

## **Time and the Text of *Sex and the City*: The Last Conversation among the Four Female Characters in the American TV Series**

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### **Abstract**

In HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), such topics as sex, love and friendship are discussed by four Manhattan-based white middle-class women in their late thirties who typify varied and contrasting role models. In this paper, I examine the text of the final conversation among the four characters, which occurs in the penultimate episode of the last season (2004). My objective is to identify the linguistic features through which the four protagonists' different personalities and ideologies are delineated, to study whether their identities and worldviews on sex, love and life have changed since the 1997 pilot show, and to reveal how and why their distinct value systems have altered over time. Linguistic scrutiny, validated by a more extensive consideration of the text of the entire TV series, uncovers that Carrie, throughout the six seasons, evolves from a value-neutral inquisitive nature to a value-laden traditionally female *dramatis persona*. What is more, the fact that even the ideologically groundbreaking figures of Samantha and Miranda, along with Charlotte and Carrie, are finally provided with a regular partner and family and with a standard white middle-class lifestyle clearly conveys that, over time, the text of *Sex and the City* has gradually incarnated a mainstream value system and has represented more and more stereotypically female characters.

**Keywords:** *conversation analysis; female characters; feminist media studies; feminist television studies; language and gender; pragmatics; Sex and the City; stylistic analysis*

### **1 Introduction**

Among American TV series, HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) is noteworthy for its audience of 11 million viewers in the US and for having been sold extensively across the world, not to mention the numerous awards it has won. It is also widely regarded as innovative and groundbreaking for its subject matter, perspective and characters. In fact, such topics as sex, love and friendship are discussed earnestly and thoroughly from a female viewpoint by the protagonists, four Manhattan-based white middle-class women in their late thirties who typify varied and contrasting role models (Akass-McCabe, 2003).

In a recent paper (Virdis, in preparation), I analysed the text of the conversation among the four characters in the 1997 pilot show, and tried to offer an objective

description of these female role models: Carrie, the author of a sex column for a New York paper, questions various ideas and considerations on sex, love and gender; Samantha, the owner of a public relations firm, is sexually assertive and forward-looking in gender roles, in behaviour and in relations; Miranda, a successful Harvard-educated attorney, is cynical and pragmatic; Charlotte, an art dealer, is a romantic traditionalist.

In this paper, through the linguistic tools provided by conversation analysis (Culpeper et al., 1998; Kitzinger, 2000; Harrington et al., 2008; Kitzinger, 2008), pragmatics (Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996; Christie, 2000; Grundy, 2000) and stylistics (Simpson, 1993; Mills, 1995; Short, 1996; Douthwaite, 2000; Leech-Short, 2007; cf. also Lazar, 2005), and through feminist television and media studies (Brunsdon et al., 1997; Gill, 2007; Johnson, 2007) and television and media studies (Jancovich-Lyons, 2003; Creeber, 2004; Hammond-Mazdon, 2005; Bignell, 2007; Machin-Van Leeuwen, 2007), I will examine the text of the final dialogue among the four characters, which occurs in the penultimate episode of the last season (2004). My investigation will be conducted on the text which I transcribed from the video recording (cf. Appendix), but the interpretations offered of each utterance will also be based on and confirmed by the paralinguistic and non-linguistic signals discernible in the video. My objective will be to identify the linguistic features through which the four protagonists' different personalities and ideologies are delineated, and to study whether their identities and worldviews on sex, love and life have changed since the 1997 pilot show and, if they have, to reveal how and why their distinct value systems have altered over time.

The last conversation among Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte in *Sex and the City* (cf. Appendix) is set in a fashionable restaurant, like their first dialogue and the vast majority of their discussions in the TV series. It is composed of 26 turns, of which Carrie utters 9 (34.61%), Samantha 6 (23.08%), Miranda 5 (19.23%), Charlotte 5 (19.23%), Samantha and Charlotte together 1 (3.85%). Out of a total word count of 271 tokens, Carrie says 166 (61.25%), Samantha 50 (18.45%), Miranda 30 (11.07%), Charlotte 24 (8.86%), Samantha and Charlotte together 1 (0.37%).

In accordance with its topics, the dialogue can be divided into three sequences, the first from Carrie's opening turn 1 to her turn 9a, the second from her turn 9b to her turn 17, the third from Samantha's turn 18 to Miranda's closing turn 26. In the first sequence Carrie and her friends discuss her intricate relationship with her former partner, whom they familiarly call 'Mr Big'; in the second the writer, who is moving to Paris with her new partner, thanks her friends for their support; in the third they deal with Samantha's chemotherapy and early menopause. The three subjects they consider — love, friendship, difficulties in a woman's life — are typical, if not stereotypical, of a conversation among women, or of any communication among females. Nevertheless, they are introduced and developed in a groundbreaking, ironic and self-mocking way, contrary to what is expected from the textual genre of female conversation, while disclosing the four *dramatis personae*'s different worldviews and perspectives on life. Let us analyse these characters and the reasons why their behaviour, conversational and non-conversational, is so advanced and foregrounded.

## 2 Samantha

Linguistic scrutiny of the dialogue among the four female protagonists in the pilot show of the TV series has demonstrated that, ideologically, Samantha is the most

personally and sexually self-aware and innovative figure, given that she states and proves that, if a woman has power and money, she can choose not only to have sex without any emotional feelings, but also to act of her own free will in any sphere of activity. Furthermore, from a conversational standpoint, contrary to the stereotypes about women participants in a dialogue (cf. Lakoff, 2003 and 2004), the PR executive's conversational behaviour characterises her as a self-assured and authoritative speaker, for she controls the dialogue both quantitatively (she contributes more utterances and more words than the others) and qualitatively (she selects the topic).

In the last discussion, Samantha's overall function is not as quantitatively and qualitatively prominent as in the first, since the last deals mainly with Carrie's former partner and with her moving to Paris, therefore it is the writer, not the PR executive, who has the most power over the conversation turns and topics. In more detail, in the first sequence Samantha has two turns, one together with Charlotte (2), one alone (8). At a conversational level, turn 2 ('Who?'), which is realised by an elliptical interrogative sentence, has the communicative function of giving Carrie the go-ahead to describe Mr Big, and consequently depicts the PR executive as a supportive participant and listener, namely as an encouraging and good friend. In addition, although their worldviews and the role models they embody have remained irreconcilable, her uttering turn 2 with Charlotte finally alludes to her intimacy with the art dealer after six seasons of conversational and ideological contrast.

With turn 8 ('Would you like another cocktail?'), Samantha is the last speaker to address Carrie on her own in the whole conversation and in the first sequence, which creates expectations and foregrounds her character. In the passage about the writer's relationship with her former partner, each of the three other participants utters a turn, which embodies their dissimilar ways of taking care of someone and, accordingly, their dissimilar standpoints on affections and, by extension, on life: whereas Charlotte performs the speech act of asking for clarification (turn 4) and Miranda of giving practical advice (turn 6), Samantha offers a drink.

When the text is merely read, through turn 8 Samantha may seem to undertake a speech act whose illocutionary force is not only to offer Carrie another cocktail, but also to attempt to choose a new topic, since any different subject would be less painful than Mr Big is for the writer. The intended perlocutionary effect of changing the subject of the sequence becomes actual at turn 9a, where Carrie does not discuss her former partner anymore, but her own physical appearance. Nevertheless, the paralinguistic and non-linguistic signals (the PR executive's confidential, almost mellow, tone of voice and her bending towards her friend) not comprised in the text of the transcription indicate that another interpretation is also possible.

Because the turn is an indirect speech act, where an interrogative sentence is used to communicate an offer, it is more polite than required by the speech event of a conversation among friends; what is more, given that it includes the modal auxiliary 'Would', it is negatively polite (Yule, 1996: 64), i.e. it tends to show deference and respect. This employment of negative politeness, which is markedly inappropriate to the context and to the addressee, seems to express the PR executive's surprise at Carrie's unexpected swearing and her worry over the writer's state of mind. Nevertheless, what is perhaps even more pragmatically inappropriate, and therefore nearly comical, is the offer itself: whilst Charlotte and Miranda's ultimate intended perlocutionary effect is Carrie's mental relief from pain, Samantha's is the writer's *physical* relief and

forgetfulness which, in accordance with her hedonistic value system, should be pleasantly sought in a cocktail.

In the second sequence too, the one about Carrie's moving to Paris, Samantha utters one turn (16). The utterance ('Easy there, waterworks. '), which is realised by an elliptical imperative sentence, has the illocutionary force of backing Charlotte's request (turn 15) that Carrie and Miranda stop their emotional interaction (turns 13b-14). Instead, the PR executive's main intended perlocutionary effect appears to be showing solidarity and closeness towards the art dealer, easing her sorrow and cheering her up with the colloquial expression 'waterworks', which refers to Charlotte's shedding of tears in Samantha's usual informal and bright way. This perlocution is striking, for the two protagonists have incarnated opposing ideologies and role models for the whole TV series — the former a mainstream viewpoint on gender roles and behaviour, the latter a forward-looking perspective. However, since, throughout the six seasons, the *dramatis persona* of the art dealer has discovered the relevance of satisfying sex to a love relationship and, on the contrary, the character of the PR executive the relevance of a love relationship to satisfying sex, the text of the TV series can finally highlight their intimacy through such conversational and pragmatic means.

Once Carrie has thanked her friends in turns 13 and 17, and once they have responded to these thanks through the non-linguistic signals of smiles and tears after turn 17, Samantha realises that they have concluded the adjacency sequence of thanking-acknowledging of thanking, and opens the third sequence with turn 18. The first half of the utterance ('Let's pull it up, shall we?') is virtually a direct speech act, for an order is emitted through an imperative syntactic structure ('Let's pull it up'), evoking the PR executive's conversational and behavioural assertiveness. However, mitigation indicating concern and informality conveying intimacy are achieved through three linguistic mechanisms: i) the inclusive and informal verb form 'Let's'; ii) the informal lexical choice 'pull it up'; iii) the tag-question 'shall we'. Furthermore, the utterance also offers the interactants the opportunity to change the topic of conversation onto something less emotional and painful through uttering a speech act which conveys a suggestion.

On the one hand, the second half of the utterance ('I'd like to show my face here again. '), being a justification of that order, is another polite mitigating device, which indicates Samantha's concern for the other speakers' positive and negative faces. On the other hand, it provides information on the PR executive and her friends' worldview and sociocultural code, one of whose rules is to conduct oneself properly in one of the places where fashionable nightlife in Manhattan takes place, viz. the restaurant. Consequently, the utterance suggests that, contrary to the stereotypes about women as emotional beings who cannot prevent themselves from showing their feelings, the four figures in the TV series (or at least three of them) are capable of controlling the manifestations of their states of mind, if not even those states of mind themselves, and to make them appropriate to the context.

Not only is the third sequence initiated by Samantha with turn 18, but also its topic is chosen by her in turn 20 ('Chemo might have kicked me into early menopause. '). As mentioned above, although it concerns difficult situations in a woman's life, although it may accordingly be considered a conventionally female subject, and although indirectly elicited by Carrie's turn 19, the PR executive introduces it unexpectedly: in fact, she presents her chemotherapy and, in particular, her menopause not during a conversation

about (female) physical and mental difficulties, but after the moving adjacency sequence of thanking-acknowledging of thanking.

The incongruity to the context and, especially, to the cotext is further reinforced by turn 22 ('You cannot believe the hot flashes. I can barely keep my clothes on.'), which flouts the Gricean maxim of Quantity and makes Samantha's contribution more informative than is required by hinting at the physical symptoms of menopause. The portrayal of the acuteness of these symptoms as her wish to undress unconventionally diverges from more common and clichéd portrayals: in fact, the utterance represents a middle-aged woman who is aware of her body and not ashamed to show it and, as conveyed by Carrie's turn 23 ('Really? What was your excuse before the chemo?'), also alludes to that woman's pleasure-seeking social behaviour and uninhibited sexual habits.

One of the actual perlocutionary effects of Carrie's turn, 23, is to elicit Samantha's turn, 24 ('Oh, I'm gonna miss you, you cunt.'). Because the writer's utterance is a cleverly amusing mention of the PR executive's sexual conduct, the latter participant's utterance is specularly witty. In the first part ('Oh, I'm gonna miss you'), she seemingly ignores the Gricean maxim of Relevance by referring back to the topic of the second sequence, namely Carrie's moving to Paris, and by finally talking about her own emotions. Yet, in the second half of the utterance ('you cunt. '), she uncovers that her flouting was apparent and that she was complying with the Cooperative principle: the swearword vocative is a delayed reaction to the writer's turn 23, which is foregrounded through its contrast with the caring feelings expressed in the first half and through end focus.

Although Samantha's conversational and ideological function in the last discussion is more restricted than in the first, she is the speaker who utters the second most turns (23.08%) and the second highest number of words (18.45%), who interrupts the second sequence and its topic and initiates the third through her self-confident direct speech act in turn 18 ('Let's pull it up, shall we?'), who decides the unconventional subject of the third sequence in turn 20 ('Chemo might have kicked me into early menopause.'). Moreover, the PR executive's role, although limited, is remarkable also in the first and second sequences, which consist of and are dominated by the turns uttered by the other participants; as a result, her assured and innovative female *dramatis persona* and her hedonistic and non-stereotypical value system are presented as noteworthy by the text of the TV series.

### 3 Miranda

In the conversation in the pilot show of the TV series, Miranda's character is sketched as a cynical, and therefore extreme, version of Samantha's with regard to sex, love and gender: a successful attorney, she uses logic and reason to try to demonstrate that fulfilling sexual and mental relations between women and men are difficult, if not impossible, to establish. Furthermore, at variance with the conventions about gender identity and personality traits, her female figure is attributed some features which are generally ascribed to male protagonists and speakers, i.e. that consistent use of logic and reason and a self-confident conversational behaviour (cf. Lakoff, 2003 and 2004).

In the last conversation, most of these linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics are confirmed. Of the 5 turns (19.23% of the total turn count) and 30 words (11.07% of the total word count) uttered by Miranda, one turn composed of 7 words is comprised in the first sequence. After Carrie has considered her relationship with her former partner in

three long turns (1, 3, 5) and in 58 words (viz. in more words than those uttered by the three other participants in the whole discussion), the attorney takes the floor at turn 6 to give her advice. Her utterance ('Then just put it all behind you.') opposes the writer's not only in length and pithiness, but also pragmatically and ideologically.

In fact, while Carrie's three utterances are mostly realised by positive declarative sentences which describe her relationship in an emotional way, Miranda's utterance is realised by an imperative sentence which, significantly, offers an opinion through the same grammatical structure as prototypically employed to give an order, and which, as a result, depicts its speaker as assertive and even domineering. The portrait constructed by the grammatical structure is reinforced by the propositional content of the utterance. Although the writer represents her former association as complicated and exasperating, and although the only obvious answer to her problems is forgetting about Mr Big, she is annoyed and confused, and lacks the sturdiness and the will to do so. By contrast, not only does the attorney give her the practical counsel to ignore him, but she also conveys this illocutionary force in an outspoken and matter-of-fact way, namely, as mentioned above, in a few words and through a direct speech act. However, her assertive manner is offset by three linguistic devices acting as mitigators and thus indicating intimacy: i) the informal logical discourse marker 'Then', which is, strictly speaking, semantically redundant; ii) the downtoner 'just'; iii) the informal lexical choice 'put it all behind you'.

In the second sequence, Miranda utters two turns, 11 and 14. The former ('She didn't even say anything yet.') is one of the actual perlocutionary effects of Charlotte's turn 10, whose illocutionary force is requesting Carrie not to thank her friends with emotional words before moving to Paris. In turn, the attorney's utterance has clearly identifiable illocutionary and perlocutionary forces: through an indirect speech act, consequently through a polite and face-saving strategy, she requests the art dealer not to take the floor so that it can be turned over to the writer. Illocutionary and perlocutionary levels and politeness strategies apart, the turn reveals Miranda's concrete value system at the locutionary level. Given that Carrie has not thanked them yet, they cannot feel certain that she is going to do so and, in that case, about what she is going to say, accordingly it is premature to weep: in accordance with the attorney's pragmatic standpoint on emotions and, by extension, on life, difficulties must be fought effectively, but only if they arise in order to save time and energy.

With turn 14 ('Me? I've never had an opinion in my life.'), Miranda disregards the Gricean maxim of Quality by not trying to make her contribution one that is true, and by saying what she knows to be false. In fact, the attorney usually has considered and decided views which she does not hesitate to communicate to her friends; in particular, in previous sequences and episodes, the three other characters have been told in no uncertain terms that she disapproves of Carrie moving to Paris. Therefore, the implicature triggered by flouting the Quality maxim seems to be that of silently reiterating her disapproval, and at the same time of preferring not to explicitly phrase it out of her affection for the writer and out of encouragement to her.

Two turns, 21 and 26, are uttered by Miranda also in the third sequence. The former ('Task accomplished.') has the illocutionary force of acknowledging that Samantha's turn 20 has accommodated Carrie's request in turn 19 that some other participant select an unemotional subject for the third sequence; the attorney's utterance also embodies the communicative function of praising the PR executive's utterance which, although inappropriate to the context, is appropriate to the cotext and to the request. Both

illocutionary forces indirectly emphasise some essential aspects of Miranda's practical nature, i.e. her liking for setting herself a goal and for reaching it properly.

Similarly to turn 11 in the second sequence, turn 26 taken by Miranda ('Wow. Even 'cunt' didn't stop her.') is the actual perlocutionary effect of turn 25 taken by Charlotte, where the art dealer starts weeping again. Like turn 11, in turn 26 the attorney utilises an indirect speech act and a polite and face-saving strategy to command her friend to do something, here to stop crying. Again, the utterance picks out not only Miranda's and Charlotte's contrasting viewpoints on the demonstration of their feelings and on their public behaviour, but also on their distinct gender roles and ideologies.

On the one hand, the attorney personifies a groundbreaking female role model who does not commonly parade her states of mind either to her friends or at the restaurant, Manhattan's ultimate meeting place. On the other hand, the role model embodied by the art dealer is the most stereotypically female among the four represented by the TV series, for she is romantic and easily affected by her physical and mental sensations. Moreover, as conventionally implicated by Miranda's turn 26 through the adverb 'even', it is contrary to expectations that the swearword 'cunt' uttered by Samantha did not prevent Charlotte from weeping again, since the art dealer, in accordance with female clichés, does not usually tolerate swear language so that she can conform to respectable and even prudish social standards.

As a result, in the final dialogue in the TV series, Miranda reinforces some of the linguistic and non-linguistic traits disclosed in the pilot show. Concerning her conversational behaviour, she is a self-aware speaker who, although indirectly and politely, often gives orders and indications to the other participants and signals her perspective on their actions and lives. Regarding her temperament, she is logical and critical, with a remarkable talent for problem-solving and a matter-of-fact worldview. Despite these qualities, the main difference between her description in the first discussion and that in the last is her final lack of cynicism and of distrust of men. This may be due to her having had a child and having got married during the last two seasons of the TV series, viz. to her having in small part embraced conservative female principles, which are sketched by the text as incompatible with scepticism and wariness of males.

#### 4 Charlotte

The examination of the pilot show of the TV series and of the conversation among its four female figures has proven that Charlotte incarnates the most traditional role model. In fact, her tenets and behaviour aim to preserve the *status quo* with regard to sex, love and gender roles and relations, and her utterances indirectly maintain the stereotype of a passive and weak woman interacting with a practical and powerful man, namely a woman who does not act from free will and who does not self-determine her life and activities.

Charlotte's mainstream value system is confirmed by the text of the last conversation and, in part, by Samantha's and Miranda's utterances studied above. Although she utters 5 turns (19.23% of the total turn count), i.e. as many as the attorney, the art dealer is the participant who produces the smallest number of words (24, viz. 8.86% of the total word count): these figures may reinforce her depiction as a quiet and docile speaker or, indeed, as a speaker with the objective of offering such a public image of herself. In this connection, the distribution of her 5 turns in the three sequences of the discussion is significant. Aside from the turn with Samantha (2), which has already been analysed,

she utters one turn in the first sequence (4) and one turn or, rather, one word in the third (25), whereas she utters her three other turns (10, 12, 15) in the second. Since the second sequence, in which Carrie thanks her friends, contains the discussion of a topic which is more moving compared to the topics of the other two sequences, Charlotte's decision to take the floor there suggests her sentimental and idealistic worldview.

This is reinforced by turn 4 ('Love? He said he loved you?'), one of the actual perlocutionary effects of turn 3, where Carrie appears to hint at her former partner's supposed affection for her. The art dealer carries out the communicative function of asking her friend to confirm this hint through an interrogative sentence where the keyword 'love' is repeated twice, once as a noun and once as a lexical verb. This indicates that this feeling holds a prominent position in Charlotte's value system, and that, should the man's affection be confirmed, she would willingly reappraise him in the light of this new fact, and would invite Carrie to do the same.

Of Charlotte's three turns in the second sequence, two, 10 ('Stop. Really, you gonna make me cry.') and 15 ('You guys, stop. Please.'), have a similar linguistic and pragmatic structure. Both are direct speech acts where an imperative sentence, realised by the main clause/finite clause 'S/stop', is used to give an order to the other participants, namely to request Carrie not to thank them and to ask Carrie and Miranda to cease their interaction at turns 13b-14. These potentially impolite and face-threatening denials of the floor are mitigated by such linguistic devices as the hedges 'Really' and 'Please', the explanation 'you gonna make me cry', the revelatory solidarity vocative 'You guys'. Consequently, one of the ultimate communicative functions of both of the art dealer's utterances is to convey her emotions and to portray her as a sensitive, accordingly conventional, female role model.

This communicative function is performed and elaborated in Charlotte's other utterance in the second sequence, i.e. turn 12, and in her only utterance in the third, i.e. turn 25. The former ('But I know it's coming.'), an actual perlocutionary effect of Miranda's turn 11, is uttered by the art dealer to express that, although Carrie has not thanked them yet, her feelings are so delicate and tender — and her female *dramatis persona* so conservative — as not to be able to bear even the thought of her friend saying goodbye. The latter turn ('Oh ...'), where she starts weeping again, seems to be more foregrounded than turn 12, given that it is included not in the sequence about the affecting subject of Carrie's moving to Paris, but in that about the less sentimental topic of menopause. Although Samantha's turn 24, which precedes it, is, as examined above, structured so that an expression of tenderness ('Oh, I'm gonna miss you') is immediately followed by a term of abuse ('you cunt.'), Charlotte ignores the second half and its comic effect and focuses on the first because of her romantic ideology.

Whilst the conversation in the pilot show deals with sex and love, and represents Charlotte's and the other characters' various standpoints on gender roles and on the inter-gender relations between women and men, the last conversation considers principally female friendship, problems and intra-gender relations. Therefore, it sketches the art dealer as the protagonist who, in accordance with the cliché of the (over)sensitive woman, is conventionally sentimental and emotional towards her friends and their issues, and willing to show her states of mind. In addition, the final conversation briefly provides a few details about Charlotte's viewpoint on inter-gender relations. She is described as glad to forgive a man, unfeeling and unsympathetic though he may be, as long as he declares he is contrite and in love, thus reinforcing her



idealistic worldview as evoked in the pilot show and her traditionally meek and patient female role model subject to an equally traditionally authoritative male.

## 5 Carrie

In the discussion in the pilot show of the TV series, Carrie's figure is not depicted as a role model proper, but as an inquisitive personality. In fact, also in accordance with her job as the writer of a sex column for a New York paper, she investigates Samantha's and Miranda's advanced value systems and principles on gender and sex; her inquisitiveness, at a conversational level, is realised by her uttering the second least turns and the second least words, consequently by taking the floor only to invite reasons and clarifications from the other participants. Furthermore, in order to work out whether she can apply those value systems and principles to her own sexual behaviour, she chooses to test them out after their conversation by having sex without feelings, which eventually turns out to fail to fulfil her expectations.

In the last discussion, Carrie's conversational behaviour is quite different. As mentioned above, she selects two of the three topics discussed in the three sequences, viz. Mr Big and her moving to Paris, while also sparking off the change of topic in the third sequence through the second half of her turn 19. Apart from deciding on the subjects, she is the speaker who amplifies them most through her 9 turns (34.61% of the total turn count) and 166 words (61.25% of the total word count). Like Charlotte's turns and words, also the distribution of the writer's in the three sequences is significant. Her uttering 4.5 of her turns (50%) and 103 of her words (62.05%) in the first sequence, where she deals with her former partner, signals that the man's degree in her scale of values and priorities is high, even higher than those held by her friends (thanked in the second sequence) and by their difficulties (considered in the third). Moreover, such a number of turns and words and her nervous paralinguistic and non-linguistic signals (tone of voice, gestures) suggest that, contrary to what she maintains in her turn 7, he is anything but behind her.

Whereas, in the dialogue in the pilot show, Carrie's job as a writer emerges from her inquisitive nature, in the last it comes out from her distinctive use of language and of foregrounding devices to phrase her sensations, along with conveying solidarity and closeness towards her friends. Of the 18 words which compose turn 1 ('Sure. Now that I'm with someone else, now that I'm leaving, it's different. You know who he is?'), 10, namely more than a half, realise the optional constituent of the adverbial/adverb phrase 'Now [...] leaving' which, despite its syntactic non-obligatoriness, is foregrounded by its length and informativeness. In addition, the adverbial is also marked by parallelism: the structural string 'Now that I'm' is held constant, whilst the lexical strings 'with someone else' and 'leaving', which provide details about Carrie's new partner and address, are varied in order to signal and underline the fact that her life has changed, perhaps forever, and that Mr Big does not belong to it anymore.

Con conversationally speaking, the most remarkable linguistic feature in turn 1 appears to be its final sentence 'You know who he is?', whose grammatical structure spurs Samantha and Charlotte's turn 2 ('Who?'), and whose communicative functions are to indirectly request the floor again to define Carrie's former partner, and to arouse the other participants' curiosity for the forthcoming expression referring to him. For her friends' utterance allocates her the requested floor and evokes that their interest has actually been awoken, she has achieved her goals and can portray the man in her following turn.

This essential communicative exchange offers basic information about the speakers and their conversational styles and strategies, and especially about the solidarity relations among them. On the one hand, the writer has the social and conversational ability to elicit the other participants' responses, to obtain the floor again as requested, and to have her friends wishing to know more about Mr Big and her opinion about him. On the other hand, the PR executive, the art dealer and, probably, the attorney are so responsive and willing both to turn over the floor to and to learn about the writer out of their affection for and worry over her.

The representation of Carrie's former partner in turn 3 ('The Boy Who Cried Love, that's him. Just like in the fable, it's too little, too late.') derives from the parodic alteration of the title of Aesop's fable 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf', where a shepherd boy tricks his neighbours with false cries of 'Wolf!' and raises repeated alarms, so that his final genuine cry for help goes unheeded. The writer's parodic referring expression gives prominence to the man's sardonic attitude and unreliability, while suggesting her own definitive distrust of him and of his alleged amorous advances. The mocking phrase and its illocutionary force are also confirmed by another parallelism (a structural string 'it's too' + a lexical string realised by an adjective), which also underscores the weakness ('little') and tardiness ('late') of his intentions, and vindicates her wariness and derision.

As acknowledged by Carrie herself through two notable instances of metalinguistic reflection, the 'fable' (turn 3) of the boy crying love is an 'allegory' (turn 5) of her relationship with Mr Big. The use of these two technical terms during an informal conversation about a personal topic conveys the writer's attempt to investigate her relationship in an apparently scientific and unbiased way, and consequently her will to communicate distance between herself and her former partner. However, because of the technical terms, Carrie's utterances have at least two unintended actual perlocutionary effects, i.e. expressing distance also towards the other speakers (her friends), and being misunderstood by them (cf. turn 4 by Charlotte). Furthermore, turn 5 ('No. It's ... No. It's an allegory. Look, my point is, he's been doing this for years, years. And I'm done with it.') is typified by a number of linguistic features: i) curt short sentences ('No.', twice); ii) false starts ('It's ...'); iii) repetitions ('years, years'). Their pragmatic function is to betray the writer's emotive involvement in what she is saying, and accordingly to contradict her seeming impartiality towards and aloofness from her relationship. Therefore, a third unintended actual perlocutionary effect of her use of technical terms can be distinguished, that of uncovering that the propositional content of her turns (5 and 7 mostly) is false, viz., that, deliberately or not, she is deceiving herself and her friends into thinking that she has forgotten about Mr Big.

A metalinguistic function can also be attributed to several other strings, which reinforce Carrie's desire to control the propositional content of her utterances and to directly or indirectly comment on it. At turn 5, the fact that the writer's former partner has never got involved in a stable relationship with her ('he's been doing this for years, years.'), and the fact that she is now tired of these circumstances ('And I'm done with it.') are introduced by the discourse marker 'my point is'; this can be analysed as carrying out the pragmatic function of illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), which explicitly names or rather announces the illocutionary act being performed, here — since the speech act remains an indirect one — asserting and highlighting her opinion about the man's attitude and her own emotions. Moreover, at turn 7 ('Oh, it is [...] never say that'), Mr Big's being 'behind me' and Carrie's being 'upset' at him

result in her swearing sentence ‘Well, fuck him!’. This is immediately followed by another metalinguistic comment on her own appropriacy to context and individual style, that is to say by the sentence ‘And you know I never say that.’: it has the function of accounting for her uncommon and unpredictable use of swear language and, as a result, of emphasising how annoyed she feels.

The writer’s frequent metalinguistic reflection on her own utterances confirms her wish to have power over their propositional content and over the argument she is trying to establish, in order to persuade the other participants of her position and, if the case arises, to answer their observations with less difficulty. Yet, the linguistic features at turn 5 examined above and the unexpected swearing at turn 7 reveal that, irrespective of the metalinguistic words and strings, Carrie is still emotionally attached to her former partner and oversensitive to his behaviour towards her. The fact that these are actually her feelings is reinforced by her flouting the Gricean maxim of Quantity and by her not making her contribution as informative as is required: a couple of hours before moving to Paris with her new partner, she does not spend her last evening with her friends focusing, for example, on him or on her Parisian life, but discussing Mr Big and investigating his behaviour. Consequently, the writer’s friends and the TV series spectators are not unduly surprised when, at the end of the final episode of the last season, she leaves her new partner for her former one — and they lived happily until the 2008 film.

As mentioned above, one of the intended perlocutionary effects of Samantha’s turn 8 (‘Would you like another cocktail?’) is selecting a new, less upsetting topic for the conversational sequence, a topic different from Mr Big. The intended perlocutionary effect is actualised in turn 9a uttered by Carrie (‘No, no, no, I can’t be drunk on the plane. I want to arrive stunning and impossibly fresh-looking.’), where she deals with her physical appearance in her idiolect characterised by deviation and foregrounding devices. The first sentence (‘No, no, no, I can’t be drunk on the plane.’), in particular the adverbial/prepositional phrase ‘on the plane’, flouts the Gricean maxims of Quantity and of Manner (submaxim 1), since the writer makes her contribution more informative than is required, and since she does not avoid obscurity. Accordingly, Carrie obtains the effect of arousing both her friends’ and the spectators’ curiosity regarding the reason behind her desire not to be drunk in that specific place, a reason which is subsequently offered in the second sentence of the utterance (‘I want to arrive stunning and impossibly fresh-looking.’).

The subject attribute ‘stunning and impossibly fresh-looking’, which sketches the appearance the writer desires to have once landed in Paris, is realised by the two coordinated adjective phrases ‘stunning’ and ‘impossibly fresh-looking’. Not only is the former a near synonym of the latter with the role of syntactically and semantically reinforcing it, but the latter is also a case of semantic deviation — in a normal paradigm, the adverb ‘impossibly’ does not collocate with the adjective ‘fresh-looking’. This deviation foregrounds the fact that nobody is likely to appear untired and full of energy after an intercontinental flight, and that, if Carrie does look so, she will have resorted to some elementary tricks such as avoiding drinking much and, probably, as is true to her female figure and confirmed by a subsequent scene, dressing and making up.

For this reason, the deviation is also ideologically marked. The writer, in Paris, wishes to appear extremely well-groomed to meet her new partner, who moved there some days before her. When her concern over her former partner and relationship is also taken into account, Carrie is described by the text of the TV series as a female *dramatis*

*persona* who employs her inquisitive skills only to ask herself questions and to make up her mind about her men, who investigates their state of mind and behaviour towards her, who appears neat and tidy for them, who is, in a word, with regard to the males she loves, even more stereotypically mainstream than romantic and emotional Charlotte.

In the second part of turn 9 ('OK. Ladies ...'), Carrie switches the discussion from Mr Big to thanking the other speakers, thereby opening the second conversational sequence. She does so through a string of two words, thereby manifesting extreme reduction in explicitness: because all of the participants in the conversation share the same encyclopaedic knowledge of the world, which includes the piece of information that, when somebody leaves or moves, s/he usually gives a farewell speech, they can all infer that the writer is going to make one, and can associate the two words 'OK. Ladies ...' to the beginning of that speech event. More importantly, Carrie's utilising reduction in explicitness and the other speakers' resulting inferencing processes underline the solidarity and closeness among the four female characters of the TV series: not only do they expand any new topic as soon as one of them presents it, but they also induce what that new topic concerns.

In turns 13a ('I want to thank you all for wishing me well tonight.') and 17 ('Today I had a thought. What if I ... What if I had never met you?') Carrie observes the Leechian maxims of Sympathy (minimise antipathy between self and other, maximise sympathy between self and other) and of Approbation (minimise dispraise of other, maximise praise of other) in order to perform the speech acts of informing her friends of her sensations and feelings towards them, of thanking and extolling them for their durable affection and consistent support, and of ultimately reinforcing that common affection and that common support.

In turn 13b ('In spite of some of your personal opinions about my leaving ...'), Carrie also undertakes the speech act of attacking Miranda for the attorney's disapproval of the writer moving to Paris. Nevertheless, Carrie's face-threatening act (FTA) against Miranda is mitigated by two devices at least: i) she leaves her utterance unfinished, as a result her threatening propositional content remains incomplete; ii) she flouts the Gricean maxim of Manner (submaxim 1) by evoking her attack in an obscure way through the use of the vague noun phrase 'some of your personal opinions' instead of the more precise 'your [Miranda's] unfavourable opinion'. Consequently, the implicature triggered by the unfinished utterance and the flouting is that, although the writer would have preferred unanimous encouragement from her friends, she acknowledges the attorney's view and comprises her in thanking her friends.

Carrie's final two turns (19 and 23) belong to the third conversational sequence initiated by Samantha with turn 18. Through turn 19 ('Yes, the tears have to go. All right, someone say something not sentimental.'), the writer seems to carry out two speech acts: i) in the first sentence, validating the PR executive's justification for a change of topic, namely behaving properly in a fashionable restaurant; ii) in the second sentence, backing and reiterating the PR executive's request for a change of topic. Both speech acts have broader, even ideological, implications. Firstly, they disclose the conversational means employed by Carrie and the other interactants to signal and confirm solidarity and closeness, i.e. supporting and repeating each other's speech acts. Secondly, and more interestingly, by validating Samantha's explanation and request, the writer also backs what seems to be their shared worldview and sociocultural behaviour patterns. As mentioned above, the fact that the four female protagonists do not approve of crying at the restaurant entails that they desire to always behave and look their best in

fashionable public places; it also involves that, although they are moved to tears by Carrie leaving Manhattan to live in Paris, they are ready to adhere to the above behaviour patterns and to dominate their physical and mental sensations. Accordingly, with the partial exception of Charlotte, they are depicted by the text of the TV series as assured, independent and non-stereotypical female figures.

The fact that Carrie has quickly retaken control of her public conduct and conversational behaviour is also suggested by turn 23 ('Really? What was your excuse before the chemo?'). By directly referring to the propositional content and literal meaning of Samantha's turn 22 ('You cannot believe the hot flashes. I can barely keep my clothes on. '), the writer flouts the Gricean maxim of Quality and does not try to make her contribution one that is true, viz. she does not wish to elicit an answer with her wh-interrogative sentence 'What was your excuse before the chemo?'. On the contrary, her proposition triggers the existential presupposition 'you had an excuse to undress before the chemo', a presupposition which is supported by anybody's encyclopaedic knowledge of the world — given that undressing in public, irrespective of the cause, is socially inappropriate, one needs an 'excuse' to do so. Therefore, bearing in mind the participant Carrie is addressing — Samantha —, the writer implicates that the PR executive does not take her clothes off out of her 'hot flashes', as she has just stated, yet out of lust; as a result, Carrie does not perform the speech act of asking Samantha a question, as appears to be the case at the locutionary level, but that of skilfully and amusedly hinting at her friend's uninhibited sexual life.

Carrie's conversational behaviour in the final discussion and its dissimilarity from that in the first conversation sum up and indicate the evolvement of her female figure from the simpler inquisitive personality which emerges from the pilot show to the more complex *dramatis persona* coming out in the penultimate episode. On the one hand, both the text of the final discussion and the text of the entire TV series, from the first season to the last, portray the writer as a character who is usually rational and sometimes even critical, and who has a witty sense of humour worded through noteworthy linguistic skills. On the other hand, as soon as she falls in love or has love problems, she forgets her logical characteristics and turns sentimental and emotional, supine and powerless against her active and domineering partners who have power over their relationship, in other words, she is represented as an average or, rather, stereotypical woman interacting with even more clichéd men.

## 6 Conclusion

Linguistic scrutiny of the final conversation among the four female protagonists in *Sex and the City* and its comparison with their first discussion, validated by a more extensive consideration of the text of the entire TV series, have uncovered a number of significant ideological differences between the two episodes. In fact, the scrutiny and comparison have demonstrated that Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte personify both female role models and *dramatis personae*. On the one hand, they embody fixed models viewed as examples in a particular role, namely women who are either sexually self-confident and innovative in gender issues, or concrete and rational, or conventionally idealistic and emotional. On the other hand, the PR executive, the attorney and the art dealer get involved, willingly or not, in diverse events and experiences which turn them into more complex *dramatis personae*: at the end of the final season, promiscuous and hedonistic Samantha has got a regular partner and has beaten cancer, self-reliant and distrustful Miranda has had a child, has got married and has established a relationship

with her husband's mother, conservative and romantic Charlotte has divorced her first husband due to his sexual impotence and has married the second also thanks to his sexual potency. However, as emerges from the analysis of the final conversation, despite these major alterations in their lives, their value systems have remained almost unchanged: when discussing, the role models and their distinct worldviews prevail over the *dramatis personae* and their personal experiences, probably in order to provide the spectators with excited conversations and to continue to offer them their favourite role model to identify with.

This is not the case with regard to Carrie. For Short's (1996: 169-172) prototypical discourse structure of drama can be applied to TV series, the latter textual genre too is usually constituted by two discourse levels, the authors/audience level and the character/character level. Nevertheless, the text of *Sex and the City* is more complex discursively, since it has three discourse levels which also include an intermediate narrator/narratee level: in fact, sometimes (for instance, in the first conversation) Carrie steps out from the character/character level and, as if she were a dramatic version of a typical first-person narrator in a novel, provides narratorial comment on herself and the other protagonists, their various actions and their differing value systems.

Because, in any text, the narratee normally aligns her/himself with the narrator's position, and because, in the TV series, Carrie is a first-person narrator who directly addresses the narratee, the latter participant is more likely than usual, among the distinct perspectives presented in the TV series, to assume Carrie's standpoint and worldview. In addition, that standpoint and that worldview are easy to assume, given that the text of the TV series, also through the device of the intermediate discourse level, sketches Carrie as an average human being, with positive and negative personality traits and ideas, but without Samantha's, Miranda's and Charlotte's excessive, sometimes hyperbolic, qualities and thoughts.

For her special dual relation with both the narratee and the spectators, and for her being the only participant with the possibility of influencing her addressees at two discourse levels out of three, it is ideologically marked that it should be Carrie who, throughout the six seasons, evolves from a value-neutral inquisitive nature to a value-laden traditionally female *dramatis persona*, who is eventually unwise, sentimental and passive when in love. What is more, since this may be ascribed to the will to conclude the TV series with a supposedly happy ending, the fact that even the ideologically groundbreaking figures of Samantha and Miranda, along with Charlotte and Carrie, are finally provided with a regular partner and family and with a standard white middle-class lifestyle clearly conveys that, over time, the text of *Sex and the City* has gradually incarnated a mainstream value system and has represented more and more stereotypically female characters.

#### **Appendix: The Conversation**

*In a restaurant.*

**[first sequence]**

[1] **Carrie.** Sure. Now that I'm with someone else, now that I'm leaving, it's different. You know who he is?

[2] **Samantha and Charlotte.** Who?

[3] **Carrie.** The Boy Who Cried Love, that's him. Just like in the fable, it's too little, too late.

[4] **Charlotte.** Love? He said he loved you?

[5] **Carrie.** No. It's ... No. It's an allegory. Look, my point is, he's been doing this for years, years. And I'm done with it.

- [6] **Miranda.** Then just put it all behind you.
- [7] **Carrie.** Oh, it is behind me. I'm mostly upset about him ruining my last night in New York. Well, fuck him! And you know I never say that.
- [8] **Samantha.** Would you like another cocktail?
- [9] **Carrie. [9a]** No, no, no, I can't be drunk on the plane. I want to arrive stunning and impossibly fresh-looking.
- [second sequence]
- [9] **Carrie. [9b]** OK. Ladies ...
- [10] **Charlotte.** Stop. Really, you gonna make me cry.
- [11] **Miranda.** She didn't even say anything yet.
- [12] **Charlotte.** But I know it's coming.
- [13] **Carrie. [13a]** I want to thank you all for wishing me well tonight. **[13b]** In spite of some of your personal opinions about my leaving ...
- [14] **Miranda.** Me? I've never had an opinion in my life.
- [15] **Charlotte.** You guys, stop. Please.
- [16] **Samantha.** Easy there, waterworks.
- [17] **Carrie.** Today I had a thought. What if I ... What if I had never met you?
- [third sequence]
- [18] **Samantha.** Let's pull it up, shall we? I'd like to show my face here again.
- [19] **Carrie.** Yes, the tears have to go. All right, someone say something not sentimental.
- [20] **Samantha.** Chemo might have kicked me into early menopause.
- [21] **Miranda.** Task accomplished.
- [22] **Samantha.** You cannot believe the hot flashes. I can barely keep my clothes on.
- [23] **Carrie.** Really? What was your excuse before the chemo?
- [24] **Samantha.** Oh, I'm gonna miss you, you cunt.
- [25] **Charlotte.** Oh ...
- [26] **Miranda.** Wow. Even 'cunt' didn't stop her.

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