

Analysis of the Characterization of Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* from the Perspective of Conversation Analysis

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Abstract: *The Catcher in the Rye*, the only one full-length novel created by Jerome David Salinger, gains great popularity among people and even the whole literary world. The interlocutions in the novel are carefully designed by Salinger, which is also an important way to shape a character. This paper will analyze the conversations between Holden and other characters to discuss how the image of Holden is shaped. By rendering these theories of Conversation Analysis, the personalities of characters can be shown more vividly and comprehensively. Besides, the perspective of Conversation Analysis can also deepen themes and offer a new way for readers to tap into the inner world of characters.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis; *The Catcher in the Rye*; Holden.

1. General Introduction of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Jerome David Salinger was born in a rich American Jewish merchant family in New York. When he was 15, Salinger was sent to a military school in Pennsylvania and graduated here, which became the archetype of the boarding school from which Holden escaped. After the publication of his famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, he was caught in the swamp of the clashes between the cruel reality and self-awareness. The alienation accumulating in the WWII, together with those clashes, intensified his solitude and loneliness. Therefore, he became a hermit and built a cabin in the mountains, living in isolation, which can be reflected in Holden's mental activities.

Published in 1951, the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, has been so far the most famous novel of Salinger, which is also regarded as the milestone of American Literature. It wins the fondness of generations, having great impact on the whole society with its profound social meaning and significance. While it is very popular, its content and bold language use also make it very controversial. Nonetheless, the permanent significance of this novel consists in the birth of Salinger's helping spirit.

With a simple plot, the novel tells the experience and venture of a sixteen-year-old rebellious teenager, Holden Caulfield, after his dropping out from a famous private boarding school. *The Catcher in the Rye*, to a large extent, is an autobiography of Salinger himself. Holden shares a great deal of experience with Salinger or we can also say that Salinger expressed his own thought and reflection of the modern society of his time. Take, the school, for example. When Salinger was thirteen years old, he was sent to McBurney school by his parents. However, because of his poor academic performance, he was expelled by the school. Finally, he went to Valley Forge in Pennsylvania, a private boarding school which can be found as the prototype of Pencey School in which Holden has been.

This novel mainly includes two themes: alienation and the painfulness of growing up. The world presented by the author is a world of moral decadency and alienation. Holden resists this kind of world by virtue of his own degeneration.

1.1. Image of Holden

The characterization of the image of Holden Caulfield is very successful. As a sixteen-year-old senior high school student, Holden is a composite being of contradictions, whose behavior is incompatible with that institutionalized and rule-governed society.

Holden can be described as an "anti-hero". The image of Holden is totally different from the traditional optimistic and ambitious hero shaped by the prevailing American value. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, what most readers observed is his notorious deeds. Because of his perfunctory attitude and poor performance of study, Holden is hereby expelled from school. He hates to see and criticizes the pedantic regulations of Pencey School. However, the author perceives that under the disguise of cynicism and rebellion, Holden is also a pathetic teenager with a sympathetic and delicate heart, which can be particularly found in the conversation between Holden and his little sister Phoebe.

These two seemingly ambivalent sides of Holden also reflect his important feature, that is, the negative attitude of radical anti-society as well as his yearn and faith for an innocent and pure world. However, one of the causes of the conflicts is his special age: puberty. According to Luo Yimin and Wang Xi (2021), on the one hand, Holden cannot get away from the immaturity of children. On the other hand, Holden is confused with the oncoming experience of the adulthood which he hates. His gray hair which is unmatched with his age, together with his language which is sometime childish or mature, shows his contradictory personalities. He cannot come to term with the world and therefore is locked out by the apparently normal society. Consequently, in the world full of alienation and indifference, Holden fail to find his place, forced to be a marginal man. The image of Holden is complex and transitional. Being unable to integrate into the society, Holden chooses to become a "catcher". Neither does Holden belong to the "rye", nor the world under the "cliff". What Holden can only do is to save those innocent and naive children facing the moment of falling down the cliff.

By the first-person narrative and sincere emotion, Salinger shows us a vivid and flesh-and-blood image of Holden. His

exquisite imitation and use of teenager's language endows Holden with unique personalities. It can be said that the aesthetic effect caused by the characterization of Holden comes from Salinger's harnessing of his language arrangement and organization.

To sum up, as what has been mentioned before, Holden is controversial because of his poor academic performance, intemperance and dirty talk. Nonetheless, the author thinks that it is through this kind of anti-traditional hero that Salinger shows readers the real spiritual world of teenagers of his time and poignantly criticizes the hypocrisy and the cruelty of the modern society.

2. Theories Related to Conversation Analysis

2.1. Grice's Cooperative Principle

Cooperative principle is proposed by famous linguist Grice in *Logic and Conversation* in 1975. Grice (1975) believe that we should make our conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. There are four maxims of this cooperative principle, namely, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner.

(1) the maxim of quality: it requires people to contribute their information in the conversation as much as required.

(2) the maxim of quantity: it requires people to tell the truth and to avoid telling lies and saying something lack of evidence.

(3) the maxim of relation: it requires people to say something related to the topic.

(4) the maxim of manner: it requires people to express themselves in a clear and perspicuous way.

These four principles created by Grice define what is an ideal communication and what the interlocutors should do in their conversations, which makes a rational and co-operative conversation.

However, in the real process of communication, people don't always observe these maxims. People will violate one of these maxims or simply tell the lie. It should be noticed that when the principles are broken, the conversational implicature will arise, which contains a deeper meaning than the literal meaning of the utterance(Grice, 1975). Different violation of different maxim can have different meanings:

(1) the violation of quantity: When speakers intentionally add or reduce necessary information, the violation of quantity appears.

(2) the violation of quality: If people provide false information or say something lack of evidence, they are said to violate the maxim of quality.

(3) the violation of relation: If the addressee says something unrelated to the question, then he is said to break the maxim of relation

(4) the violation of manner: If the speaker doesn't say something in a clear and obvious way, he is said to violate the maxim of manner.

The observation and violation of the cooperative principle are the foundation of the communication, which can help people to interpret the social relationship, the power and the deeper intention of the speakers.

2.2. Austin's Speech Act Theory

Influenced by General Linguistics, British philosopher

John Langshaw Austin proposed the speech act theory in 1950. According to Austin (1962), he believed that people are forming three acts simultaneously when they are speaking. Austin also demonstrated that the basic unit of human interaction is not the single word or sentence, but the exact speech act conveyed by their utterance. Additionally, the classification of traditional grammar is not convenient for people's daily communication and study, because each kind of sentence has different functions in different context.

Speech act theory includes three sub-theories: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Firstly, people use their vocal organs to produce a number of sounds by phonological, lexical and syntactic system while speaking. This kind of act is locutionary act. When the speaking utters, the act is also performed. Secondly, the illocutionary act refers that the intention of a speaker is revealed by uttering something. That is to say, the speaker not only produces the utterance with certain semantic meanings, but also makes clear his intention by using illocutionary force. It is noteworthy that the illocutionary act is also the most important one in these three sub-theories. Thirdly, the perlocutionary act is performed by the consequences of the utterance, which is represented by the hearer. It is the change called forth in the hearer to do something.

2.3. Leech's Politeness Principle

Although cooperative principle is of great significance in explaining the conversational behavior of people, it is not always effective. For example, it cannot account for the reason why people try to use an indirect speech act to express their intention. Politeness principle thus becomes the important supplement of cooperative principle. It was put forward by G. Leech in his *Principle of Pragmatics*. According to Leech(1983), people do not purposely violate one of the maxims of cooperative principle. What they actually do is to perform indirect conversational act and implicature to express their politeness. In the normal conditions, by using the politeness principle, the impoliteness can be minimized.

The six categories of politeness principle are as follows:

(1)Tact Maxim: According to tact maxim, the speaker should minimize the costs to other and maximize benefit to other.

(2)Generosity Maxim: Generosity maxim makes the speaker to minimize the benefit to self and maximize the cost to self.

(3)Approbation Maxim: It means to minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. Controlled by the maxim of approbation, the addressor can't utter something hurting or maligning the hearers. What the addressor should do is to praise the addressee.

(4)Modest Maxim: It means to minimize praise of self Maximize dispraise of self.

(5)Agreement Maxim: It means to minimize disagreement between self and other and maximize agreement between self and other.

(6)Sympathy Maxim: It means to minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other.

Politeness is the essential part of the personal relationship, which is important in daily interaction. However, people do not always observe those principles in real communication. Therefore, more meanings and intentions can be inferred by studying the violations of them.

3. Interpretation of the Personalities of Holden

There are many similarities and differences between daily conversation and novel conversation. Excellent authors wield daily conversational materials to process and recreate the conversations between characters, making the conversations real and natural. The design of conversation is an essential way to construct a character, which can also reveal the inner world of a character. Conversations are very common between characters in novel. However, this kind of conversations is not so natural as a real one. The conversations in novels are processed by authors' conscious imitation of natural communications and imagination. Natural as they are, those conversations have deeper meanings which can advance the plots and describe the characters vividly (Chang Zonglin, 1995). Therefore, as the important part of the study of conversations, cooperative principle is essential to interpret the conversations in the novel as well.

Through the control of the conversational forms as well as the features of conversation, Salinger represents the real oral communication of the teenagers in the Northeastern United States. The conversations between Holden and other characters are simple and straightforward. These conversations promote the development of the main plot and vividly depict the personalities and mental development of Holden.

3.1. Violation of Cooperative Principle

3.1.1. Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

Example 1

Old Spencer: "What's the matter with you, boy? How many subjects did you carry this term?"

Holden: "Five, sir."

Old Spencer: "Five. And how many are you failing in?"

Holden: "Four. I passed English all right, because I had all that Beowulf and Lord Randal My Son stuff when I was at the Whooton School. I mean I didn't have to do any work in English at all hardly, except write compositions once in a while (Salinger, 1987)."

Example 1 is the conversation between Old Spencer and Holden. It can be shown that in this conversation, Holden answers Old Spencer's question honestly. However, when Old Spencer asks him how many subjects he failed in, Holden not only tells him the exact number but also explains the reason why he passed English.

According to the cooperative principle, Holden obviously violates the maxim of quantity. He deliberately makes his conversational contribution more than is required because he could have answered the question straightforward with "Four." However, Holden goes ahead and tries to prove to Old Spencer that although he fails most of the courses, he still passes English because of his knowledge learned in Whooton School. It should be noticed that Holden, to some extent, is Salinger himself. Living in the spoiled love of his mother, Salinger wanted to demonstrate to others that he was excellent. However, with the same poor academic performance, Holden also wants to show his superiority. It can be perceived that Holden has the tendency to conceal his self-abasement because he tries to explain the course which he did better. Even facing his teacher, Holden doesn't try to make apology

for his failure on his history course, which shows his self-esteem and the desire to seek the recognition from others. Besides, here is also a sharp contrast. At the end of the selected conversation, Old Spencer doesn't make any comments on Holden's explanation, what he does is continuing his own question. This shows the indecorum and indifference of Old Spencer, which is opposite with the sincerity and honesty of Holden. What Holden wants here is Old Spencer's placatory words rather than adult-like precept.

3.1.2. Violation of the Maxim of Quality

Example 2

Old Sunny: "What's a matter?"

Holden: "Nothing's the matter. The thing is, I had an operation very recently."

Old Sally: "Yeah? Where?"

Holden: "On my wuddayacallit—my clavichord."

Old Sally: "Yeah? Where the hell's that? (Salinger, 1987)"

Example 2 is excerpted from the conversation between Holden and Old Sunny, an underage prostitute. This conversation happens when Holden calls a prostitute for removing the mental anxiety without the intention for sex. However, Sunny doesn't want to waste her time and wants to finish the deal as quick as possible. Therefore, Sunny tries to persuade Holden to do it. However, Holden resists her temptation by uttering that he has an operation which will make it inconvenient to have sex.

Obviously, here, Holden breaks the maxim of quality, for he seeks pretext by lying that he has an operation on his spinal canal. However, the motivation of Holden's lying can be found in the previous paragraph. Holden feels a kind of sadness when he hangs the dress for Sunny who is a peer of Holden. Just like what Holden says, the sellers may regard Sunny as a regular girl without any skepticism. From Holden's hesitation and reluctant action toward Sunny's lure, it shows Holden's sympathy for Sunny's experience. Because, in Holden's opinion, girls like Sunny should be innocent, pure and happy, leading a comfortable and wealthy life the same as Holden's. However, what Sunny presents to Holden is an image of seasoned but foolish girl. There is also a slight transition of Holden's role. Holden uses less cynical and crude words but more sympathetic and sincere tone. Therefore, Holden attempts to sympathize Sunny as opposed to adding insult to injury and pushing Sunny over the edge of "rye".

3.1.3. Violation of the Maxim of relation

Example 3

Holden: "Handsome chap like you. All those goddam golden locks. Ya need a manager?"

The guy: "Go home, Mac, like a good guy. Go home and hit the sack. (Salinger, 1987)"

Example 3 is a conversation happening when Holden entered a bar for fun at midnight. Holden wanted to have fun here but because of his lacking of licence to show his age, he was rejected by the bartender.

The maxim of relation requires people to say what is relevant to the topic. According to Holden, he asks the guy a question about whether they need a manager. Therefore, the expected answer of the guy is "Yes" or "No". However, the guy does not reply Holden's question because Holden is a minor and he can not provide anything that can prove his age. According to a recognition of an adult, what a minor should

do is stay at home in the evening and that going to the pub is the privilege of adults. Therefore, the guy use the imperative sentence to ask Holden go home. From what Holden says we can find that Holden express the praise for the barman in a exaggerate way. However, the barman does not appreciate it but tells Holden that he should be a good boy and go home. This is a representation of the special identity of Holden—a rover in the gray zone between the adult world and the minor world. Although Holden wants to pretend himself as an adult by talking in a adult-like style of blandishment, he is still locked out by the barman who is the symbol of the adult world. It should be noticed that Holden is repelled by the Pency School during the school time and thus he has no where to go. As a result, Holden here is described as a rover either belong to the adult world and the minor world.

3.1.4. Violation of the Maxim of Manner.

Example 4

Ackley: “What the helly reading?”

Holden: “Goddam book. (Salinger, 1987)”

This is a conversation between Holden and his roommate Ackley, a boy with whom Holden was very disgusted.

Example 4 is a violation of the maxim of manner. Ackley wants to know what kind of book Holden is reading. Although Holden does reply Ackley’s question, he does not tell the exact name of the book he is reading. In the normal situation, if asked a question like this, people will reply with the specific name of the book rather than say “Goddam book”. Therefore, the manner of Holden’s replying Ackley’s question is ambiguous.

Although this conversation is very short, we can find the features of the conversation of the teenagers of that time. Hou Weirui (1982) pointed out that Salinger’s language shows the type of the language of the society as well as the age group—the abuse of bad language, which is a way for teenagers to express their disappointment and angry toward the world. Both of the words Holden and Ackley use show their cynicism and their rebellion against the world. By saying “Goddam book”, Holden expresses his aversion towards Ackley, indicating that Holden looks down upon his peers because all of them are the hypocrites of the Pency School.

3.2. Application of Speech Act Theory

Generally speaking, Phoebe, Holden’s sister, appears not until Chapter 21. From the previous narration about Phoebe by Holden, it can be known that Phoebe is Holden’s hope and pride, who saves him and protects him. Holden always describes Phoebe as a clever and lovely girl who is superior than any of her peers. By analyzing the speech act of their conversation, readers can know Holden’s personalities better.

Example 5

Holden: “Who said I got kicked out? Nobody said I—”

Phoebe: “You did. You did. Daddy’ll kill you!” (Salinger, 1987)

This is a short conversation happens after Phoebe realizes Holden’s lie of his being expelled from Pency School. According to the speech act theory, when uttering the sentence “Daddy’s going to kill you”, she performs three speech acts simultaneously. The simplest one is her action of uttering this sentence. However, what’s more important is her illocutionary act. Although the literal meaning of the sentence

is that if their father knows the news of Holden’s being expelled, their father will burst into anger and even “beat Holden to death”. It also shows the real intention of Phoebe: she worries and concerns about Holden’s current situation. As for Phoebe, Holden is the same as Allie. Allie is already dead. Phoebe doesn’t want to loose Holden again. What’s more, it suggests that his father doesn’t care too much about Holden’s inner world. What they only concern is the fact of Holden’s transferring to another school and endless being expelled. Therefore, the family relation is one of the essential factors to dissect the personalities of Holden. Although living in a wealthy family, Holden doesn’t feel very happy. There are few descriptions of Holden’s father and mother in the novel, but more descriptions between Allie, his dead little brother, and Phoebe. All of these shows the lack of parent’s love and the unbalance between spiritual and material world. There is even no conversation between Holden and his father. What the readers only known is that his father is a successful lawyer with bad temper by Holden’s interior-monologue. The relatively scarce descriptions of his parents show the lack of parents’ roles and models which is of great importance in the development of children to guide and shape them. The parental alienation contributes to Holden’s spiritual void and misbehavior, which reveals the root of Holden’s lost and agony.

Example 6

Phoebe: “Please, Holden. Please let me go. I’ll be very, very, very--You won’t even—”

Holden: “You’re not going. Now, shut up! Gimme that bag.” (Phoebe started to cry.)

Holden: “I thought you were supposed to be in a play at school and all I thought you were supposed to be Benedict Arnold in that play and all.” (Salinger, 1987)

The above conversation is also very interesting. Holden wants to see Old Phoebe for the last time because he will become a hermit and live in the mountain where nobody will disturb him to get away from the fallacious world. However, Phoebe’s action of recalcitrance of following him almost drives Holden mad. Phoebe determines to go with Holden. When Holden intends to leave Phoebe alone, Phoebe begins to cry, which makes Holden softhearted and then persuades him to stay. Holden’s words about his assumption of Phoebe’s performance show his concerns and hesitation to leave Phoebe, which is the illocutionary act of his utterance. By expressing the literal meaning of his utterance, Holden implies that he wants Phoebe to stay and finish the show which Phoebe has expected for a long time and that he compromises with Phoebe to not leave her alone. Holden’s responsibilities can be shown from the process where Phoebe persuades Holden to stay. Phoebe’s petulant behavior makes Holden to relent. Holden realizes that it is his responsibility to protect and make Phoebe happy forever, which also shows Holden’s spiritual development.

3.3. Violation of Politeness Principle

Example 7

Old Sally: “Lots of boys get more out of school than that”.

Holden: “I agree! I agree they do, some of them! But that’s all I get out of it. See? That’s my point.

That's exactly my goddam point, I don't get hardly anything out of anything. I'm in bad shape. I'm in lousy shape."

Old Sally: "You certainly are."(Salinger, 1987)

Example 7 is excerpted from the conversation between Old Sally and Holden. Old Sally is Holden's girlfriend whom Holden regards as "phony" as people around him. It should be noticed that the previous dialogue of this conversation is also very important, where Holden uses a long length to describe the real circumstance and situation in the boy's school in which students and teachers are all phonies and dandies.

Evidently, Sally's answer at the end of the conversation violates the approbation maxim by agreeing with Holden's self-depreciation. Instead of comforting Holden, Sally chooses to follow the intention of Holden, affirming his impotency and failure. According to Holden, the world he lives in is a phoney world because almost all the people around him is hypocritical. From his description of the schools, Holden shows the perfunctory attitude of the schools, and that the sole goal of these dandies is to become wealthy and have a Cadillac. All the students talk about girls and sex. Actually, Holden's revealing of the hypocritical students is the criticism of the problems of American education system. Although Holden agrees with Sally's opinion that there are still some students can learn something good, he confesses that what he can learn is those meaningless things which he hates. Holden regards himself as "a lousy shape" which shows his cowardliness. What can be perceived in his sentences is that, though he is extremely pessimistic and hates the people around him, Holden has no alternative and chooses to follow the crowd, doing the things he hates and disdains.

Example 8

Old Sally: "It isn't that. It isn't that at all. We'll have oodles of time to do those things--all those things. I mean after you go to college and all, and if we should get married and all. There'll be oodles of marvelous places to go to. You're just—"

Holden: "No, there wouldn't be. There wouldn't be oodles of places to go to at all. It'd be entirely different," (Salinger, 1987)

This conversation is also between Old Sally and Holden. Similarly, Holden uses a long turn to express his ideal life of turning back to nature which is similar to the adherents of romanticism. Although Salinger doesn't describe the place directly, the natural beauty can still be sensed by Holden's thoughts, which shows Holden's aspiration of returning to nature and Salinger's dream of being a hermit. However, after Holden presents his views vehemently, Sally shows her objection and indifference toward Holden's seemingly ridiculous ideas, saying that there will be more opportunities when they grow up. By denying vigorously what Sally said, Holden violates the agreement maxim. He fails to reach the agreement of Sally's ideas. According to Holden, what he really wants is to escape from the adulthood. He thinks that everything will be totally different from the current situation when they get into the adult's world, for they will have endless troubles to deal with. Therefore, the most apposite opportunity is now and they can set out immediately without worrying money and other things. However, compared with

Sally's realistic realization of the situation, Holden is relatively innocent and naive. In fact, what Holden describes reflects his ideal life freed from the phonies, the hypocrisy and the indifference of the human world. However, at that time, such kind of life is impossible due to the flourishing development of the industrialization and booming economy. Holden wants to keep his innocence and the distance with the hypocritical adult world by living in the forest cottage with Sally. Nonetheless, what Holden gets from Sally is her indifferent cynicism, which causes great impact on Holden.

This conversation also shows Holden's growing up. Instead of complaining all the day, Holden finds a way to solve his spiritual and physical void. In the later chapter, although his friends cannot understand him and even make fun of his innocent idea, Holden wants to live in the nature, pretending to be a deaf-mute and even marry a deaf-mute girl, which shows his unwillingness to communicate with the phoney people and the desire to integrate with the nature.

4. Conclusion

J. D. Salinger's exquisite and consummate writing skills and his worldview are fully shown in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger's characterization of Holden is also very impressive and successful.

According to Leech(1983), the best way to understand the principles of literary communication is to apply the principles of daily communication to interpret the conversations in novels. Conversations account for a great part in novels, and thus the author tries to represent the image of Holden by analyzing the theories of conversation analysis. By gradually analyzing the conversations between Holden and different characters, the complexity and the spiritual development of Holden can be shown comprehensively. The conversations between Holden, Old Spencer, Ackley, barman, Sunny illustrate the complexity of Holden's personality. His attitude changes as the interlocutor's change. Holden shows his reverence and observance toward Old Spencer, his disdain and contempt toward Ackley, his sympathy and hate toward Sunny, and his innocence as a minor when talking with the barman and so on. By deliberately violating some conversation theories and using speech act theory, Holden shows his rebellious spirit, limited cognition of the world, and the growth of himself. Those conversations show Holden's disappointment, rebellion and sympathy.

The application of the theories of conversation analysis in the novel provides a different approach to analyze characters by helping readers to tap the real intention of Salinger. What's more, the combination of the linguistic theory and literature will also enrich the materials of linguistic studies and ways to analyze literature(Liu Shisheng & Zhang Ping, 2001).

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