

Research Article

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Language Functions Used by The Main Characters of The Marriage Story Movie

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Abstract

People use different utterances by considering the social context in which communication takes place. An utterance may have more than one meaning and function depending on social context and other factors. This study aims to describe the spoken language functions of the main characters, Charlie and Nicole, in the *Marriage Story* movie. This descriptive qualitative research used Roman Jakobson's language function classification to categorize the selected utterances found in *Marriage Story* movie into one of the six functions (emotive, conative, referential, metalingual, phatic, and poetic). To interpret the classified data and the contexts or situations, I relate the language functions to social factors and social dimensions based on Holmes' categorization. The results show that all six language functions appeared in Nicole and Charlie's utterances. The data analysis depicts that emotive function is predominantly used by the main characters throughout the whole movie. Moreover, those language functions are influenced by social factors and social dimensions.

Keywords: language function; social factor; social dimension; *Marriage Story*.

1. Background of the Study

Marriage Story is a comedy-drama movie written, directed, and produced by Noah Baumbach, a New York writer-director. After its release on 29th August 2019 at Venice Film Festival, *Marriage Story* was transformed into digital streaming on 6th December 2019, chosen as one of nine best pictures of the year by the Academy Awards, receiving additional nods for best actor, actress, original screenplay, and original score. *Marriage Story* was starred Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver as the main characters and other actors and actresses in supporting roles. Johansson starred as Nicole Barber and Driver starred as Charlie Barber. Nicole is an actress, while Charlie is a New York theatre director. They have been married for eight years. Unfortunately, their marriage is not a beautiful and harmonious one; it is a story that is on the verge of ending. They are facing

a long divorce process, in which every one of them fights for the custody of their son, Henry.

The *Marriage Story* movie was chosen as the object of research because the movie depicts different language usage that depends on the purpose or situation. The main characters in the movie tend to use verbal expressions to help them communicate their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and needs. They usually use language to both intentionally and unintentionally express thoughts as to what and how they feel; they also consider how, why, when, where, and to whom they deliver their utterances.

In this movie, language as verbal communication is used not only as positive reinforcements, such as to praise or show empathy but also as negative reinforcements, such as critical or hateful speech. When having a conversation with other characters, both Nicole and Charlie tend to combine communication with supportive language, which are language communicated in an open, honest, sincere and non-confrontational way. However, in some other situations, they also use unsupportive language, including sarcasm, curse, labels and judgmental language. In addition, this movie contains the function of language in almost every utterance, such as when the main characters produce command, share information, or maintain close relationships with other characters.

When talking about a language as a means of communication, we cannot disregard human beings as speakers. Speakers of a language will be influenced by the social context. Language can show the speaker's social classes, educational background, and the relation between the speakers and the participants. Nicole and Charlie in *Marriage Story* movie are indeed affected by different contexts, meanings, and other factors of communication. This research employs Roman Jakobson's theory of language function classification to analyze the functions of the language appearing in the movie [1]. He divides language functions into referential, emotive, phatic, conative, metalingual, and poetic. Furthermore, the categorization by Janet Holmes is applied to find out factors that influence language functions and to investigate the relationship between language functions, social factors, and social dimensions [2].

Social factors consist of the participant, setting, topic/context, and function. The participant alludes to who is speaking and with whom he is speaking [2]. People will talk differently from one to another considering the interlocutor's specific backgrounds, such as age, sex, relationship, and personal characteristics. He also states that setting influences the way people select an appropriate language code or variety by considering the time and place of the interaction. Levinson asserts a context must be understood to be a set of propositions, describing the beliefs, knowledge, commitments and so on of the participants in discourse [3]. Holmes adds that "the topic of the interaction related to what is being talked about or discussed" [2]. In other words, the topic limits the speaker to not speak out of the context of the discussion and guarantees the integrity of the conversation. Further, in a social context, the roles, relationships, general society normalities, cultural values, and customs of individuals affect the way they communicate and engage with each other [4].

Meanwhile, social dimensions consist of the social distance scale, status scale, formality scale, and two functional scales. The social distance scale is useful to identify

the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. A status scale, according to Holmes, justifies the participants' relationship whether the speaker is superior or has a higher status than the interlocutor or inferior and has a lower status than the interlocutor [2]. The formality scale can assess the influence of social settings or types of interaction on language choice. The two functional scales refer to low affective content and high affective content. Information-oriented interactions do not require the expression of feelings. Otherwise, interactions that prioritize the expression of feelings usually provide little new information.

This research intends to investigate (1) the functions of language spoken by Nicole and Charlie in the movie, (2) social factors and social dimensions that influence the functions of language spoken by them.

2. Methods

A qualitative descriptive method is employed to be the research methodology to thoroughly describe social phenomena in certain matters relating to the problem and area study. "Qualitative research involved the researcher in interpreting what they see, hear, and understand" [5]. The researcher's interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understandings. Instead of being presented statistically, the results are spelled out in the form of descriptions supported by the conversation data.

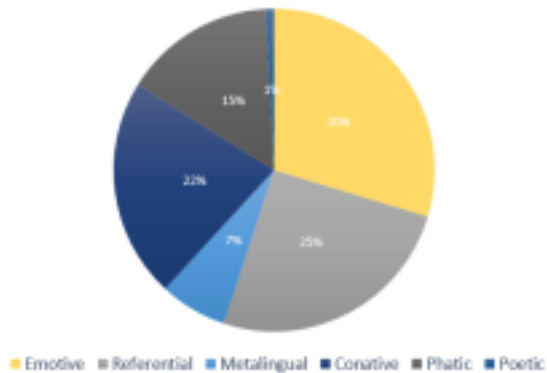
The population of this study is all the utterances of the main characters in the movie. Meanwhile, the sample of this study is the utterances containing language functions used by the main characters. Further, this study used a non-probability sampling with a purposive sampling technique to choose the data that had particular language functions spoken by Nicole and Charlie.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Functions of Language Used by Nicole and Charlie

This section presents the types of language function (expressive, conative, referential, metalingual, poetic, and phatic) containing in Nicole and Charlie's utterances in the *Marriage Story* movie. There are found 118 data that reflect each of types of language functions. The percentage is displayed in the form of a chart as follows.

Functions of Language Spoken by Nicole and Charlie



During the whole movie, the researcher found 118 utterances that reflect all Roman Jakobson's language function classifications.

The emotive function is predominantly used by the main characters with thirty-five utterances (30%). The rest includes referential function with thirty utterances (25%), metalingual function with eight utterances (7%), conative function with twenty-six utterances (22%), phatic function with eighteen utterances (15%), and poetic function with one utterance (1%)

3.2 Social Factors and Social Dimensions Influencing the Use of Language Functions

The following are instances of each language function along with the discussions

3.2.1 Emotive Function

express a message or feeling. Emotive focuses on the expressions of emotion, thoughts, attitudes, and opinions of the speaker which are delivered in different word choices and intonations. The following conversations in bold contain the emotive function.

Nora : Now, can you tell me a little bit more about what's going on? Because part of what we're going to do together is tell your story.

Nicole : **It's difficult to articulate. Sorry. It's like I know why I'm doing this but I don't know too. It's not as simple as not being in love anymore.**

The topic of the conversation (00:25:15 – 00:25:35) is the reason why Nicole wants to file a divorce against her husband Charlie. However, Nicole finds it hard to explain the reasons she wants a divorce to her lawyer. The tone of her statement is slightly worried and her facial expression also shows confusion. In relation to Holmes's social factor, the participant and the setting equally affect how Nicole expresses her feeling. But Nicole does not spill the entire emotion considering that she does not know Nora very well yet. She tends to use formal language because the conversation occurs in the office.

At this point, it can be seen that Nicole's utterance is highly affective rather than referential because Nicole tends to show her feeling than to provide information. In Holmes's referential and affective functions scales, the utterance is thus more of the low information content and high affective content. The use of the word "articulate", instead of "say" or "explain", indicates higher formality and distance, rather than low formality and high solidarity. In conclusion, Nicole's utterance is emotive as she expresses her individual feeling and emotion to Nora.

The emotive function also emerges in a conversation during (01:11:35 – 01:11:59).

Nicole : I can't believe I have to know you forever!

Charlie : **You're fucking insane! And you're fucking winning!**

Nicole : **Are you kidding? I wanted to be married. I'd already lost. You didn't love me as much as I loved you. You're so merged with your own selfishness that you don't even identify it as selfishness anymore. You're such a dick!**

In this scene, Nicole visits Charlie's new house after they have gone through their first divorce proceeding. Nicole intends to discuss their marriage again because they have never talked about their feelings thoroughly. The initially light conversation becomes tense when both characters pour out all their long-hidden feelings and emotions to each other. The participants' relationship appears to be the pivotal social factor that gives an impact on the language function in Nicole's utterance. As a married couple, they have completely known each other's characters so they can talk freely with all emotions, for instance, both Nicole and Charlie use swear words to express anger. This proves that there is also a connection between language function and social dimension, such as a social distance scale. They have high solidarity since they speak straight forward towards each other. In terms of the formality scale, the location of the conversation has shown that it has a low formality scale. Besides, in this dialogue, Charlie and Nicole tend to show their expression more than information. Therefore, the conversation lowers the referential scale and brings up the affective function scales. By the explanation above, it is clear that emotive function is spoken by Nicole and Charlie to show their emotional feeling towards each other.

The next conversation occurring at 01:58:25 – 01:58:46 also reflects the emotive function.

Nicole : **Oh good.. Thank you for everything Nora..**

Nora : You're welcome, doll.

The bold words show Nicole's gratefulness to Nora for all the help for finally winning the divorce. It is categorized as emotive because she not only thanks Nora but also expresses her happiness for finally winning the divorce. This is also supported by her facial expression and blurry eyes when hearing the good news. The setting of place which takes place in Nicole's house builds a casual nuance that Nicole can express her feeling freely. In this conversation, the topic and participant as the social factors also influence

the language function used by Nicole. Concerning the social distance scale, Nicole and Nora have frequently met each other and discussed their problems together which indicates a close relationship between the two of them. Nicole's utterance is highly affective because she expresses her feeling.

The second dialog below portrays how Nicole and Charlie react to their lawyers' negative behavior (01:35:47 – 01:35:58).

Nicole : Nora says there's no coming back from this.

Charlie : **Fuck Nora. I hate fucking Nora telling me I always lived in LA. Even though I never lived in LA.**

How could you have her say those things about me?

Charlie's utterance indicates emotive function because he intends to express his annoyance towards Nicole's lawyer, Nora. Responding to Charlie's arguments, Nicole claims that Charlie's lawyer, Jay, is also doing what Nora has done. They come to the conclusion that both lawyers give untruthful information about them. Nora's attitude triggers Charlie to reveal his feeling of annoyed and hateful towards Nora. The participant and the topic of the conversation determine the emotive function that Charlie would use. He knows Nicole's characters so that he frankly spills the guts over Nora to her. Based on Holmes's social distance scale, those swear words and the way he tells Nicole about Nora shows that they have high solidarity that makes them express any emotion outspokenly and comfortably. The dialogue also has a high affective scale since they prioritize to show their feeling and underrate information.

Another example of emotive function appears in a conversation when Nicole expresses her anger against Charlie.

Charlie : How did you read my emails?

Nicole : **I hacked into your account you dumb fuck!**

At this moment (01:11:38 – 01:11:56), both Charlie and Nicole are arguing the fact that Nicole hacked into Charlie's email and found out that he had an affair. Their close relationship as husband and wife leads them to have informal language choices and swearing words. Additionally, the topic in this conversation is his husband's affair that makes Nicole irritated and use swear words over him. This proves how social factors, such as participants and topics, can influence the way people speak. Here, Nicole also uses curse words such as "*dumb fuck*" to emphasize her feeling of disappointment and resentment regarding Charlie's disloyalty. In terms of functional scales by Holmes, their conversation shows expression-oriented interaction that requires the expression of feelings. Thus, it brings up the affective function scale

3.2.2 Referential Function

Referential function focuses on the context and provides information. It can be used to inform a report, description, statement, confirmation, and explanation of something. The following utterances in bold are examples of the referential function.

Nicole : **There's a new hotel over on Highland that's supposedly not too expensive and pretty nice.**

Charlie : Oh.. ok, I'll check it out

In this scene (00:43:23 – 00:43:44), Charlie thinks that he can stay at Nicole's house that night. Nicole however indirectly asks him to look for another place to stay. She gives him a recommendation about a hotel where he can stay. The role of the participant influences how Nicole composes an utterance. Nicole does not feel reluctant to let him stay in another place because of their tenuous marriage relationship. The low formality scale makes them use daily language. In terms of Holmes's social distance scale, the dialogue above shows low solidarity due to the broken relationship. Moreover, the dialogue also shows low affective content and high referential content because Nicole delivers information about a new hotel to Charlie and avoids expressing emotions.

Another example of referential function exhibits in the following dialog.

Jay : What's Exit Goat?

Charlie : **Exit Ghost. It's the name of my theatre company.**

Charlie produces a referential function since he uses language to convey new information about his theatre to his lawyer Jay (00:46:20 – 00:46:26). The topic and the function of the interaction relatively have a close connection with language function spoken by Charlie. Jay at the time is reading Charlie's document and then asking him for a confirmation about the meaning of Exit Ghost.

Thus, Charlie shares new information with Jay about his job and the theatre's name. Referring to Holmes's formality and social distance scale, the situation is quite formal and they have a high distant relationship and low

solidarity because this is their very first meeting and the conversation takes place in an office. Social scale does not have a quite important influence in this situation, because they share the same age. Moreover, this conversation is marked as high referential content and low affective content due to the presence of information exchange.

The next dialog containing the referential function of language emerges when an evaluator comes to Charlie's house to evaluate Charlie and Henry's relationship as father and son (01:48:01 – 01:48:09).

Charlie : Um, you know, work. I'm preparing a play I'm directing in a few months.

Evaluator : Oh, what is that?

Charlie : **Kasimir and Karoline by Odon von Horvath? We're doing it at the Barrow in New York.**

At this point, the evaluator asks many questions about Charlie's daily life and how his relationship with Henry is. The evaluator then raises a question about what prevents Charlie from taking and picking up Henry from school. Charlie then answers the evaluator's question and explains that he cannot pick Henry up from school because he is preparing a Kasimir and Karoline play by Odon von Horvath in New York. In terms of the participants' bond, the dialogue shows a high distant relationship since Charlie and the evaluator have never met before. They discuss a quite serious matter which makes them use semi-formal language. They also share the same age, so the status scale does not have a quite important influence in this situation. Moreover, the evaluator has important roles to collect as much data for the divorce proceedings later, so this conversation is marked as high referential content and low affective content because they require a lot of information. As a result, Charlie's utterance indicates referential because he describes information about the play to the evaluator.

3.2.3 Conative Function

This concerns the use of language to influence and manage the participant's behavior or attitudes ranging from a rather polite or request to a more forceful command or order. The words in bold are examples of conative function.

Henry : I don't want to—

Charlie : **Henry, get in the fucking car! I'm sorry, but Jesus, get in the fucking car.**

In this situation (00:55:36 – 00:55:44), Charlie wants to pick his son Henry up from Nicole's house to have some quality time. Arriving at Nicole's house, Henry is happily playing treasure hunt with Nicole. Consequently, Charlie shouts at Henry to get him ready to go quickly but Henry asks him whether he can stay with Nicole instead of going out with him. Charlie says no because he has set the plan but Henry still refuses. It makes Charlie mad and swear. It proves that the social factor and social dimension affects the use of the swear word. The close relationship between the participants is shown from the use of swear words when Charlie talks to his son. Charlie may not use swear words if he talks to a person that he does not know well. To emphasize his superiority, Charlie uses swear words to force Henry to get in the car.

The next dialog also carries the conative language function.

Henry : Dime, rime, lime, pime, sime—

Charlie : **Honey, stop guessing. You're so close, stay with it.**

Here, the participant and topic of the dialogue influence the language function that Charlie uses (01:52:29 – 01:52:43). He asks Henry to focus on the word in the book and stop guessing the answer. He gently asks Henry not to be lazy to read. Based on Holmes's social distance scale, the conversation shows that Charlie possesses a high intimacy with

Henry. Moreover, his role as a father makes Charlie know when he needs to be casual and assertive with Henry. The conversation gets more casual because it happens at home which leads the participants to use informal language. On the other hand, they do not show much feeling because they are in a learning activity. Thus, this conversation causes low affective and high information content. In conclusion, the analysis above shows that Charlie's utterance indicates a conative function because he asks Henry to follow his command.

The next example of a conative function appears in a conversation when Charlie immediately asks Henry to go to the bathroom (01:06:34 – 01:06:39).

Charlie : **Go pee and then we're going back out!**

Henry : I'm too tired!

Charlie : **Go pee and then we're going to go drive to Halloween!**

Charlie produces two utterances that contain conative function in an imperative command. In this scene, Charlie is going to take Henry to a Halloween party but they stop by the hotel first because Henry wants to pee. Arriving at the hotel, Henry does not go right away to the toilet. Instead, he lays down on the floor while sorting his candies. Looking at that, Charlie hurries his son to go pee, but Henry refuses because he feels too tired. Charlie then produces the second imperative sentence to get his son to go to the toilet right away so that they can immediately go to the party. In terms of the social scale, their relationship as father and son reflects an intimate relationship that makes them use informal language choice. Besides, to emphasize his superiority as a father, Charlie uses a direct and imperative command to force Henry to pee. This also shows an interconnectedness between language functions and the influence of participants as social factors. The dialogue shows a low affective scale since no emotion is involved. In conclusion, Charlie's utterance is conative as the utterance is used to get Henry to do an action.

3.2.4 Metalingual Function

This aims to check up codes of language or to convey information about the lexical code of languages, such as explaining an item with synonyms, definitions, paraphrases, or examples. The following utterances in bold are examples of the metalingual function.

Henry : Why aren't they paid?

Charlie : **They're young. They're learning. I don't know, maybe if they do a good job, they get paid later.**

In this situation (02:09:05 – 02:09:33), Charlie is about to help Henry to read a letter from Nicole. When Charlie mentions "intern", Henry looks confused about it and then Charlie explains what it means. By doing so, Charlie has used the metalingual function because he explains the meaning of "intern" to Henry. The participants and the topic of

the interaction become the factors that influence the language function used by Charlie. Their close relationship as father and son reflects high solidarity because they choose to use the regular interactions they have. In terms of the functional scale, they have high information content and low affective content because Charlie uses language to provide information to Henry.

The following is another example of the metalingual function.

Sandra : Can you un-serve?

Nicole : **What do you mean, like take it back?**

Nicole's sister Cassie, Sandra, and Nicole herself are waiting for Charlie to come (00:33:15 – 00:33:23). Nicole has prepared a scenario for handing over the divorce paper to Charlie in a natural way. However, Sandra is unsure about Nicole's plan and asks what if she un-serves the envelope to anticipate that Nicole could change her mind. As Nicole does not get Sandra's intention, she confirms whether she should cancel her plan. Her intonation also indicates a curiosity toward her

mother's utterance. Thus, the sentence in bold is regarded metalingual since Nicole rechecks Sandra's intention. Regarding the social factor (participant), they must have a close relationship with one another as a family. They also use informal language choice since the dialogue occurs at home. The dialogue reflects a low affective content because Nicole here intends to both ask and provide information.

3.2.5 Phatic Function

This is used when the speaker wants to achieve an optimal level of relevance because of the speaker's communicative intention, for instance, an intention to speak with the interlocutor, to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication or to expresses solidarity with others. The following utterance in bold is an example of a phatic function.

Nicole : **Are you ok?**

Charlie : Something's sharp.

In this situation (00:55:28 – 00:55:33), Charlie tries to connect the booster seat in the car but his finger hits something sharp. Nicole then checks if he is fine in response to Charlie's condition. By the explanation above, Nicole's utterance indicates phatic because she uses language to expresses her concern to Charlie. Regarding Holmes's social distance scale, Charlie and Nicole noticeably have a high intimacy because she instantly shows her worry to her husband whose finger is injured. This also shows the connection between language function and a social factor, namely the participant. They also use informal language because the conversation occurs in the house yard. Nicole and Charlie do not share much information; she expresses her attention to Charlie that indicates an affective content.

Another sample of the phatic function of language appears when Charlie drives Henry to Nicole's house (01:04:28 – 01:04:36).

Charlie : **Is everything ok?**

Nicole : Yeah, why?

Arriving there, Charlie is aware that Nicole's face looks pale and different. He tries to show his caring for Nicole by asking about her condition. In this conversation, the function of the interaction becomes an important factor because Charlie really worries about Nicole's condition. Regarding the social distance scale, Nicole and Charlie's relationship is not yet harmonious so they feel somewhat distant and estranged from one another. This is seen in Nicole's short and intrusive answer. The location of the conversation has shown that the conversation is low on the formality scale. Moreover, the dialogue is marked as low affective content due to the unhealthy relationship, Charlie can only ask Nicole's condition without showing too much emotion and feeling, so this conversation brings up referential content and affective content lower.

3.2.6 Poetic function

This is used when the speaker produces playful dictions to express their feeling, interest, or attitude and to draw the addressee's attention. This is an example of Charlie's utterance categorized in poetic function:

Sandra : Don't! I'm so heavy!

Charlie : **You're light as a feather.**

In this situation (00:35:55 – 00:37:04), Charlie finally meets her beloved mother-in-law Sandra after a long time. Expressing his excitement, Charlie directly lifts Sandra up with full of joy. Sandra shouts out to Charlie not to lift her up because she is so heavy, but he says the opposite that she is light as a feather with a playful intonation. Charlie's utterance indicates poetic because he uses an aesthetic feature. In relation to Holmes's social factor, the participant and function of the interaction play an important role in Charlie's utterance. Due to their intimate relationship, Charlie has no hesitation in expressing his feeling and complimenting Sandra using poetical language to make her happy. In terms of the formality scale, Charlie tends to use informal language because the conversation takes place at Nicole's house. Moreover, in this dialogue, Charlie shows highly affective content since he expresses both happiness and revelation to Sandra

4. Conclusion

After analyzing the language function (Jacobson, 1987) along with the social factor and social dimension in the *Marriage Story* movie, there are found 118 data that represent types of language function in the utterance employed by Nicole and Charlie. However, all data cannot be presented in this paper due to a page limitation. The main characters oftentimes convey their feelings, thoughts, and opinions resulting in emotional word choices, dynamic intonations, and interjections. Those aspects put the emotive function into the most dominant language function with thirty-five utterances (30%). Followed by

referential with thirty utterances (25%), the third is conative with twenty-six utterances (22%), the fourth is metalingual with eight utterances (7%), the fifth is phatic with eighteen utterances (15%) and the least frequent language function is poetic with only 1 utterance (1%).

Social factors and dimensions intertwine with the function of language. Concerning the social factors, participant interactions, such as an interaction among family members or social participants, perpetually occur in every movie. As regards setting or social context, the movie settings include public and private places. The *Marriage Story* movie, however, involves many different topics and diverse language functions in each conversation that rely on the places and occasions.

Solidarity, status, formality, and functional scales are identifiable social dimensions in Nicole and Charlie's utterances. Solidarity scale refers to the relative intimacy among participants. The *Marriage Story* portrays not only high solidarity through family dialogues including husband-wife, father-son, mother-son, mother-daughter, and sister-sister intercourses but also low solidarity through conversations between strange social participants, for example, the main character with a counselor or with an evaluator. Regarding the status or power scale, the high status appears in the father to son, mother to son, mother to daughter, and lawyer to participant conversations. Meanwhile, the most frequent low statuses are from husband to wife, relative to relative, and co-worker to co worker.

Furthermore, the formality scale indicates formality and informality in the speaking styles depending on the setting or social context. In this movie, high formality exhibited in the formal setting, such as an office, is less dominant than the low informal setting, such as a house, hotel room, and restaurant. It is because many conversations occur in informal situations and involve participants who have an intimate relationship. Lastly, the functional scale is comprised of referential and affective functions. In this movie, affective function appears slightly more frequent than referential function since the typical interaction topics are marriage and divorce making the participants tend to share their feelings. In conclusion, the relationship between language functions and social contexts has influenced the main characters' language choices, while social factors and social dimensions have modified their language production and language function.

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