"Me. Yes."

"I know you?"

"My name is Bride."

She squints. "That supposed to mean something to me?"

"No," I say and smile. "Look what I brought you." I can't resist and place the bag on the bed. I reach inside ... I lay two envelopes—the slim one with the airline gift certificate then the fat one with five thousand dollars. About two hundred dollars for each year if she had served her full sentence.

Sofia stares at the display as though the items might be infected.

"What's all that for?" ...

"It's okay," I say. "Just a few things to help you."

"Help me what?"

"Get a good start. You know, on your life."

"My life?" Something is wrong. She sounds as if she needs an introduction to the word.

"Yeah." I am still smiling. "Your new life."

"Why? Who sent you?" She looks interested now, not frightened.

"I guess you don't remember me." I shrug. "Why would you? Lula Ann. Lula Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—" (Morrison, 2015, pp. 19-21)

In the above exchange, both participants have corresponding frequency of turn-taking. Nevertheless, Bride is the participant who initiates conversational exchanges, while Mrs. Huxley responds

mostly. Even though there are no overlaps or clear interruptions in the turns, Bride is the one orienting the interaction and allocating turns to Sofia. Thus, she is having control over the floor. Mrs. Huxley's hesitation, minimal responses, and the use of hedges like "I uh" signals her discomfort with the sudden conversation with a stranger.

This seems to suggest that the participant in control is Bride. Yet, an examination of adjacency pairs in this exchange deflates this suggestion. The patterns question/answer and offer/acceptance are violated by both participants. When Sofia asks the question "Who are you?" Bride does not answer this question. Instead, she responds with another question: "You're Sofia Huxley, right?" to which Sofia answers with a nod. Again, Sofia asks: "I know you?" and Bride this time gives an answer that is ambiguous to Sofia: "My name is Bride."

So far, Bride is the one violating the adjacency pairs, thus appropriating control and not conceding easily. But this is not the case when we realize that Bride did not achieve her intended goal by meeting Mrs. Huxley. Bride meets Sofia hoping for forgiveness. She seeks recognition from her, the reason why she drops expressions that are supposed to trigger Sofia's memory. When Bride reminds her that she was the one who offered to give her a ride from Decagon (when Sofia was released from prison), Sofia fails to recognize the adult Bride or acknowledge her for that. But when Bride says "I guess you don't remember me," and follows by uttering her full name "Lula Ann Bridewell," Sofia responds by beating Bride because she recognized the child Lula Ann. Therefore, Bride fails to acquire recognition and forgiveness which she was seeking from her interlocutor: "even Sofia Huxley, of all people, erased me" (Morrison, p. 38). As the participant who initiated the exchange, she did not achieve the goal of the exchange, which reverses the control of the situation.

In the following conversational exchange between Bride and

her friend Brooklyn, we notice a different pattern of control in turn-taking. The chapter in which this exchange occurs is narrated by Brooklyn herself. Bride has been severely beaten by Sofia, and she fears the process of going through the police questioning if she goes to the hospital, so she heads towards Brooklyn's house. The latter tries to understand from Bride what happened exactly:

"So tell me. What happened, Bride? Who was he?"

"Who was who?" She touches her nose tenderly while breathing through her mouth.

"The guy who beat you half to death."

She coughs for some time and I hand her a tissue. "Did I say it was a guy? I don't remember saying it was a guy."

"Are you telling me a woman did this?"

"No," she says. "No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

"I suppose. Somebody scared him off, I guess. He banged me around and took off."

See what I mean? Not even a good lie. I push a bit more. "He didn't take your purse, wallet, anything?"

She mumbles, "Boy Scout, I guess." Her lips are puffy and her tongue can't manage consonants but she tries to smile at her own stupid joke.

"Why didn't whoever scared him off stay and help you?"

"I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!"

She is shouting and fake-sobbing so I back off. Her single open eye isn't up to it and her mouth must hurt too much to keep it up. (Morrison, pp. 24-25)

This time, Brooklyn is the one initiating the conversation and orienting the turn-taking, while Bride is just responding to and following with the conversational topic. Additionally, the turns are of equal length. The lack of terms of address that mark respect indicates

the closeness of the two participants, and hence, should suggest comfort in the conversation.

If Bride's violation of adjacency pairs in the first exchange indicates her control over the conversation, in this interaction it indicates her inferior position. Brooklyn asks about the identity of the guy who beat Bride to death, and she answers with an answer that is irrelevant to the question: "Did I say it was a guy? I don't remember saying it was a guy." When Brooklyn asks if it was a woman, Bride answers with negation, affirming the previous suggestion that it was a guy. Nonetheless, expressions such as "I suppose" and "I guess," indicate Bride's answers are dispreferred responses, which signals reluctance to tell the truth and her discomfort in the conversation. Her final break out: "I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!" coupled with her body language "shouting and fake-sobbing" interrupt the sustained topical talk. She surrenders granting full superiority and control of the conversational floor to Brooklyn.

It is significant that Bride has been hallucinating about herself gradually becoming a child again throughout the novel. Therefore, it is inferred that she is unconsciously allocating herself among the category of "children" rather than adults. When she goes to look for Booker, she has an accident that leads her to stay in the care of a hippie couple, Steve and Evelyn, who are taking care of a child they found abandoned in the rain. Her interaction with the child Rain who confides in her how she was molested with the help of her own mother, and how she would kill her mother if she meets her again, helps her muster more courage to confront her past. This is significant as it happens right before we see a change in her conversational pattern which signal a change in how she views herself and the category she allocates herself to.

Bride reaches the location of Booker's hometown, and there she meets his aunt Queen who reveals to her where Booker is staying and tells her a bit about his own childhood traumas. Bride is enraged

*Literary Discourse and Conversation Analysis: A Study of Turn-taking principles  
in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child.*

when she meets Booker, so she breaks a Michelob bottle over his head. She angrily pleads for an explanation as to why he abandoned her:

“You walked out on me,” she screamed. “Without a word! Nothing! Now I want that word. Whatever it is I want to hear it. Now!”

Booker, wiping blood from the left side of his face with his right hand, snarled, “I don’t have to tell you...”

“Oh, yes you do.” She raised the broken bottle.

“You get out of my house before something bad happens.”

“Shut up and answer me!”

“Jesus, woman.”

“Why? I have to know, Booker.”

“First tell me why you bought presents for a child molester—in prison for it, for Christ’s sake. Tell me why you sucked up to a monster.”

“I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn’t do any of that. I wanted to make amends but she beat the crap out of me and I deserved it.”

“You lied? What the hell for?”

“So my mother would hold my hand!”

“What?”

“And look at me with proud eyes, for once.”

“So, did she?”

“Yes. She even liked me.”

“So you mean to tell me—”

“Shut up and talk! Why did you walk out on me?”

“Oh, God.” Booker wiped more blood from the side of his face.

“Look. Well, see. My brother, he was murdered by a freak, a predator like the one I thought you were forgiving and—”

“I don’t care! I didn’t do it! It wasn’t me who killed your brother.”

“All right! All right! I get that, but—”

“But nothing! I was trying to make up to someone I ruined. You just ran around blaming everybody”... (Morrison, pp. 153-154)

This time around, we see Bride initiating the conversation with a solid face threatening sequence of turn-taking. Not only she is the one initiating the exchange, but she also has the longest turns; she controls the conversational topic, constantly interrupts, and allocates the turns to Booker. She has assumed full control over the conversation.

When she asks him “Why did you walk out on me?”, he avoids the question by refusing to answer, thus violating the acceptancy of usual adjacency pairs. At first, she sounds as if she is pleading: “why? tell me Booker.” And here, again, he refuses to answer by giving an irrelevant response to her plea. Unexpectedly, this time she responds according to his answer and does not insist on her objective of understanding why he left her. She reveals the truth oh her lies about Sofia, introduced by minimal sentences and interjections “I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent.” With this, Bride succeeds in engaging Booker in the conversation and sparking his interest. After this statement, the conversation proceeds in an ordinary question/answer pair. Then, suddenly Bride initiates a sequence of face threatening interruptions. She does not concede the floor to Booker, and whenever he tries to avoid the answer to the original question of the interaction, she interrupts him and takes over the floor of the conversation. Her aggressive face threatening turns at talk perform a threatening social action that indicates her empowerment.

The analysis of these conversational exchanges further informs and enriches Morrison’s use of Magic Realism employed to narrate Bride’s trauma. Her continuous struggle throughout her childhood and her desire for the motherly love are what initiated her craving to be acknowledged and recognized. Because of that, she is unable to recognize and embrace her identity. She is an adult who has not

*Literary Discourse and Conversation Analysis: A Study of Turn-taking principles  
in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child.*

fulfilled her childhood; hence, she is enacting it in her hallucinations of going back to childhood. It is important to remark that after her confrontation with Booker, she has stopped believing she is a child and is finally able to embrace her adulthood adult because he “offered her the hand she had craved all her life, the hand that did not need a lie to deserve it” (Morrison, p. 175). Throughout her interactions with different individuals in her life, we see how she was able to finally celebrate her adulthood and accept her wounded childhood. The process of her identity construction is made visible through conversation, whether violent or soft, inferior or superior.

### Bibliography

- Benwell, B., & Stokoe, E. (2006). *Discourse and Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Carter, R., & Simpson, C. (2005). *Language, Discourse and Literature: An Introductory Reader in Discourse Stylistics*. London: Routledge.
- Drew, P. (2005), ‘Conversation analysis’, in K. L. Fitch and R. E. Sanders (eds), *Handbook of Language and Social Interaction*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hare-Mustin, R. T., & Maracek, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Making a Difference: Psychology and the Construction of Gender*. New Haven: CT: Yale University Press.
- Hoey, M. (2005). *Discourse-Centred Stylistics: A Way Forward*. In R. Carter, & P. Simpson, *Language, Discourse and Literature: An Introductory Reader in Discourse Stylistics* (pp. 121-136). London: Routledge.
- Jackobson, R. (1960). *Linguistics and Poetics*. In T. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in Language* (p. 350–77). Cambridge: Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Joseph, B. (2003). The editor’s department: Reviewing our contents. *Language*, 79, 461–463.
- Martín-Salván, P. (2018). The Secret of Bride's body in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 1-15.
- Morrison, T. (2015). *God Help the Child*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Pratt, M. L. (1977). *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*. Indiana: Indiana UP.



- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation. *Language*, 696-735.
- Schegloff, E. (1973). "Recycled Turn Beginnings: A Precise Repair Mechanism in Conversation's Turn-taking Organization." Public Lecture in the series *Language in the Context of Space, Time, and Society*, Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of Michigan, July, 1973. Mimeographed
- Schegloff, E. (2007). *Sequence Organization in Interaction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sidnell, J. (2010). *Conversation Analysis: An Introduction*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sidnell, J., & Stivers, T. (2013). *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Toolan, M. (2005). Analysing Conversation in Fiction. In R. Carter, & P. Simpson, *Language, Discourse and Literature: An Introductory Reader in Discourse Stylistics* (pp. 193-210). London: Routledge.
- Wales, K. (1989). *A dictionary of Stylistics*. London: Longman.