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Sinclair and Coulthard's 'IRF' Model in a One-To-One Classroom: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the application of the Sinclair and Coulthard model of discourse analysis to a one-on-one classroom setting, specifically while teaching Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to advanced students. The study reviews the model's theoretical foundations, its hierarchical structure, and addresses criticisms regarding its limitations, such as the inability to account for para-linguistic features and the phenomenon of double labelling. Through detailed analysis of recorded classroom interactions, the paper demonstrates the model's adaptability despite its challenges, particularly in identifying and categorizing various acts and moves within the discourse. Despite the model's shortcomings, it provides valuable insights into classroom dynamics and the intricacies of teaching complex literature. The paper concludes by advocating for further research to enhance understanding of discourse patterns in unique educational settings.

KEYWORDS

Sinclair and Coulthard model; one-on-one learning; Shakespeare; classroom discourse analysis.

Introduction

The Sinclair and Coulthard system (1975, 1992) of discourse analysis was a seminal model developed to investigate classroom interaction, and over the years this model realized a range of research ideas that aided in the further development of pedagogic practices. *Macbeth*, written in 1606, is an immortal piece of literature written by Shakespeare, which for over five centuries has made significant contributions to the world of literature as well as linguistics. This paper will begin with a brief review of the Sinclair and Coulthard model, which will be followed by a description of the process of analysis of the recorded data, based on which an attempt will be made to make a conclusion about the compatibility or incompatibility of the model by trying to apply it to a one-on-one classroom with an advanced user while teaching Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Review of the Model

M.A.K Halliday's (1961) article, "Categories of the Theory of Grammar" conceptualized the Sinclair and Coulthard model's theoretical underpinnings. At the time, a linguistic description of interaction was non-existent, hence the formulation of a linguistic approach that would harmonize with the existing grammatical theory, needed to be postulated.

In the Sinclair and Coulthard model (also called the Birmingham Model), the

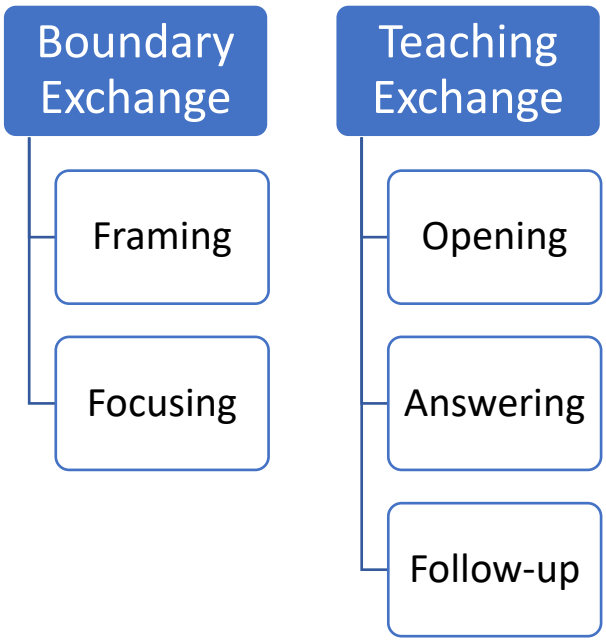
researchers used a *rank scale* for their descriptive model (developed in 1975 and slightly modified in 1992) because of its flexibility. "The major advantage of describing new data with a rank scale is that no rank has more importance than any other and thus if one discovers new patterning, it is a fairly simple process to create a new rank to handle it" (Sinclair and Coulthard 1992, 2*)*.

The *rank scale,* much like Halliday's model, also consists of five ranks, namely –

- *Lesson*
- *Transaction*
- *Exchange*
- *Move*
- *Act*

These units "are related in a consists-of relationship with smaller units combining with other units of the same size to form larger ones" (Coulthard 1985, 121). The units are related to each other in a hierarchical nature wherein '*lesson'* is the largest unit and '*act'* is the smallest. A total of twenty-one different classes of *act* was identified by Sinclair and Coulthard which combined to form different classes of '*move'-s.* A total of five *moves* were realized -*Framing, Focusing, Opening, Answering and Follow-up,* which formed two major classes of *exchange* – *Boundary and Teaching.*

Figure 1 – A diagrammatic representation of the relationship between the classes of *Moves* and *Exchanges.*



These exchanges combine to form *transactions,* which then combine into a *lesson.*

Figure 2 – A diagrammatic representation of the Sinclair and Coulthard model (Farooq 1999 31).

Just like any renowned research work, over the years, the Sinclair and Coulthard model too generated quite a few critiques, wherein the critics have highlighted a few significant concerns; some of which were encountered while applying the system to the data that was collected for this essay.

The first criticism is that of 'Double Labelling' – the critics asserted that in practice, a single act or move has the ability to perform two functions at once, which is in stark contrast to what the system originally assumes – "each utterance or part of an utterance has one and only one function" (Francis and Hunston 1987, 149). Although this criticism mostly considers everyday conversations, yet it seemed to be prevalent in classroom interactions as well, and in certain situations, there have been instances which have mirrored a double-labelling phenomenon in the collected data.

Another popular criticism of the Sinclair-Coulthard model is its failure to recognize the presence and importance of *para-linguistic features* in discourse, mainly hand gestures, facial expressions and eye contact (Francis and Hunston, 1992). Eye-contact wasn't a very big issue in the data primarily because it was an online class, recorded over a Skype call, and it is not possible for either the teacher or the student to frequently look at the camera, however, in an online lesson, other para-linguistic features play an extremely important role, since they

compensate for the lack of direct physical contact by affecting the nature of the utterances. Thereby, it could not be ignored in the analysis.

Method of Analysis

For this essay, I decided to record a hundred-minute online session over Skype with an eleventh-grade student (S), who has been studying with me since the last three years. The data collection and the transcription processes have been elaborated below.

Data Collection Process

The academy where I teach, primarily conducts one-to-one online classes for its students, so choosing a class on which the Sinclair-Coulthard model could be applied for my analysis wasn't that difficult. The mode of teaching is usually through online platforms (predominantly, Skype) and the duration usually ranges from fifty to hundred minutes. Most of my students' classes are fifty-minute sessions but the student (S) had missed one of her classes, and we were conducting a hundred-minute session to compensate for the missed lesson, hence recording such a session made sense, because it gave me enough data to analyze and transcribe.

Transcribing the data

I had taken a verbal permission from the head of my academy to record the entire session over Skype, and had also informed the student of the same beforehand, allowing her to be prepared mentally. The student was a little conscious during the first fifteen minutes of the class, and this phenomenon was echoed by Nunan (1992) – 'the presence of [the] machine [can be] off[-]putting' (1992, 153), although in my student's case, it wasn't the 'machine', but a perpetually blinking red button that flashed on the top-right corner of the screen. However, she gradually settled in. I managed to extract about 18 minutes and 59 seconds from the hundred-minute session, which was then transcribed. The audio quality of the extracted video was quite good; hence no technical hindrances occurred while transcribing.

Applying the Model

Applying the Sinclair-Coulthard model to the transcribed data became a challenging as well as enlightening experience since the literature taken for the analysis was a Shakespearean tragedy, highly acclaimed for its linguistic complexities. The approach was similar to Atkins' (2001) essay on a similar topic. Wherein he followed Brazil's (1995, 29-46) procedure, which was to first divide the collected data into *moves.* Which essentially involved the identification of *framing and focusing* moves and *opening, answering and follow-up* moves. My analysis wasn't so straightforward, and I struggled to classify and categorize the data into *moves.* However, as I got used to the design of the model, it gradually became simpler.

The next part of my struggle began while assigning *act* labels to the individual utterances. This was even more challenging than the *move*-allocation step, and it took a great of deal of time and research to understand the sheer complexity of the Sinclair-Coulthard model. The process, though tedious was extremely liberating. In the following sections of this essay, an attempt will be made to explain the difficulties encountered while trying to apply this model to the collected data. The finished analysis has been attached to Appendix 3 for reference.

Examples of the Problems Encountered While Applying

Example 1

Throughout the transcript, it was observed that there were multiple instances where the student answered a

question with a question of her own. The utterances have been extracted below –

a. Here she is responding to – 1. *From the previous scenes, do you have any questions?* –

4. S – Uh, I remember – I wanna just make sure that what I understood is correct.
5. T – Hmm
6. S – So… There was doctor, gentlewoman and Lady Macbeth. And Doctor and gentlewoman were – like – saying that lady-woman (laughs) sorry, **Lady Macbeth was sleepwalking?**
7. T – Yes, Lady Macbeth was sleepwalking – yes, mmhmm.
8. S – And then, what gentlewoman saw before – uhm – before the scene, like – when doctor – I mean before the scene where… She and the doctor… uhm… **Doctor and she?**

   T – The doctor and herself. …

b. Next, are similar set of responses where she is trying to figure out a particular word, that the teacher is trying to elicit – 'rub' in this case.

T – Ok, suppose you're writing with a pencil –

S – Hmm.

T – And you make a mistake, and you have an eraser, what do you do with that eraser?

S – **Remove?**

71. S – (smiles back**) it's not praying (falling intonation) right?** –
72. T – Its not?
73. S – **Praying? ...**

c. Finally, the last instance where, in the middle of her response she suddenly includes an overt interrogative to understand if her usage of the word 'baffled' was correct.

95. S – Then the doctor and the lady heard it, and then… well…
96. S – (pause) and then… they were… **Baffled? Is that… ?**
97. T – Yes!
98. S – **Is that the correct word?**
99. T – Yes, yes, that's a good word! …

In the above scenarios, it became a struggle to assign proper moves to the utterances, since I was divided in my understanding of categorizing the above (emboldened) responses either as an 'initiating move' by the student with 'elicit' as an act or as a 'reply' act in the 'answering move', to the original teacher elicit at the level of initiation. However, Berry's (1981) analysis shed some light on this. Berry (1981) 'argues that the acceptability, and indeed prevalence, of evaluative follow-up in the classroom is a feature of the teacher's role, which she/he describes as that of the *primary knower* or K1.' (Willis, 1992 113-114).

Here if we take the first utterance mentioned above in utterance 6 – *S – So… There was doctor, gentlewoman and Lady Macbeth… Lady Macbeth was sleepwalking?* We can safely assume that the teacher plays the part of the K1, since, as per Berry, the initial question is not a 'real' question, but essentially a request for information on the part of the speaker (teacher in this case) – a 'pseudo-question'. Here, the pseudo-question is utterance 1 **–** *'From the previous scenes, do you have any questions?'* This question behaves both like a check and an elicitation. (The dual nature of utterance 1 will be explained in example 2)**.**

Coming back to Berry's description, someone who seeks to elicit information will not be a *primary knower* K1, but a *secondary knower,* K2. (ibid.) So, as per this, it is safe to hypothesize that the student here is the K2 and the teacher the K1. However, there is a point that Willis (1992, 118) makes – 'often, in the

classroom students may regard themselves as K1 without challenging the status of the teacher. There can be a student who, might want to provide the information requested but doesn't have enough confidence. During such situations, they might answer a question with a question with a rising intonation, in this case' – "… *Lady Macbeth was sleepwalking*?"

Willis (1992) suggests taking the analysis a stage further and introduces a new act – *offer.* I found the introduction of this new act (*offer*) extremely useful, since there are many instances of similar nature that occur in my classrooms, wherein the student answers a question with an *offer.* Utterances 57, 71 and 73 all share the behavioral characteristics of an *offer.* However, the utterances in 8, 96 and 98 above is of a slightly different nature. –

8.S – And then, what gentlewoman saw before – uhm – before the scene, like – when doctor – I mean before the scene where… She and the doctor… uhm…
Doctor and she?
96. S – (pause) and then… they were…
Baffled? Is that…?
98.S – **Is that the correct word?**

The student is not *offering* in these scenarios, but is trying to ask a question about the grammatical construction of the particular statement she makes in utterance 8. In 96 and 98, she inquires about the compatibility of the word 'baffled' in her description of Lady Macbeth's murder confession while sleepwalking. In both the above cases, these appear to be *pupil elicits* rather than *offers.* Hence, they have been categorized likewise in my analysis.

Example 2:
The next utterances which caused difficulty for the application of the model are utterances 1 and 3 –

1. **T – From the previous scenes, do you have any questions?**
2. S – Umm, from the previous scenes…
3. **T – Of course not! (Both laugh)…**

Francis and Hunston's work (1992, 149) *assume that 'each utterance or part of an utterance has one and only one function (e.g. Open University 1981:23). So, each act must be either, say, a qualify or an informative, a move must be either eliciting or acknowledging, and so on. Yet, the critics claim, in practice a single act or move can perform two functions at once.'* For example, at first glance, the utterance 1 question might appear like a 'check', however, the student has been studying with me for over three years, hence she's very comfortable because of which she isn't shy to express her views, ask questions, or pro-actively recap lessons. In most of our classes the exchange structure isn't a stringently teacher-controlled phenomenon as it otherwise is with other newer students**.** Hence, questions like *utterance 1* actually functions like a teacher elicit, which automatically results in a recap of the previous class. Thereby, I labelled the question both as a teacher *elicit* and as a *check* in my analysis.

According to Francis and Hunston's article (1992)*,* utterance 3 fits the 'double-labelling' feature. Wells *et al.* (1981) suggest that such exchanges can be seen as overlapping, with the linking utterances realizing simultaneously the second element of one exchange and the first element of the next. Utterance 3 (emboldened above), appears to have a dual function, one of *acknowledging* the unsaid fact, that the student might not have any questions and the other of *informing* her of the fact that she doesn't have any questions because she wasn't paying enough attention*.* I decided to keep it as an 'initiating move' with an *inform* act label.

Example 3

The next analysis is on the dual nature of utterance 22 –

21. S – Yea…. a lady of the nobility, companion to the queen (not a servant).
22. T **– Not a servant so, Nady of lobili – (laughter), Nady of lobility, look at that! (laughter)**
23. S – (laughing)…

I have categorized utterance 22 as an *aside* because the conversation essentially involves the teacher saying something that is not a part of the discourse. However, in this situation, there is something different. Utterance 22 is not a usual *aside*.

Usually, *asides* are 'muttered under one breath' (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992, 18). However, here the utterance (22) serves a dual purpose – first, to initiate a para-linguistic response (laughter) from the pupil; second, to repair the spoonerism – 'nady of lobility'. Paralinguistic responses, as mentioned before by *Francis and Hunston*, are overlooked by the Sinclair-Coulthard model, hence, there is no way to 'code' the response this *act* generates, however self-correcting the spoonerism by the teacher can be coded as an *aside.* Hence, it has been coded likewise in the analysis. Utterances 170 and 177, are more archetypal examples of *aside* acts –

168. S – Uhm, then Dunsinane is also on their side, right?
169. T – Dunsinane… Dunsinane is a…
170. T – 'Dunsinane he strongly fortifies'.
171. T – ok.
172. T – Dunsinane is a… uh… is a place.
173. S – Yes. It's a place…
174. S – So…
175. T – It is the name of a place and… uh...
176. T – this is from where…
177. **T – just a minute let me share my screen with you…**

Utterance 170 is a self-read initiated by the teacher that he does to remind himself of the importance of 'Dunsinane' in *Macbeth*, and is not a direct response to the student elicit utterance 168 – 'Uhm, then Dunsinane is also on their side, right?'; which is followed by a screen-share over Skype, to show the student the pictures of Dunsinane and a piece of reading material. While sharing the screen, the teacher mutters utterance 177, which is again 'a remark unrelated to the discourse' (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992).

Example 4

Utterances 60 and 70 is what we'll be looking at next –

54. T – Ok, suppose you're writing with a pencil –
55. S – Hmm.
56. T – And you make a mistake, and you have an eraser, what do you do with that eraser?
57. S – Remove?
58. T – Yes, what is another word for it?
59. S – (pause) uhmm…
60. **T – C'mon, you can do it!**
61. S – (loud laughter) Remove?

…

68. T – Wash, yes, but if there's no water, then what does that action become?
69. S – mmm…
70. T – (smiling) **I am not giving you the word; you're going to find it out!**
71. S – (smiles back**)** it's not praying (falling intonation) right? – …

During the course of the above conversation, it was the teacher's (my) intention to elicit the verb 'rub' from the student in order to help her remember Lady Macbeth's mental state in Act 5, scene 1 of the tragedy.

According to Sinclair-Coulthard (1992, 17), 'a prompt suggests that the

teacher is not requesting but expecting or even demanding. They are always realized by commands, and a closed set at that.' The above example is a perfect one wherein my student, who happens to be quite well-versed with mature texts, fails to produce a simple response as – 'rub'. Here, utterance 60 is produced as a *prompt* to 'force' the student into a response, which redirects her response to her previous answer – 'remove', hence in this situation the outcome was a failure. Regardless of the result, this label was marked as a *prompt*, on account of its demanding nature.

Utterance 70 however, was a more confusing phenomenon to address – '*I am not going to give you the word; you're going to find it out!*' At first glance, this appears as a directive, as its purpose seems to produce a linguistic reaction, however, its work is also to reinforce the elicitation in utterance 58 – 'what is another word for remove?'. Also, if analyzed textually, it has an anaphoric reference to the initial elicitation produced in utterance 43 – 'T – So, if someone is washing his/her hands, then what is the action that they do?'

However, if the utterance was split into two parts –

1. '*I am not going to give you the word;*
2. *you're going to find it out!*'

The first part looks like an *evaluate* act, since it is evaluating the student's repeated unsuccessful attempts at guessing the word and also her unwillingness to apply herself, which is then followed by a 'demanding' *prompt* to force the student into a response. Hence, the first part of *utterance 70* has been coded as an '*evaluate'* and the second part as a *'prompt'* respectively in my analysis.

Discussion

The IRF model was primarily 'derived from data recorded in 'traditional' primary school classrooms during the 1960s that demonstrated clear status and power relations between teachers and learners.' (Walsh 2006, 47). A majority of the challenges that manifested while applying the model was due to the fact that the model was not designed to be applied to a one-to-one advanced learner classroom. However, since its inception, a significant number of modifications and expansions have been performed on the model which aided in answering a majority of the problems encountered during the analysis.

Dave Willis (1992, 118) pointed out how a student, who wasn't confident enough might answer an elicitation by the teacher with a question and in the process took the analysis a stage further by introducing a new act – *offer.* This successfully answered the problems encountered in example 1.

Francis and Hunston's *Double Labelling* (1992, 149), addressed the issue faced while analyzing example 2, and while going through the article it was found that the IRF model was further amended by Coulthard and Montgomery (1981) from IRF to I (R/I) R (F^n) (ibid P 124).

Example 3 was an utterance where the outcome presented a dichotomy. According to Francis and Hunston's article (ibid.), the IRF model fails to address paralinguistic features in classroom and everyday conversations, hence the paralinguistic features of this utterance could not be coded, however, the self-repair of the uttered spoonerism by the teacher, could be coded as an *aside.*

In example 4, it was possible to analyze both the utterances with the data provided by the IRF model, although the analysis of utterance 70 was a little off-track because of the structural duality of the utterance, but the analysis made sense once the sentence was split into two parts.

Conclusion

Tackling *Macbeth* in a typical one-to-one classroom is quite a challenge on its own owing to the linguistic richness of Shakespeare's text, yet a linguistic analysis can provide valuable insights for teaching. It can help students understand the power of language, the importance of context, and the impact of literary elements on the overall narrative, which throughout the class, my student discovered at different times.

Many of the act labels like *bid, cue* and *nomination* remain unused in this one-to-one classroom, yet the level of communicativeness remained unaffected. The communication in a one-to-one classroom also depends on the level of acclimatization of both the teacher and student, and in this case, the student was extremely comfortable, hence there were a lot paralinguistic responses (especially laughter) in the class, which could not be coded.

The data analyzed for this essay involved the analysis of a small sample, 18 minutes and 59 seconds and further research is suggested on a larger chunk of data to fully understand the peculiarities and deviations in a one-to-one classroom setup. The identification of any kind of uniqueness in the discourse while teaching a Shakespearean tragedy could not be pinpointed here, but further research could uncover something of significance.

Although the assignment of act labels to individual utterances in the Sinclair and Coulthard model (1975, 1992) is quite a time taking and tedious process, yet the model could successfully fit a majority of the collected data. Regardless of its many criticisms, the model is still a seminal piece of work in the world of discourse analysis, and the theories of many of the critics haven't evolved enough to significantly challenge its viability, as is echoed by Francis and Hunston (1992, 156) in their article – '… many of the concepts we have discussed remain sadly underdeveloped…'.

The activity of analyzing classroom data with the help of this model could open a window into the deeper understanding of classroom discourse, which could be invaluable for language teachers.

> If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching.
>
> - *The Merchant of Venice 1.2.12-17* (Shakespeare 21)

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