The Father-Son Dialogue Patterns in Barn Burning

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Abstract: It is on the revelation of stylistic features of the father-son conversations in Barn Burning, one of best Yoknapatawpha novels of William Faulkner. From linguistic perspectives of Stimulus-Response and Cooperative principle, it is found that the father-son dialogue patterns comprise the change of the linguistic stimulus-response chain and the frequent violation of conversational maxims governed by the Cooperative Principle. At length, it concludes that it is the rivalry between "loyalty" and "treachery" in the inner world of Sarty that underlies the conversational feature.

Keywords: dialogue pattern, father-son, stimulus-response, conversational maxims, loyalty and treachery

1. Introduction

Barn Burning, the "Best Short Novel of the Year" in 1939, is one of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels and is taken as the representative work of William Faulkner. It is against the background that after the American Civil War, production relations in American South faced drastic change and that white farmers suffered mentally and physically [1]. The novel is viewed through the third-person perspective of a young impressionable child Sarty. Father Abner is used to setting on fire landowners' cattle barns when he loses his temper. His ill-deeds are witnessed by Sarty. However, taking into account the blood relationship with his father, Sarty has to lie in the court when his father is sued by a landowner. For this lawsuit, his family has to move to another place where Colonel Sartoris lives. When Abner and Sarty visit Sartoris's farmland, Abner fouls Sartoris's carpet intentionally. Hence, Sarty's family has to wash the tainted carpet. However, Abner returned the damaged one to Sartoris. Consequently, Abner is fined twenty bushels of corn, and the fine is half reduced for his defense. It is the fine that triggers Abner's vengeance of burning the horse barn of Colonel Sartoris. In order to relieve the potential loss caused by his father's action, Sarty has to tell Sartoris his father plan. Unexpectedly, Colonel Sartoris wants to kill him. As a result, Abner and Sarty's brother are shot down. At length, Sarty is regretful for his act, and is nowhere to find.

In this novel, competition between loyalty and treachery in Sarty's mind is well illustrated in the twelve direct conversations between Sarty and his father. Although the fictional dialogues are fabricated by novelists, they still subject to pragmatic and other linguistic principles pertaining conversations. From linguistic perspectives of stimulus-response and Conversational maxims, this research mainly focuses on what the pattern of the father-son dialogues and how to interpret the pattern. The conversations between Sarty and his father Abner takes on at least the following obvious patterns: constant changing of the linguistic stimulus-response chain and frequent violation of the conversational maxims governed by the Cooperative Principle. In certain sense, these patterns including changes of the stimulus-response pattern and violating the conversational maxims can be taken as the stylistic features of the father-son dialogues and can

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be interpreted as the foregrounding parts of the novel. By means of contextual analysis, it is revealed that it is the rivalry between "royalty" and "treachery" in the inner world of Sarty that contributes to the stylistic features of the father-son dialogue pattern.

2. The Father-Son Dialogues

What follows is the twelve pairs of father–son dialogues or descriptions organized in sequence in Barn Burning [2]:

(1) *"Get back in the wagon," his father said. He got in too, over the tail-gate.*

(2) *"You were fixing to tell them. You would have told him." He didn't answer.*

(3) *"You're going to be a man. You got to learn. You got to learn to stick to your own blood…Er?"… He just stood here. "Answer me," his father said. "Yes," he whispered. His father turned.*

(4) *"Come with me."*
    "Me?" his father said.
    "Yes," his father said. "You."

(5) *"Ain't you going to ride?" he (Sarty) said.*
    "No. give me your foot."

(6) *"Don't you want me to help?" he whispered. His father did not answer…*

(7) *"Don't you want to ride now?" he whispered. "We kin both ride now," the light within the house altering now, flaring up and sinking.*

(8) *"Pap," he said. His father looked at him — the inscrutable face, the shaggy brows beneath which the gray eyes glinted coldly… "You done the best you could!" he cried. "If he wanted hit done differet why didn't he wait and tell you how? He won't git no twenty bushels! He won't git none! We'll gether it and hide hit! I kin watch …"*
    "Did you put the cutter back in that straight stock like I told you?"
    "No, sir," he said.
    "Then go do it."

(9) *"Does anybody here claim it was?" his father said. "Go back to the wagon." But he did not…*

(10) *"Take them on to the shade and hitch," his father said. He did so and returned.*

(11) *"Go to the barn and get can of oil we were oiling the wagon with," he said. The boy did not move. Then he could speak.*
    "What…" he cried. "What are you…"
    "Go get that oil," his father said." Go."

(12) *"Ain't you going to even send a nigger," he cried. "At least you sent a nigger before!" This time his father didn't strike him.*

3. Patterns of the Father-Son Dialogues

3.1 The Altered Stimulus-Response Chain

From the perspective of linguistic stimulus-response theory (formula), those father-son dialogues are characterized by the "broken stimulus-response chain". By the broken stimulus-response chain, it is meant that father Abner's verbal stimuli (commands) don't always arouse Sarty's obedient response (verb behavior or actions). Put in another way, the previous three dialogues are initiated or dominated by Abner and that Sarty merely acquiesce in his commands or response with few words; however, this dialogue pattern is altered later on.

In 1933, American structuralist Bloomfield proposed a famous linguistic stimulus-response formula [3]:

$$S \rightarrow r……………………s \rightarrow R$$

Fig.1: The Linguistic Stimulus-Response Formula

In this formula, **S** stands for the practical stimulus to one of two interlocutors, **r** the substitute verbal reactions of the interlocutor, **s** the substitute verbal stimulus to the other interlocutor, and **R** the practical reaction of the other interlocutor [3].

In the dialogues above, most of what father Abner says is about commands and requirements. According

to the linguistic stimulus-response formula, Abner's commands can be taken as his substitute verbal reaction (**r**) to the experiences in real world (**S**, the practical stimulus); and his substitute verbal reactions can be converted to the substitute linguistic stimulus (**s**) to Sarty. Besides, Sarty's reactions (verbal behaviors or actions) to his father's commands can be taken as the practical reaction (**R**) to prior linguistic stimuli.

From the previous three dialogues, it can be observed that Abner's commands (stimuli) always stimulate Sarty to make the "obedient" actions (responses), for Sarty always does as what Abner says or commands. In other words, those dialogues follow the patterns: father's commands (verbal stimuli) →son's loyal actions (verbal behavior or practical responses). For example, he acquiesces in his father his command (see dialogue One and Dialogue Two) or uses few words to reply Abner's questions (see Dialogue Three). Hence, in the prior three dialogues, Sarty's actions, verbal and behavioral, are loyal to his father, and at least he does not oppose his father requirement, which reflects his obedience to his father. Accordingly, the linguistic stimulus-response chain in those conversations can be described by the follow diagram:

<div align="center">

Father   Son
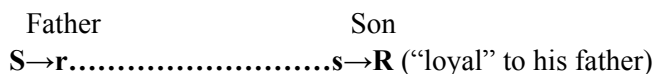
S→r………………………s→R ("loyal" to his father)

</div>

Fig.2: The Stimulus-Response Chain in the Prior Three Dialogues

However, in the remaining dialogues concerning father's command and son's reply, it can be seen that .Abner's commands (stimuli) stimulate Sarty to make the "treacherous" actions (responses), for Sarty does not follow what Abner says or commands. Put in another way, the remaining eight dialogues do not follow the prior pattern: father's commands (verbal stimuli) →son's "loyal" actions (verbal behavior or practical responses). Rather they follow mixed patterns, that is, one pattern father's commands (verbal stimuli) →son's "treacherous" actions (verbal behavior or practical responses) and the other pattern: son's verbal stimuli→father's practical response.

For example, Sarty starts to change his acquiescence by answering back or even doubts about what his father says (see Dialogue Four). He does not wait for his father order and speak firstly, that is, he becomes the question-makers not the question-listener (see Dialogue Five to Dialogue Seven). Sarty starts to doubt even defy his father's command and try his best to forestall his father's unjust action of setting the land owner's cattle barn on fire (see Dialogue Eleven and Twelve). In other words, Sarty employs his verbal stimuli to influence his father's behavior. When his father in trouble, he cuts in without his father's permission and manages to utter out his voices on the standard of vice and virtue to defend his father (see Dialogue Eight).
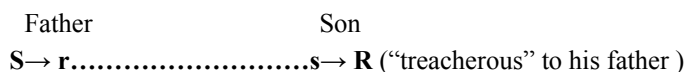
<div align="center">

Father   Son

S→ r………………………s→ R ("treacherous" to his father)

</div>

Fig.3: The Stimulus-Response Chain in the Rest Eight Dialogues

<div align="center">

Son   Father

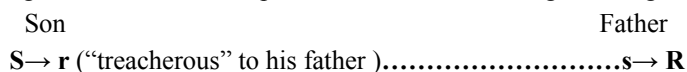**S→ r** ("treacherous" to his father)**………………………s→ R**

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Fig.4: The Stimulus-Response Chain in the Rest Eight Dialogues

In sum, the new stimulus-response pattern in the dialogues save the prior three dialogues breaks up the stimulus-response chain established at the first three conversations. In the three dialogues, Sarty's practical responses (verbal behavior or action) are "loyal" at least as seen from his father, for he obeys his father's order; however, in the remaining eight, Sarty's practical responses is "treacherous" in nature, for he doesn't follow the order and get permission. With the change of the nature of Sarty's practical responses, the nature of the stimulus-response chain in the remaining eight dialogues.

3.2 Flouting the Conversational Maxims

The dialogue pattern, furthermore, is fraught with frequent violations against the Conversational Maxims. The interlocutors rarely conform to the maxims within the Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.

The category of Quantity about the quantity of information for communication: make your contribution as informative as is required (for communication purposes); do not make your contribution more informative than is required [4]. The Quality maxim is to make your contribution one that is true. To be specific, do not

say what you believe to be false, and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence [4].The Relevance maxim is to make your conversations relevant. The maxim of Manner consists of various sub-maxims: be perspicuous, avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and be orderly [4]. However, it is possible to flout a maxim intentionally or unconsciously and thereby convey a different meaning than what is literally spoken. Many times in conversation, this flouting is manipulated by a speaker to produce a negative pragmatic effect, as with sarcasm or irony [5].

Take the first three dialogues. When confronted his questions and requirements, Sarty adopts two pessimistic attitudes: he acquiesces (see dialogue1 and dialogue2) or answers them with few words even irrelevant ones (see dialogue3). The former response violates the Quantity maxim, the latter the Quality as well as Relation maxims.

Take the rest eight dialogues. In these conversations, Sarty begins to speak more than before, takes the initiative to answer father's questions, and has his own appraisal standard on vice and virtue (in Dialogue Eight, he holds that father as done his best to clean the rug, while in Dialogue Eleven, he is opposed to father impulse to burn the barn). Those indicate that Sarty try his best to observe the Maxims. However, father starts to defy the conversational Maxims govern by the Cooperative Principle. He, for instance, often turns a blind eye to Sarty's questions (see Dialogue Six and Dialogue Twelve), answers them perfunctorily, or cuts in deliberately (see Dialogue Eight and Dialogue Eleven).

4. Interpreting the Pattern of Father-Son Dialogues

The features of the dialogue pattern, including the change of stimulus-response chain and violations of the conversational Maxims, are determined by the situational contexts pertaining to father-son conversations to great extent. Those features including changes (alternations) and violation (deviance) in those dialogues can be interpreted from foregrounding in Functional Stylistics [6]. Foregrounding is artistically motivated prominence and prominence can be either qualitative or quantitative, but not all the prominences are foregrounding [7]. Only those whose functions are significant in situational contexts are foregrounding. Foregrounding is correlated to the theme of a work and the meaning of relevant situational contexts.

The stimulus-response chain first breaks up in dialogue Four which takes place after their visit to Major de Spain's mansion. What he sees in Major de Spain's mansion exerts a great influence on his mind: he is determined to "help his father turn over a new leaf and hopes to pursuit justice, happy, and peaceful life" [8]. The great change marks the turning point in the rivalry between "royalty" and "treachery": treachery takes up the upper hand. Meanwhile, the great change in Sarty's mind is supposed to be reflected in his expressions and behavior. In this sense, it, hence, is effortless to understand the fracture of the stimulus-response chain: in the prior three dialogues, Abner's linguistic stimuli (what he says) always stimulate his son to response accordingly and perform the desirable or loyal action; whereas in most of the rest conversations, especially the last four, to Abner, his linguistic stimuli often stimulate his son to produce undesirable and seemingly treacherous verbal behavior rather than the loyal one like before.

By the same token, Sarty's violations against the Conversational Maxims at first and compliance with them later on can be also explained by the great variation in his inner world: treachery takes up the upper hand in the rivalry between "royalty" and "treachery": treachery. What is important to be pointed out is that the competition between starts much earlier, which can be observed in the psychological activities of Sarty when he is summoned to testify in the court. However, he makes fraud testimony lies for the sake of his father decency and for fear of his father's corporal punishment. To his father, this is a loyal behavior. Sarty bears hatred to his father; hence, it is reasonable for him to violate the conversational maxims to avoid any communication with his father in the previous conversations. Of course, this hatred is not strong enough to be blatant. Later on, because of the dominance of treachery in his mind, he is determined to help his father turn over a new leaf and hopes to pursuit justice, happy, and peaceful life. It, therefore, is reasonable for him to comply with the conversational Maxims to communicate more with his father and point out his faults.

5. Summary

In sum, from the perspectives of linguistic stimulus-response formula and conversational maxims, the father-son dialogue patterns, comprises the change of the stimulus-response chain and violation of the maxims governed by the Cooperative Principle. In order to reveal how these patters are generated, these patterns can be part of the stylistic features, especially the foregrounding part, of the father-son dialogues. By means of contextual analysis, it is discovered that the rivalry between "royalty" and "treachery" in the inner world of Sarty that underlies these stylistic features.

6. Acknowledgement

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