

# **Influencing the Mind in Tom Robbins' Still Life with Woodpecker: Conversation Analysis**

*Georgia Nikoleta Trimi, (MA Applied Linguistics)*

University of Nottingham, UK

---

## **Abstract**

Influencing the mind and changing an individual's worldview can occur through a specific choice of words and language manipulation. This is usually a subtle process which is instinctively perceived by the witnesses, who, however, are not able to pinpoint the manipulative aspects of language causing the influence of the mind and the gradual change of somebody's worldview. This essay attempts to apply ideas borrowed from Conversation Analysis in order to explore how Bernard, a major character in Tom Robbin's Still Life with The Woodpecker, manages to transform her into a different individual as well as examine whether the findings converge or diverge with the findings in literary criticism. According to the findings of the essay, the implementation of turn taking, topic shift and turn allocation shed light onto how mind control is achieved in literary conversations. A suggestion for further research could be the implementation of turn taking, topic shift and turn allocation in literary dialogues in order to explore their subtle undercurrents and then compare the findings with the existing literary criticism in order to examine whether the findings converge or diverge.

---

**Keywords:** Tom Robbins, Woodpecker, Conversation Analysis, mind, manipulation.

## **Introduction**

According to Carter (1997), there are two possible ways to apply literary linguistics i.e. literary stylistics and linguistic stylistics. According to literary stylistics, the text is the starting point of the analysis and the analyst will choose the most suitable framework from the field of linguistics to produce a textual interpretation. On the other hand, linguistic stylistics is driven by a theory which is applied to the text, which is in turn treated as a piece of data.

This essay attempts to employ the framework of literary linguistics, to shed light on Tom Robbin's Still Life with Woodpecker, and more specifically to borrow ideas from discourse analysis including turn taking,

turn length and topic shift to show how Bernard manages to influence Leigh-Cheri's mind by infusing his worldview into hers. According to Tom Robbins, "Language is not the frosting, it's the cake"; therefore, the selection of words and linguistic patterns plays a role in influencing the mind and instilling an individual worldview in another person's mind; along with this literary criticism it will also be reflected on to see how conversation analysis agrees or disagrees

## I.

Tom Robbins: Still Life with Woodpecker.

Tom Robbin's Still Life with Woodpecker is characterized as a post - modern fairy-tale in which Tom Robbins attempts to criticize and deconstruct aspects of western society including history, social activism, and individuality, oppressive and institutionalized aspects of romance (Mattison, 1996). Since one of the main plotlines revolves around the love affair between Bernard and Leigh-Cheri, it can be claimed that one of the most central topics of the novel uses post modernism in order to un-build the westernized concepts of romance imposed by modern society. Leigh-Cheri, the princess of an expatriate European family residing in Seattle, decides to use her power and social position to contribute to society by engaging in social activism. Soon after she meets the infamous redhead Bernard, she becomes introduced to his philosophy, which plays a significant role in the development of her personality.

### **Conversation Analysis: Literature Review and Analyzing Dialogue in Fiction**

One of the approaches included in the field of Discourse Analysis is Conversation Analysis. This approach originally emerged from ethnomethodology, a field of sociology primarily focusing on how members of a society produce and interpret social interaction, while oral dialogue is under scrutiny to give insight into social and pragmatic principles (Millers, Craig & Person, 1997). Conversation Analysis views all types of dialogues as social phenomena, characterized as highly organized and highly functional; people do not only use language to communicate verbally; but also to "construct, establish reproduce and negotiate identities, roles and relationships in conversational interaction" (Drew & Curl, 2006). The characteristic feature of this approach is the view that the dialogue is organized in sequences, in a turn taking mode and additionally that the utterances depend on the previous and the forthcoming things to be said (Bhatia, Flowerdew & Jones, 2008).

In its attempt to reveal the patterns governing social interaction, Conversation Analysis focuses on the systematic study of turn taking, mainly

because their recurrent nature attracts responses and distinguishes them from similar practices (Drew & Curl, 2006). Secondly, the sequence of actions is examined and the way the turn is grasped, how this sequence is linguistically and internally organized, and what people intend to do with the language (2006, pp. 24-25). CA has taken a new turn however; it not only focuses on the responses to the actions, but also how these linguistic forms are structured and how these sequences emerge (Hopper, 1998).

This essay attempts to adopt the second viewpoint and employs ideas of conversation analysis for *Still Life with Woodpecker*, in order to examine how the dialogues between the main characters are linguistically constructed and how one of the two major character's mind becomes influenced to such an extent; that she adopts his worldview and becomes a subject to his power. The reader also needs to take into account the linguistic organization in order to consciously understand the writer's intentions instead of merely relying on intuition to discover what characters do to each other with words (Short as cited in Verdonk, P. & Weber J.J., 1995).

### Turn Length

In conversation analysis, speakers organize their conversation by taking turns when they speak; the size of the turns, their texture and the preferred topic can provide information about the characters, their behaviour and the undercurrents of the dialogue (Herman, & Bennison, 1998).

Taking a closer look at Bernard's and Leigh-Cheri's turns, it can be observed that the longest turns belong to Bernard. For example, in pages 67-69, Bernard's turns range from 1 word to 71 words, contrary to Leigh-Cheri's whose turns do range from 3 to 13 words (Robbins, 1980). This can be particularly seen during their conversation while trapped in the pyramid, where Bernard produces his longest turns, for example in pages 252-254, apart from the single word turns produced by Bernard, intended to convey compact meaning "Yum" (p. 253) and "Shoot" (p. 254) Bernard's turns feature 69, 101 and 128 words, while Leigh-Cheri's do not exceed 26 words. Bernard's discourse seems to be interplay between introducing his worldview to Leigh-Cheri and talking about their relationship, by significantly providing longer utterances as their conversations proceed. As Leigh-Cheri becomes more accustomed to his way of thinking, it becomes more possible for Bernard to provide more sophisticated examples and opinions. It is notable that his first utterance is the one-word "yum" mantra (p. 46), which takes Leigh-Cheri by surprise; however, it is the essence of his philosophy in one word. In pages 71-74 as the story unfolds, Bernard's turns become bigger, in which he answers Leigh-Cheri's questions either with a joke to remove the tension of the suspicious woman and then elaborates with a statement to reveal more about his way of thinking. In pages 249 and 253,

he produces his longest turns i.e. 192 and 128 words respectively, elaborating on the concepts which Leigh-Cheri dwelled on in the attic while Bernard was in prison namely “love” and “choice”. He does not ask questions frequently, and when he does, they tend to move to extremes, either having little significance, “Say” (p. 94), or emphasis “Me?” (p. 96) stimulating the mind “A better world has gotta start somewhere. Why not you and me?”

On the other hand, Leigh-Cheri produces relatively small utterances, mainly consisting of questions. For example in pages 67-74 there are 30 exchanges, in which there are six questions all of which are asked by Leigh-Cheri, which mostly refer to retrieving practical information, for example “What’s your name”, “You want to blow up something else”?

Readers can be informed that Leigh-Cheri does not have a solid worldview “You are better equipped for this world than I am I am always trying to change the world. You know how to live in it” (p. 263). Her confusion can be seen from her troubled mind regarding issues of romance as seen when she claims to not “have a love life...Maybe, I don’t know, how, either” (p.76).

It was likely that the lack of a solid worldview, coping mechanisms to survive in this world and muddled ideas on love, kept her wondering and secretly searching for an answer. Taking a closer look at Bernard’s discourse, he tends to talk and provide answers about the issues that troubled Leigh-Cheri elaborating on the following themes: “dreams that never lie (p.95), “good and bad luck” (p. 98), “what makes love stay” (pp. 116-117), its essence (pp. 249, 262) and finally the fact that each individual has the choice to find “ a simple truth to live by” and “refuse to passively accept what we’ve been handed by nature and society” (p. 253). The choice of topics is obviously one fundamental reason why Leigh-Cheri gradually adopts new ideas, “That may be changing. You’ve reaffirmed my belief in romantic bullshit” (p. 98).

From a literary standpoint Buriskova views this influence on Leigh-Cheri similarly. She mentions that Tom Robbin’s heroes are labelled as radical, attacking and deconstructing the grand narratives of the west by creating their own’ worldviews. In this case, Bernard is a post-structuralist character; intending to destroy the Care Fest with his dynamite and similarly to destroy Leigh-Cheri’s beliefs with his words (Mattison, 1996).

### Topic Shift and language

It can be inferred that Leigh-Cheri’s character evolves after she has locked herself up in the attic, where she ponders on Bernard’s worldview and shapes her own. Taking a more detailed look at topic shift, it can be inferred that in the initial phase of their encounter, Bernard avoids controlling the

topic as it is seen from Leigh-Cheri's exclamation: "You evasive bastard. I am trying to understand you and you won't give me a straight answer" (Robbins, 1980, p.94). Additionally Bernard fails to produce the anticipated adjacency pairs as for example, shortly after they had met Leigh-Cheri asked him: "You want to blow up something else" only to receive an unexpected answer revealing his intentions to seduce her: "What I want is to buy you a drink". Another instance is when Leigh-Cheri wants to find out more information about him: "What's your name", only to receive a very short and unsatisfying answer. "Bernard". When she asks again implying that providing only the first name is not sufficient "Bernard what"? she still does not learn his surname, because Bernard chooses to replace it by using an adjective revealing an aspect of his personality when he says: "Bernard maniac" (pp. 68-69). By not providing the anticipated adjacency pairs, Bernard creates surprise, attracts her attention and after he has achieved that he insists on his purpose to take her out; In pages 68, 69, Bernard used four utterances to suggest going for a drink. So even though in the surface he seems that he does not control the topic, when it comes to achieving his goal, he seems to return to his topic of interest, by repeating in a somehow obsessive manner a similar utterance as seen in the following examples: "What I want is to buy you a drink", "A pina tequila or a tequila tai", "Then I can buy you a drink?", "I am listening to nothing unless I am sitting across a table from you at the Laihana Broiler" (pp. 68-69).

A similar pattern can be seen in pages 71-74. Even though there are moments of evasiveness when Leigh-Cheri asks him: "Are you saying what I think you are saying"? and Bernard not only does not provide her with a satisfying answer, but he also reveals that she should be saying even less when he states, "I am saying more that I think I should be saying". He also asks her four times whether she was going to turn him in until he receives "yes" for an answer. Moreover, Bernard does not provide Yes/ No answers, and it seems to influence Leigh's point of view, by slightly deviating from the topic and then providing a correction and an elaboration, following Leigh-Cheri's enquiry: "Are you a poet?" Bernard implies that he is not, not by saying "no", but by introducing a new meaning in the conversation for example: "I am an outlaw". This new meaning creates curiosity in Leigh-Cheri's mind who asks for further information by wanting to know whether outlaws are "important members of society?" At this point, Bernard has the opportunity to elaborate on this and infuse his worldview in her inquiring mind by explaining that "Outlaws are not members of society, but they can be important to society" (pp. 71-72).

However, after their reunion in the pyramid and after she had started shaping her own worldview, he demonstrates better top control and less topic shift. For example when Leigh-Cheri ponders on the meaning of their love

by asking: “That’s all our love was to you?”, Bernard gives a full account on love dedicating almost 19 lines, which is one of his longest turns (p.249). Finally, another example of a consistent topic control is when Leigh-Cheri mentions Bernard “found a key to wisdom in the Camel pack”. At this point Bernard takes the chance and uses fourteen lines to explain the importance of making conscious choices in our life.

Presumably, Bernard stops being evasive in the pyramid, because Leigh-Cheri is familiarized with his “outlaw” wisdom, and it is not necessary for him to provide her with an introduction, but instead can elaborate on the details, contrary to the beginning of the story.

Finally, the language used by Bernard is informal and playful; playful language may be used to indicate resourcefulness to ease the tension in order to prepare Leigh-Cheri to receive and speculate on his views or even succumb to him “You are bananas”, “Then split with me”, or “How about dinner after your interview? There is a delicious fish called mahi mahi. The fish so nice they named it twice” (pp. 79, 73). Contrary to Leigh-Cheri, who uses plain informal register, this playful language is full of symbolism, indicating linguistic control, which can justify one more reason why Bernard dominates the conversation.

Regarding symbolism this analysis agrees with the following literary criticism, by stressing the importance of symbolism for the manipulation of the mind. Byrnes (2015) has examined *Still Life with Woodpecker* from a magical realistic perspective and argues that Tom Robbins tends to use language in order to make unexpected and irrational associations and thus deconstruct the reality representing modes traditionally connected to Europe (21). This approach combined with Tom Robbin’s view from *Wild ducks flying backwards*, similes and metaphors expand the worldview and the possibilities too, can lead to the conclusion that language was used to liberate Leigh-Cheri to abandon her sterilized European imposed way of thinking.

#### Turn allocation

Sacks et al. (as cited in Culpeper, J. Short, M. & Verdonk, P., 1998) argue that the points in which the characters let other characters speak (turn allocation) and choose to speak themselves (self -selection) is a pattern which can be encountered in conversations.

More specifically, interruptions are an example of turn allocation and self -selection, which may reveal power, confidence or the urge to talk about an issue among others. Such an example is seen when Bernard and Leigh-Cheri first meet and Bernard interrupts her twice to explain when he uses his single word mantra (p. 67) and when he refuses to listen but insists on a date. This interruption suggests Bernard’s confidence and assertiveness to achieve his goal. An occasion when Leigh-Cherri interrupts Bernard is when she is

uncertain of what he is telling her, asking for further details (p. 97) “castle moats, dragon bait- “Dragon bait?”. Contrary to that, Bernard’s interruption is not led by his desire to ask for information but to provide his opinion and show his disagreement instead: “Selfish. Frivolous. Imma”, “Wait a minute. Hold on...” (p. 258).

Bernard on the other hand does not show any signs of hesitation in the novel, but Leigh-Cheri shows three instances of hesitation. The first one is when she hesitates to admit that love is the answer to Bernard’s philosophical question, for fear she might sound whimsical (p. 96) only to receive the answer that such a denial might be destructive for the individual. Finally, the statements in pp. 255-256 “If he hasn’t let us out by now...” which indicates fear and “What...do...you mean?” which shows uncertainty also invites Bernard to give an explanation and consequently infuse more of his opinions in her mind “...dynamite is the question, not the answer...” (p. 255). Since Leigh-Cheri is not likely to provide her own original opinions but she seems to be the eager listener, the examination of turn allocation indicates that contrary to Bernard’s, she does not lead the dialogue, therefore she is prone to listening and assimilating new information, in this case Bernard’s opinions.

The dominant and influential role of Bernard suggested by the patterns created in the turn allocation of the dialogue suggests that the authority is given to a man, which in turn agrees with anti-feminist criticism. Even though Tom Robbins is considered to be a feminist writer by choosing a female protagonist who refuses to accept the traditional role of the princess (Buryskova, 2012), there are still some complications to this, since it is the man who ‘dictates his beliefs to a woman’ (Mattison, 1996), by taking the role of her mentor (Buryskova, 2012). Even though there is an attempt of deconstruction regarding Leigh-Cheri’s worldview (p.53), in terms of gender roles, there seems to be no subversiveness (p.64). These literary viewpoints also converge with the existing finding in the turn allocation section, since Bernard takes the role of the mentor who is guiding Leigh-Cheri’s mind.

### Suggested Further Research

The above analysis suggests that the application of conversation Analysis in literary texts cast light in the undercurrents of the dialogues and more specifically how turn length, topic shift and turn allocation can contribute to influencing a fictional character’s mind. Given the fact that there is an ongoing debate on whether there should be a real distinction between dialogues in real life and fictional settings (Hutchby & Wooffitt, as cited in Bowles, 2011) or that CA can be connected to literary texts provided that the fictional characters are responsible for their utterances (Person,

2011), I suggest more research to be conducted comparing how literary conversations differ from realistic ones (Bowles, 2011).

Being an interdisciplinary field, Applied Linguistics could be combined with psychology in order to yield more findings in the study of literary dialogues. More specifically the notion of explicit vs implicit could help the researcher study the “subtle undercurrents” of literary dialogues in more detail.

Tom Robbin’s language is full of imagery; I therefore, suggest the influence of a literary character’s mind could be explored through the effects of imagery through the activation of schemata in the fictional character’s mind.

Finally, given the fact that there is not much literary criticism on Tom Robbin’s novels, there could be a more detailed research into the literary dialogues present in his novels and a comparison with existing literary criticism, with the aim of discovering to which extent they diverge or converge.

### **Conclusion:**

According to the findings of this essay, it seems that the way language is used influences fictional characters in terms of shaping their worldviews and transforming them into different individuals. An individual with a resourceful mind, an excellent control of the language and a well-rounded worldview, is likely to influence somebody whose worldview is not solid. Apart from a means of conveying messages, manipulating or informing others, language and more specifically the particular choice of words and the patterns they create can shape and create identities. I believe that the implementation of CA is one possible method which could enable the researcher to discover similar findings in literary dialogues.

### **References:**

- Bennison, N. (1998). Accessing Dialogue through conversation. Tom Stoppard’s Professional Foul. In J. Culpeper, M. Short. & P. Verdonk (Eds.), *Exploring the Language of Drama, From Text to Context*. (pp. 67-82). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bhatia, V. K. , Flowerdew, J. & Jones R. H. (2008). *Advances in Discourse Studies*. USA: Routledge.
- Bowles, H. (2011). The Contribution of CA in the Study of Literary Dialogue. *Novitas Royal Study on Youth Language*. 5(1), pp. 161-168. Retrieved from: [http://www.novitasroyal.org/Vol\\_5\\_1/bowles.pdf](http://www.novitasroyal.org/Vol_5_1/bowles.pdf)
- Buryskova, Z. (2012). *The subversiveness in the novels by Tom Robbins: Still Life with Woodpecker and Skinny Legs and All*. Thesis. Masaryk.



- Czech Republic. Retrieved from: [https://is.muni.cz/th/215340/ff\\_m/Thesis\\_Final\\_Draft.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/215340/ff_m/Thesis_Final_Draft.pdf)
- Byrnes, S. E. (2015). *Extraordinary Objects, Exceptional Subjects*. Thesis. Canterbury. New Zealand. Retrieved from: [http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/10816/thesis\\_fulltext.pdf;jsessionid=4717A528C57C05E969ECCD97295DFA34?sequence=1](http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/10816/thesis_fulltext.pdf;jsessionid=4717A528C57C05E969ECCD97295DFA34?sequence=1)
- Carter, R. & Nash, W. (1990). *Seeing Through Language: A Guide to Styles of English Writing*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Curl, T. Drew, P. & Ogden, R. (2006). Linguistic resources for social action. In V. Bhatia, J. Flowerdew, & R. Jones, (Eds.), *Advances in Discourse Studies*. USA: Routledge.
- Hopper, P. J. (1998). *Emergent Grammar* in press. In Bhatia, V. Flowerdew, J. Jones, R. (Eds.), (2008). *Advances in Discourse Studies*. USA: Routledge.
- Herman, V. (1991). Turn management in Drama. In Culpeper, J. Short, M. & Verdonk, P. (Eds.), (1998). *Exploring the Language of Drama, From Text to Context*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hutchby, I. & Wooffitt, R. (1998). *Conversation Analysis*. In Bowles, H. (ed.), (2011) *The Contribution of CA in the Study of Literary Dialogue*. Novitas Royal Study on Youth Language. 5 (1), pp. 161-168.
- Mattison, M. P. (1996). *Un(reed)ing Tom Robbin's Still Life with Woodpecker and Ismael's Reed's Flight to Canada*. Retrieved from: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=17189&context=rtd>
- Person, R. (2009). Oh in Shakespeare. In Bowles, H. (ed.), (2011). *The Contribution of CA in the Study of Literary Dialogue*. Novitas Royal Study on Youth Language. 5 (1): 161-168.
- Robbins, T. (1980). *Still Life with Woodpecker*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Sacks, H. Schegloff, E.A. & Jefferson, G. (1978). A simplest Systematics for the Organisation of Turn Taking in Conversation. In Culpeper, J. Short, M. & Verdonk, P. (eds.), (1998). *Exploring the Language of Drama, From Text to Context*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Short, M. Understanding conversational undercurrents in 'The Ebony Tower' by John Fowels". In Verdonk, P. & Weber J. J. (Eds.), (1995). *Twentieth-Century Fiction, From Text to Context*. New York, NY: Routledge.