

Exploring Characters' Interactions in Sam Shepard's *True West* In Terms of Preference A Study in Dramatic Discourse Structure

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Abstract

This research focuses on Sam Shepard's *True West* from the perspective of preference organization. It explores the conversational sequences of characters in a variety of situations and encounters, and to show how these characters organize their responses to actions of various sorts. The conflicts in this play are shown by identifying and interpreting these responses, which are mostly dispreferred second parts. The antagonistic qualities of Lee and Austin are made explicit via applying the preference structure analysis to their interactions. The dispreferred responses, which outnumber the preferred ones in this play, provide clues to the characters' violent behaviour and intellectual aspects.

استطلاع تفاعلات الشخصيات في مسرحية "الغرب الحقيقي" للكاتب سام شبارد من منظور

هيكل التفضيل دراسة في الخطاب المسرحي

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الخلاصة

يرصد البحث هيكل الأفضلية في مسرحية "الغرب الحقيقي" للكاتب سام شبارد فيتحقق سلسلة من الحوارات بين الشخصيات الرئيسية في مختلف المواقف ليكشف عن الطريقة التي ينظم من خلالها هؤلاء ردود أفعالهم. إذ يمكن تحديد الصراعات في هذه المسرحية وتمييزها عن طريق تأويل تلك الاستجابات، التي معظمها كان من النوع غير المفضل. لقد أظهرت الشخصيتان المتخاصمتان (لي وأوستن) تمايزا عدائيا تجلى بعد تطبيق نظام بنية الاستجابة المفضلة، وعلى وفق ذلك أعطت استجابات هاتين الشخصيتين مفاتيح للوقوف على طبيعة العنف في هذه المسرحية ومظاهره المختلفة.

1. Introduction

Chapman (2011: 177) defines conversational analysis as "an area of social studies that is particularly concerned with the structures, patterns and regularities in naturally occurring conversation". It is a discipline that pays much attention to the contextual use of language and its various functions by inspecting the sequential interactive structures shaped by linguistic and non-linguistic strategies as part of social behaviour (ibid). Further, conversational analysis tries to come to terms with the socially constructed communication through focusing on talk resources when people interact, (Mey, 2009: 132). It is basically concerned with "the methods participants orient towards when they organized social action through talk", (ibid).

The essential interest of conversation analysis is to frame and conceive of the participants' repertoire when they organize their talk, that is, how a social exchange is initiated and terminated, how turn taking is managed, and how agreement is arrived at, (Allott, 2010: 51). It examines in detail the natural production of language samples in context, (ibid). Cruse (2006: 37) adds that the aim of this approach is to "extract regularities of organization". The conversation analysis includes a lot of notions. One of these is 'turn conversational unit' which means the occasion to have turn or role in speaking during a conversation and is being uninterrupted. If there is no recognizable end and beginning of the next turns, they are, hence, described as 'latched'. Also, turns 'overlap'. A turn may be adopted by a speaker as reality is indicated by a slight pause, which is a signal for 'transition-relevance place' that another participant may take in an interaction, (ibid). Another term used in conversational analysis is 'repair' which means that "where a speaker needs to repeat or reformulate part of his/her utterance in order to correct what he/she had previously said", (Baker and Ellece, 2011:115). A speaker may change mind and makes self-repair or is repaired by another participant and it can be indicated by repetition, pauses or hesitation, (ibid). 'Back-channels' or 'back-channel signals or cues' is another notion used in conversation analysis represented by such utterances as 'yeah', 'hmmm', 'wow', which are verbal signals of attention while someone else is still speaking without any attempt to interrupt or turn-take, (Cruse, 2006:37).

Another key topic in analyzing conversation style is adjacency pairs. They are 'automatic sequences' as part of automatic patterns in the conversation structure. An adjacency pair is always composed of two parts, each one is produced by a participant in a verbal interaction. Within the same pair, the first part plays a role in initiating the second part's response. Adjacency pairs fall into various sequences, such as a question-answer, a thanking-response, and request-acceptance. Sometimes the response to the first part is delayed as in the case of question-answer where there is an intervening question-answer sequence referred to as 'insertion sequence'. Also, a question-answer sequence or adjacency pair may be inserted within a request-acceptance sequence functioning as a 'condition on the acceptance', (Yule, 2000: 77-8).



2. Preference Organization

Sequential pairs constitute social actions of various interests and orientations on the part of the interactants. If there is a request, for example, initiated in the first part, the second part will convey acceptance to that request, which is, from a structural point of view, more preferred than a refusal, (Yule, 2000:78). This notion is, hence, referred to as 'preference' which implies a structure with a social pattern "in which one type of utterance will be more typically found in response to another in a conversational sequence, (ibid, 133). Sidnell and Stivers (2013: 210) discuss this structure in detail explaining that this preference organization is extremely varied in relation to situations and social activities. The interlocutors often apply certain principles when interacting in different situations and domains. In addition, 'preference principle' has a role in selecting and interpreting referential expressions, in producing and interpreting the initiation and responding to actions, and in repairing utterances, in turn-taking, (ibid).

Sacks, in his lectures in 1969, 1971 and 1992, formulated principles for the selection and interpretation of descriptions and references. He discussed a number of rules related to preferences orienting these to references and others to conversational actions. First, he considered the notion of 'recipient design' which implies that "speakers should orient to the recipients, whatever ways are relevant for the matter at hand" when they interact. His primary interest in discussing the recipient design is to arrive at specifications, one of which is directed towards describing the selection of formulations and descriptions which is mentioned by Sacks: "if possible, select a description that you know that the other knows". In this case, the speaker has to adopt 'a recognitional reference known to the recipient (Cited in Sidnell and Stivers, 2013: 211-12). Another principle of reference selection analyzed by Sacks concerns itself with 'maximal property of descriptions' based on the idea of a host of descriptions being ordered. Thus, when inviting someone for cocktails, dessert, coffee, or dinner, the speaker should make an appropriate connection with time, effort, cost, etc., necessary for the recipient to interpret the intended selection. This principle implies that "the most that can be said concerning some locally occasioned, contextually bound essential feature of the scene", (ibid). In 1992, Sidnell and Stivers (ibid:213) mention that Sacks describes responding actions in his lectures considering 'questioner-preferred answers', especially to yes-no questions. These questions expect a preferred answer.

The formulation of preference principle is "if possible, avoid or minimize explicitly stated disconfirmations in favor of confirmations", (ibid). This principle is discussed and elaborated by Schegloff (2007: 59) who argues that preference and dispreference are organized with reference to the action in the second pair part as a response to the first pair part aligned by the recipient. The first pair part, further, includes assessments, questions with a minus or plus response in the second pair part. Also, the first pair part, embraces actions of various sorts such as requests, offers, invitations, announcements, etc. key terms are, thus, associated with the second part response such as 'granting', or 'acceding' the



request as a preferred response, while a dispreferred one is termed as 'rejecting' or 'denying'. Offers and invitations are responded with acceptance as a preferred reaction while a dispreferred one is termed as 'decline' or 'reject'. In sum, the preference structure has a positive or + response if the response is (acceptance, granting, agreement, etc.) which is a preferred reaction, and a dispreferred response is embodied by (rejection, declining, disagreement) which is given – response. But, there are some deviations from this principle as in the case of disagreeing as a response to the negative self-evaluation which is an indication of "aligning with its speaker". Also, accepting an offer is not always a preferred response as in the following example "would you like the last piece of cake?" where rejecting the offer is the required response, (ibid: 60).

Preferred and dispreferred responses are embodied by practices and features. These features contrast in some situations and make a turn or a cluster of turns. One of the features of preference structures is 'mitigation' which means that some turns show the organization of mitigating or attenuating the dispreferred answers to avoid distance from the first part pair. Another feature is elaboration which shows how a preferred response is rendered with a tendency to be reduced. More elaborated responses are dispreferred which include components such as 'accounts', 'excuses', disclaimers' and 'hedges'. Besides, the default responses can be seen as the preferred ones in relation to successful references. Sometimes, the second pair part may shape the dispreferred structure and turns it into a preferred one. Hence, 'default' is another feature of preference organization. Positioning is a further feature in that preferred second pair parts are articulated "after the single beat of silence" comprehended by the interactants as 'normal transition space' without delays and the turns exchanged are delivered in a non-contiguous way. The contiguous ways are broken by a variety of practices. One of these is 'inter-turn gap' which means that there is a gap overtaking the transition space. Another thing is 'turn initial delay' where the second pair part starts with 'pre-pausals' such as the use of 'uh', hedges that delay the second pair response or it may be occupied by discourse markers such as 'well'. 'Anticipatory accounts' is another facet where accounts, excuses, appreciations beside others go together with dispreferred responses. These break the contiguity of the turns and delay the response.

Contiguity breaking practice is also formed via turns in the form of 'agreement + disagreement' formats which in turn constitute preferred responses in that "there is a potential complementarity between the early and contiguous placement of preferred responses". This feature is called 'pro-forma agreements'. There are also practices concerning first pair parts which "contribute substantially to the interactional density of this sequential arena- after a first part pair and before its second pair part" which is called 'pre-emptive reformulation with preference reversal'. Thus, the sequencing development should be understood as "a joint project of both parties to arrive at a sequence, whose parts are contiguous and in agreement or in a preferred relationship", (Schegloff, 2007: 63-70).

3. Sam Shepard's True West: Critical Views

Sam Shepard have written over forty plays, winning several prizes in the



theatre including an Obie Award, Pulitzer Prize, and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. He started as a one act playwright during the sixties in New York, as a theatre experimentalist, and has developed in the following decades as a dramatist intensely interested in family affairs. His plays are largely characterized by creativity at the level of language, imagination, disjunction and provocation, (Wilcox, 1993: 1).

Textual and performative aspects of his plays are seen as 'wildly funny' as in the case of *True West* (1980), when disposition is highly intended to galvanize its performance and to fizz moments of absurdity. Also, this play, and Shepard's other dramatic works, are imbued with sadness integrated with a feeling of intimidation and confusion, (Roudane, 2002: 1-2). This integration has been voiced into social context when he specifically seeks to address individuals' inward fears and the "the public disorders of a nation". Further, Shepard tries to make his characters more concerned with a "world filled with shattered families and iconography of popular culture", (ibid: 3). In several of his plays, including *True West*, the family concept is cautiously approached in terms of passion, violence and decay; these plays are overwhelmingly dominated by this concept. His attitude towards the notion of family becomes evident in an environment in which he addresses matters concerning disintegration, tensions, and pressures seeking unity and connections between the family members and with the world outside, (ibid: 21).

4. Preference Structures in Sam Shepard's *True West*

True West symbolically represents a violent relationship between Austin and Lee who can be viewed as incarnating opposite extremes of the creative artist. The two brothers are featured on antagonistic relationship in which Austin is all earnestness, and life is all inspiration. Thus, the main reason behind their disconformities ensues from the struggle to create since without the help of the other, each is unable to create art. This ideological conflict comes into concreteness when enhanced by a set of discussions between the brothers about the New West and the Old West, and hence, remains a major theme in the play. The two brothers become part of the Old West which, represented as violent, overcomes the New West. Their acrimonious exchanges go on throughout the scenes, which mostly and considerably show dispreferred responses outnumbering the preferred ones, as shown in the table below.

The ideological disconformities between the two brothers, at various levels, are reflected in the preference structures featuring in their dialogical interactions, which largely oriented towards disagreement throughout several verbal encounters.



Scene No.	Preferred Structures	Dispreferred Structures
Scene one	3	16
Scene two	1	5
Scene three	12	3
Scene four	7	13
Scene five	1	2
Scene six	4	6
Scene seven	0	11
Scene eight	0	17
Scene nine	0	1
Total No.	28	74

Table No. (1): Preference structures in Sam Shepard's *True West*

In the expository part of the play, the two brothers appear as if they were strangers. They have lived apart and they have not seen each other for ages. Austin is married and has come to his mother's house to write a Hollywood screenplay, whereas, Lee is wild and prefers living in the desert. Now that their mother is away from home, Austin is left in charge of the house. In the first scene, Lee starts showers Austin with a lot of disturbing questions and ends up even subbing Austin's art. They are totally different, Austin is a husband and a successful writer; Lee, on the other hand, is a thief and an outcast. They are even different at the level of life pursuit. Their disagreement soon features when they start talking about art, a topic which is argued about throughout the scenes. The table above shows abundance of dispreferred responses in the first scene.

Lee's presence in the house is not apposite, and sooner, he tends to vex Austin in a barrage of questions disrupting his attempt to write. Thus, the latter, starts questioning his brother about how long he would stay in the house; most of Lee's responses are dispreferred and go against Austin's expectations. The following dialogical interaction shows how Lee's dispreferred second parts are structured:

Austin: You going to be down here very long, Lee?

Lee: Might be. Depends on a few things.

Austin: So you don't know how long you'll be staying then?

Lee: Depends mostly on houses, ya know. (True West, p. 5)

This interaction appears to uncover a brotherly conflict when Lee subverts Austin's efforts at art. Lee's two dispreferred responses are marked with information presented with a mixture of mitigation that expresses doubt, and the account displayed is terse. The overall effect of Lee's dusty answers is that he is presenting his back-door style, suitable for a thief, which happens to be Lee's current identity.

A major point of tension and connection between the two brothers in this scene occurs when Lee wants to borrow Austin's car. The two brothers wrangle about it for a while. The car becomes a symbol of the two brothers' reunion since Lee lent Austin his car in the past. But, Austin's dispreferred second parts are strongly marked by the same direct response, using 'no' to show refusal as structurally



unexpected next act as in the following interaction:

Lee: *Now all I wanna' do is borrow yer car.*

Austin: *No!*

Lee: *Just fer a day. One day.*

Austin: *No!*

Lee: *I won't take it outside a twenty mile radius. I promise ya'. You can check the speedometer.*

Austin: *You're not borrowing my car! That's all there is to it. (True West: p. 6)*

Lee's burning need for the car urges him to nag creating a detailed first part request with a substantial variation of promising just to make successful expectation in the second part response. But Austin produces a kind of a token refusal by repeating negative responses. In fact, the expression of dispreferred second part responses, especially in regard to Austin, is an accurate representation of distance and lack of connection, which Austin has prominently and repeatedly displayed in this scene.

The second scene is somewhat different from the first at the level of mood and interaction. It seems a pleasant scene and all tensions between the two brothers seem to have burnt up. Now Austin likes his brother's stories out on the desert. This scene is full of Lee's assessments, upon which Austin mostly disagrees mostly. These personal and critical assessments cunningly disguise Lee's pervasive physical violence. Lee, instead, criticizes Austin's lifestyle for being fanciful and muffled. Austin, in response, prefers to keep silent, but is surprised at Lee's generalizations. The table above shows that there is a preferred response and five dispreferred ones. These clearly indicate few arguments between the two brothers. Lee gives an assessment about his mother's protection of her belongings; Austin's reaction seems to have an implied disagreement, which irritates Lee as a dispreferred response:

Lee: *Made a little tour this morning. She got locks on everything. Locks and double-locks and chain-locks and—what's she got that's so valuable?*

Austin: *Antiques I guess. I don't know.*

Lee: *Antiques? Brought everything with her from the old place, huh... .*

Austin: *I guess they have personal value to her.*

Lee: *Personal value. Yeah. Just a lotta' junk....*

Austin: *Well it must mean something to her or she wouldn't save it.*

(True West: p. 8)

Austin's disagreements in regard to Lee's assessment of his mother's private belongings are marked with the use of hedges (I guess), expression of doubt (I don't know), and a preface (well) invoked by an account presented as appeal for understanding, following these implied dispreferred second parts. These disagreements are highly respected by Austin which anger Lee. The all-inclusive effect of Austin's answers brings about a rising tension with Lee, pushing the latter to produce successive dispreferred second parts as responses to the former's offers and requests, as in

Austin: *You want some breakfast or something?*

Lee: *Breakfast?*



Austin: Yeah. Don't you eat breakfast?

Lee: Look, don't worry about me pal. I can take care a' myself. You just go ahead as though I wasn't even here, all right? (True West: p. 10)

Lee starts an expression of an implied decline for Austin's offer using a question form, which is accomplished without directly saying 'no'. Then, he produced a detailed dispreferred structure, starting with setting the stage for explaining his account (look), then, conveying a sign of independence and a relative distance indicator from his brother.

The explicit conflict between the two brothers begins in Scene Three, particularly when Lee starts to take over his brother's particularities. He deliberately interrupts the meeting between Austin and Saul, a Hollywood producer. Now, he ruins Austin's screenwriting. He blarneys Saul into a golf game, distracting the latter's attention away from Austin's work. Austin, in response, treats Lee strictly, and as a result, Lee announces that he can propose real western stories that will be successful sources for Saul's company. Accordingly, their interaction starts to be marked with convergence. Thus, the third scene teams with preferred responses, which outnumber the dispreferred ones as shown in the table above. These preference structures provide an accurate reflection of the successful interaction between Lee and Saul since Lee is now being regarded as a good provider for booming screen plays. Most of Lee's assessments, while talking with Saul, are responded to with the token 'yes', having various structural renderings on the part of Saul, such as "Oh, I love it out there. I just love it. The air is wonderful", (scene 3, p.16), "Sounds really great", (Scene 3, p.17), "Now that's an idea", (Scene 3, p.17), "Why not. I think it'd be great", (scene 3, p.17), " Well, you make it sound very inviting I must say. It really does sound great", (Scene 3, p.17), "That'd be terrific", (scene 3, p.18), "Yes, sure. I'll give it a read-through", (scene 3, p. 20). The expression of those agreements, from a social perspective, would represent a success of connection and closeness between Lee and Saul. Both of the two participants try to avoid creating contexts for dispreferred responses.

A large part of scene four, thematic in essence, is devoted to exploring the violence inherent in the family. Lee, for instance, speculates about the murders that take place inside houses and between members of the family. Thus, the climax of violence occurs in this scene since the two brothers grow furiously jealous of each other's lifestyle. Their increasing disagreements considerably outnumber their ideological conformities. Austin even begrudgingly agrees, slightly, to Lee's demands, but it is all for the sake of getting his car keys back, as in:

Lee: Well ya' can't leave things out even if it is an outline. It is one a' the most important parts. Ya' can't go leaving' it out.

Austin: Okay, okay. Let's just –get it done. (True West: p.21)

Austin produces reluctant agreements using "okay" several times in this scene to evaluate his brother's assessment of the story that Lee wants Austin to type. Austin then starts criticizing the contrived scenario that cannot be a clear reflection of true life. He repeatedly refers to the absurdity of his brother's



scenario, declaring:

Lee: What? It's too what? It's too real! That's what ya' mean isn't it? It's too much like real life!

Austin: It's not like the real life! It's not enough like real life. Things don't happen like that. (True West: p. 23)

This elaborated dispreferred second part, and other similar responses in this scene, are accomplished via a direct negative mentioning, followed by an account.

This scene is also characterized by a high frequency of pauses that occur as second parts, indicating dispreferred responses. These pauses feature immediately after Austin's pointing out the absurdity of Lee's story and when he insists in getting his car keys back. Thus, his refusals are partly couched in the technique of not responding. Instead of continuing arguments, Austin stops being severe to his brother, the matter that makes Lee give him the keys, and then they challenge each other. These challenges are interrupted with several pauses from both sides until they culminate in Lee's going off about family violence and murders, which makes Austin suddenly affectionate to his brother. From that moment up to the end of the scene, their interaction gets so conformed and all offers and requests made by Austin to help Lee in his story are accepted and taken up. Thus, preferred second parts occur in the last part of this scene, and instead of presenting elaborate dispreferred second parts, the brothers show agreements by responding with few comments and direct acceptance. Their social closeness, as a result, is reflected by Austin's acceptance to lend his brother the car once again:

Lee: We better get started on this thing then.

Austin: Okay.

Lee: Oh. Can I get the keys back before I forget?.....

Austin: Yeah. Right.

Lee: I could get a ranch, huh?

Austin: Yeah. We have to write it first though.

Lee: Okay. Let's write it. (True West: p.28-9).

Total disagreements occur in scenes 7,8 and 9 where the two brothers now can be referred to as representing opposite sides of humankind. Each one is at odds with the other in that both become unable to accomplish anything. Their acrimony gets aroused in these scenes reflecting their fundamental relationship as they both struggle to show the various sides of a single creative mind, which unleashes the violent facet of their interaction. All Austin's suggestions are declined by Lee who is now typing his story, though he still needs his brother's help:

Austin: "Between me, the coyotes and the crickets". What a great title.

Lee: I don't need a title! I need a thought.

Austin: (laughs) A thought! Here's a thought for ya'__

Lee: I'm not askin' fer thoughts! I got my own. I can do this thing on my own.

(True West: p.38)

Now Austin, who is drunk and contemplating to be a thief, is the reverse of Lee, who is now the screenwriter and thinking of financial success. This character



reversal is expected to result in Lee's verbal aggressiveness to Austin. Lee gets annoyed with his inability to concentrate. So he seeks his brother's help to finish the screenplay, but the latter denounces the former's efforts, disagreeing to his assessments, refusing his requests, and declining his offers, via successive dispreferred parts. These responses reignite the spark of struggle between the two leading Lee to smash the typewriter into the table as the following interaction in which Austin's dispreferred seconds are direct with accounts presented with a function of criticism, :

Lee: I will, but I need some advice, just a couple a' things. Come on, Austin. Just help me get 'em talking' right. It won't take much.

Austin: Oh now you're having a little doubt huh? What happened? The pressure's on, boy. That is it. You gotta' come up with it now... .

Lee:I just need a little help is all.

Austin: Not from me. Not from yer little old brother. I'm retired.

Lee: ... I'd give ya' half the money. I would. I only need half anyway....

(True West: p. 43)

The series of disconformities feature in the subsequent encounters between the brothers in Scene Eight when Lee suddenly starts talking about the need of a woman's pleasures, inquiring about the gas in the car so as to go searching for a woman in Bakersfield. Austin, in response, babbles on about toasters instead, thinking that a toast is a better solution than a woman:

Austin: ... Can't you tell the time by the fight in the sky? ...

Lee: I can't tell anything.

Austin: May be you need a little breakfast. Some toast! How 'bout some toast?

Lee: I don't need toast. I need a woman.

Austin: A woman isn't the answer. Never was.

(True West: p. 46)

The request and offer made by Austin are responded with Lee's decline and refusal, making a direct negative second part. This dispreference is oriented towards Lee's overt self-identified goal, giving the recipient a direct recognition of his claim, which is the need for a woman.

5. Conclusion

All in all, 'True West' dramatically portrays Austin and Lee as shattered individuals. They remain isolated due to their inability to understand and express their feelings. Their ideological disconformities feature whenever they encounter each other. These are shown in their dispreferred second parts in which they prefigure and preface their self-identified purposes in life. Sometimes they withhold these for private concerns. Further, most of Lee's assessments are disagreed upon, which are unexpected second parts; the matter that makes the two brothers show a struggle with a profound psychological quality. Accordingly, a sense of incompleteness is acknowledged by the two brothers when most of the offers, requests and invitations are refused. Thus, the preference organization of their dialogical interactions operates within and across the adjacency pairs which are mostly and directly expressed as central conversational devices that exhibit dispreferred second responses.



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