# A Sociolinguistic Study of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

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## Abstract

The choice of terms of address is a typical instance representing the relational aspect of language. People address and are addressed in diverse ways in their everyday lives. Their reciprocal use of terms of address hinges upon a number of factors including power, affect, distance as well as degree of intimacy. Moreover, the use of a variety of words in different settings is a true measure indicating whether the interlocutors have crossed the borders of socially accepted and appropriate language or not. The present study focuses on the dialogues of the play entitled "Death of a Salesman" in the framework of Brown, Levinson, and Wardhaugh's theories on politeness, taboo words, and power relations. A careful sociolinguistic examination of the discourse features of some samples of the play indicated that different factors influence the exercise of power, observing politeness, and the use of taboo words by people in their everyday interactions via verbal and non-verbal language.

**Keywords**: Sociolinguistics, Politeness, Power, Taboo words, Death of a Salesman

# Introduction

*'Death of a Salesman'*, a novel written by *Arthur Miller* (1949) is casted by a set of different characters. Every character has his/her own peculiar ideology and perspective with respect to the modern world. The play narrates the life of a man who attempts to earn his living and survive in capitalist American modern society. Willy Loman, the main character, wanders helplessly between the world of reality and illusion. Arthur Miller's *'Death of a Salesman'* depicts a man's life in adverse economic conditions of the Capitalist American State in the 19th century. In this setting, a man enjoys double advantages, namely one beneficial and helpful side and contrarily another inefficient and useless side for which there is no place in the capitalist society of US. In his modern tragedy, Arthur Miller successfully demonstrates that a common man's failure is a representation of the failure of a society in a minuscule. Therein, taking a seemingly anti-capitalist mood, the writer has expressed his inner feelings and beliefs employing dramatic terms. In fact, '*American Dream'* is the concept of success and chance, implying that everyone is useful and rightly deserves wealth and power. Willy Loman, the father of two sons, has an '*American Dream'* and has done whatever at his disposal to help them flourish and succeed in their lives. The younger son, '*Happy*', is favored partly, but 'Biff', the older one, is unemployed at the age of thirty-four; while all family hope used to anchor on him. When he returned home, his father was unemployed and his mental illness was exacerbated tremendously, which caused a conflict among them. Willy's wife, '*Linda'*, exercises her utmost effort to calm them, but she finally turns out to be a failure. Willy in *'Death of a Salesman'* tries to reach a good position. Not only does he fail to fulfill his desire, but he also destroys his family. Willy thinks that he can improve the financial condition of the family by committing suicide, so that they can use the insurance money to improve the situation; this turns out to be an illusion, yet. Arthur Miller in *'Death of a Salesman'* clearly indicates how a society

in the everyday life of a common man declines. It is agreed that Language is the mirror of the culture of the society in which it resides since it reflects the beliefs, norms, emotions, and feelings of its members. In this line, , according to Wardhaugh, the link between '*language'* and *'culture'* has been the focus of the study by different scholars from diverse fields. In order to explain more this idea, Wardhaugh (2010, p. 229) argues that :

The exact nature of the relationship between language and culture has fascinated, and continues to fascinate, people from a wide variety of backgrounds. That there should be some kind of relationship between the sounds, words, and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it.

Additionally, the relationship between *'language'* and *'culture'* has attracted the attention of some other scholars from different disciplines.

Different studies in 1970s and 1980s have pointed to the fact that politeness was a particular driving force in how people determine language choice and negotiate relational meaning. We can mention the approaches by Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and Leech (1983) among the early and influential contributions to the study of politeness  .

Working within a framework of pragmatics in the broad sense or the study of language in use, these researchers argued that there are not only syntactic rules in establishing grammatical use of sentences but also pragmatic appropriacy. They, thereby, all endeavored to complement the cooperative principle (CP) proposed by Grice (1975). To sum up. According to CP, the interactants base their interpretations on the assumption that people adhere to four maxims: the maxims of quantity (be informative), quality (no information which is not backed by tangible evidence), relation (being as relevant and to the point as possible), and manner (removing all

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ambiguities by being brief and orderly; Grice, 1975, pp. 45–6). If the participants in a discoursal situation do not observe the mentioned maxims in the production of an utterance (and they usually fail to observe), their non-adherence results in additional layers of meaning and the addressee tries to work out why the breech of the maxims has happened. Leech (1983) introduced the notion of politeness principle encompassing six politeness maxims: the tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy maxims.

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) offered the notions of 'face' and 'face-threatening act' for the first time in the field. Face refers to "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61), and it may have two senses: positive or involvement face and negative or distance face. Negative face refers to the tendency of the interlocutors to design their discourse in a way that their actions will be unimpeded by others while positive face is "the want of every member in a way that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). Based on rational lines, the interlocutors in a conversation observe their own face as well as the addressees in their interactions; this sometimes leads to some complications and problems. According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65), face-threatening acts (FTAs) are "the acts that by their very nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker"; mitigation is an attempt to cater for face considerations.  As Lakoff (1973, p. 303) has already pointed out "what is polite for me may be rude for you".  Brown and Levinson use the term 'politeness' as a technical term to describe face-threat mitigation (irrespective of the addressee 's assessment of the utterance). This approach was adopted in many early studies on impoliteness, which was a true reflection of. Brown and Levinson politeness strategies (Lachenicht, 1980; Culpeper, 1996; Kienpointner, 1997). More recently, researchers such as Bousfield and Culpeper (2008) and Terkourafi (2005) also develop Brown and Levinson's

or their own frameworks further. Brown and Levinson's work has been the focus of some studies which have either elaborated on them or have offered their own framework (Terkourafi, 2005; Bousfield and Culpeper, 2008). Similarly, Bousfield (2010) offered a 'predictive theory of politeness and impoliteness'. Moreover, Terkourafi (2005) used a frame-based approach to politeness phenomena. She believed that a quantitative approach helps understand politeness phenomena and allows some degree of prediction.

'politeness' as an evaluative notion within a particular cultural context, clearly does not have any entirely stable meaning, and as for any other concept, it may experience semantic modification in time. As indicated by Sifanaou (1992), an important aspect of politeness, is the fact that politeness conventions and the way they are linguistically are mutually understandable for the parties involved in the interaction. In other words, it is expected that the parties in the both sides of the interaction should follow interaction rules.

It should be noted that the term 'politeness' has a largely positive connotation in everyday language; in linguistic studies, however, the term is used in a more neutral manner: Ide (1989) mentions that "Just as 'height' does not refer to the state of being 'high,' politeness' is not the state of being polite,' rather it is a continuum stretching from polite to non-polite" (p. 225 ).

Eelen suggests that Lakoff, Leech, Brown, and Levinson "can be considered the founding fathers of modern politeness research" (2001, p. 23). Brown and Levinson, like Lakoff and Leech, build on Grice's CP. What they were hoping to develop, they said, was "a tool for describing . . . the quality of social relationships" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 55); an important element of this aim was to build, controversially, a single universal theory that addresses politeness phenomena

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in different cultures: "We want to account for the observed cross-cultural similarities in the abstract principles which underlie polite usage" (1987, p. 57.)

**Taboo**

The term 'taboo' was borrowed and subsequently used in English by Captain James Cook, who reported the word taboo from the Tongan term of 'Tapu' or 'Tabu' which meant 'forbidden'. In this respect, Radcliffe-Brown (1939, p. 5) states that:

In Polynesian, 'Taboo' means simply 'to forbid', 'forbidden', and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. "A rule of etiquette, an order issued by a chief, an injunction to children not to meddle with the possessions of their elders, may all be expressed by the use of the word 'tapu'." (Allan & Burridge ,2006, p.2). As suggested above, Trudgill also supports the point that a taboo is something which is prohibited to be uttered. In this respect, he (2000, p. 18) describes the term as follows: "A behavior which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper; it deals with behavior which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner".

Furthermore, Allan and Burridge (2006) consider 'taboo' as a prescription of behavior affecting everyday life. Similarly, according to Farberow taboos involve forbidden acts and speech. He contends that taboos are the norms of the society since they control the past, the present, and the future of its members. In this regard, he (1963, p. 2) defines the term as follows :

Taboos are primarily backward-oriented, for by being essentially forbidding and prohibiting, they tend to preserve the past and to control the impingement of the future on the present. Of course, not all taboos are old. New ones constantly appears, taking various

shapes and forms as the substance of the culture evolves, but they all serve the same goal-preservation of the status quo.

In fact, defining the term 'taboo' is difficult since the concept of taboo is different for different cultures. In this line, Trudgill claims that taboo topics are culture-specific since topics that are forbidden in one culture can be beneficial in another one. In this sense, he states (2000, p. 18) that "The type of word that is tabooed in a particular language will be a good reflection of at least part of the system". In contradiction with this point of view, Wardhaugh (2010, p. 236) maintains that taboo words are universal. He further emphasized that:

Each social group is different from every other in how it constraints linguistic behavior in this way, but constrain it in some such way it certainly does. Perhaps one linguistic universal is that no social group uses language quite uninhibitedly .

Similarly, according to Laitinen (2009), a taboo can be anything the mentioning of which is forbidden. He also adds that taboos are the result of cultural norms and historical practices shared by the members of a given speech community. In other words, taboos are relative and they may differ from one community to another. In the same line of thought, Allan and Burridge declare that since a community's members share the same principles, they have also what is called 'shared taboos'.

Moving deeper in our analysis, it is worth mentioning that through using TL, people may feel free from social norms and succeed in hurting others since taboos can act as swearwords. In this respect, Trudgill (2000, p. 18) observes that "breaking rules (may) have connotations of strength or freedom which (people) find". It can be concluded that the use of TL depends largely on the consequences of speech. In other words, if TL speech results in confusion and

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embarrassment, it is not typically maintained. However, if it causes humor, peace, and sincerity, it is usually maintained.

## Power

Having social power means trying to achive one's goals even if faced with opposition from the others. Social power legitimizes one to get the others to change their behavior even if unwilling to do so. Governments are usually the main source of social power. They try to exercise their power with typically illegitimate force. Power is the ability to bring out changes in the social or physical situation we are surrounded by. It is the potential to consciously/unconsciously make the others do or act in the way they do not normally do. When power is exercised at large scale, it is usually termed as 'impact' or 'social power', which may change not only the people's behaviour, but it may also lead to dramatic social and political changes at large scale.

Sometimes power is exercised directly or indirectly through the texts that people or governmental/nongovernmental bodies produce. Hassan (1999) calls it as semologic, or the power to socially produce texts on the spur of the moment, or 'texturing' adapted from the notion of 'text' in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Hasan 1976). Therefore, it can be claimed that the social life embodied in social practices is partly produced by texts. Different wordings of textures suiting shifting situations and contexts brings about different meanings and different levels of exercising social power (Derrida, 1978, Hasan 1999).

## Methodology

A number of definitions have emerged from the wealth of studies that have examined politeness phenomena, and these reveal subtly different emphases. For some researchers the key idea is that politeness serves as a means of reducing the possibility of conflict. Lakoff, for example,

contends that "politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction" (1975, p. 64), while Brown and Levinson (1987) view politeness as a means of softening acts which threaten the face of interactants. Kasper, in an overview of research into linguistic politeness, explains that these perspectives on politeness see communication "as a fundamentally dangerous and antagonistic endeavor" (1990, p. 194), thus politeness would require strategies that can be used by participants in an interaction to reduce the danger and possibility of antagonism .

It is worth explaining in some detail the principles of their theory, given that it has become a point of reference for almost any research in the field of politeness. The theory is predicated on the notion of the model person (MP), explained as "a willful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties—rationality and face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 58). A person's face is defined as the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects :

1. *Negative face*: the right to be independent and not being imposed on,

2. *Positive face*: the right to be acknowledged and accepted by the other members of the community to which we belong to.

People generally use power, conferred to them by possession of resources, rewards, and information) to influence the other people so that they would act in a way that is desired, valued, or needed by those in the power position. A such, power is only conferred to the minority in possession of the physical and social resources of the society, and thanks to this fortune they can change their surrounding environment in different ways and using a variety of tools one of the most outstanding types of which is language, generally, and text, specifically.

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**Data Analysis**

To delve into the sociocultural issues embedded into 'The Death of the Salesman' by Arthur Miller, the following samples have been extracted for analysis. Each sample is followed by the authors' analyses:

Sample 1

LINDA: *Isn't that wonderful?*

WILLY: *Don 't interrupt. What 's wonderful about it? There's fifty men in the City of New    York who'd stake him. [To BIFF] Sporting goods?*

(Act I, page 49)

In this dialogue, Willy doesn't respect Linda. Because of his higher position, he ignores her! He uses his power to underestimate Linda's role in the dialogue. This is a legitimate indication of power relation in this example .

**Sample 2**

BIFF: *I'll see Oliver tomorrow. Hap, if we could work that out…*

LINDA: *Maybe things are beginning to ―*

WILLY [wildly enthused, to LINDA]: *Stop interrupting!* (To BIFF) *But don't wear sports jacket and slacks when you see Oliver.*

(Act I, page

50)

In this dialogue Linda tries to speak but she gets interrupted by Willy and he doesn't let her talk. She is discouraged by hearing 'stop interrupting'. This one is also an example of legitimate power .

**Sample 3**

LINDA: *Oliver always thought the highest of him*

WILLY: *Will you let me talk?*

BIFF: *Don't yell at her, Pop, will ya?*

WILLY [angrily]: *I was talking, wasn't I?*

BIFF: *I don't like you yelling at her all the time, and I'm tellin'you, that's all .*

WILLY: *What're you, takin'over this house?*

(Act I, page

51)

Here Willy benefits from the hierarchy and discourages Linda one more time to speak, but Biff tries to defend his mother politely. He tries to respect his father and give his opinion by just saying "I don't like you yelling at her all the time, and I'm tellin'you, that's all". Biff is tactful toward willy. By saying "What're you, takin'over this house?" Willy emphasizes on his power and tries to ask his son to stop taking his mother's side .

**Sample 4**

HOWARD: *Seven years old. Get that tone.*

WILLY: *Ts'ts. Like to ask a little favour if you… [The whistling breaks off, and the voice of HOWARD'S daughter is heard.]*

HIS DAUGHTER: *Now you' Daddy.'*

HOWARD: *She's crazy for me! [Again the same song is whistled.] That's me! Ha! [He winks.]*

WILLY: *You're very good!*

(Act II, page 60)

Willy wants to ask Howard not to fire him but Howard is aware of it, so he doesn't let him talk and interrupts him by using the voice recorder he just bought. Howard's power as the boss is outstanding. In this dialog, both legitimate and expert power relationship is observable .

**Sample 5**

WILLY: *I tell ya why' Howard. Speaking frankly and between the two of us, y'know I'm just a little tired.*

HOWARD: *Oh, I could understand that, Willy. But you're a road man, Willy, and we do a  road business. We've only got a half-dozen salesman on the floor here.*

WILLY: God knows, *Howard, I never asked a favor of any man. But I was with the firm when your father used to carry you in here in his arms.*

HOWARD: *I know that, Willy, but*

WILLY: *Your father came to me the day you were born and asked me what I thought of the name of Howard, may he rest in peac*e.

HOWARD: *I appreciate that, Willy, but there just is no spot here for you. If I had a spot I'd slam you right in, but I just don't have a single solitary spot.* [He looks for his lighter. WILLY has picked it up and gives it to him. Pause.]

WILLY [with increasing anger]: *Howard, all I need to set my table is fifty dollars a week. HOWARD: But where am I going to put you, kid?*

WILLY: *Look, it isn't a question of whether I can sell merchandise, is it?*

HOWARD: *No, but it's a business, kid, and everybody's gotta pull his own weight.*

WILLY [desperately]: *Just let me tell you a story. Howard*

HOWARD: *'Cause you gotta admit, business is business.*

(Act II, pages 62-63)

In this dialogue Howard and Willy mostly speak respectfully to each other. This respect and polite language is due to Howard's position and Willy's age. In spite of the respect Howard has toward Willy, he uses the word "kid" to show his power. Willy gets interrupted again here, "Just let me tell you a story. Howard."

**Sample 6 :**

THE WOMAN [resisting]: *But I've got to get dressed, Willy, I can't*

WILLY: *Get out of here! Go back, go back... [Suddenly striding for the ordinary] This is Miss Francis, Biff, she's a buyer. They're painting her room. Go back, Miss Francis, go back...*

THE WOMAN: *But my clothes, I can't go out naked in the hall!*

WILLY [pushing her offstage]: *Get outa here! Go back, go back!*

[BIFF slowly sits down on his suitcase as the argument continues offstage.]

THE WOMAN: *Where's my stockings? You promised me stockings, Willy!*

WILLY: *I have no stockings here!*

THE WOMAN: *You had two boxes of size nine sheers for me, and I want them!*

WILLY: *Here, for God's sake, will you get outa here !*

Willy insults his mistress by disrupting her and uses taboo language to vindicate himself in front of his son, who just got aware of his father's affair .

**Sample 7**

BIFF [his weeping breaking from him]: *Dad...*

WILLY [infected by it]: *Oh, my boy...*

BIFF: *Dad...*

WILLY: *She's nothing to me, Biff. I was lonely, I was terrible lonely.*

BIFF: *You— you gave her Mama's stockings!*[His tears break through and he rises to go.] WILLY [grabbing for BIFF]: I gave you an order!

BIFF: Don't touch me, you — liar!

WILLY: Apologize for that! BIFF: You fake! You phony little fake! You fake! [Overcome, he turns quickly and weeping fully goes out with suitcase. WILLY is left on the floor on his knees.]

(Act II, pages 92-95)

Willy doesn't let Biff to talk, because he is aware of his son's anger. He ignores him when he calls him several times. Biff uses taboo words to show his dissatisfaction with his father's sinful relationship.

**Sample 8**

BIFF: *I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one dollar an hour, Willy I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. a buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home!*

WILLY [directly to BIFF]: *You vengeful, spiteful mut!*  [BIFF breaks from Happy. Willy, in fright, starts up the stairs. Biff grabs him.]

BIFF [at the peak of his fury]: *Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all.*

(Act II, page 104-106)

Willy swears at his son, Biff. Biff also swears at himself. He is angry by the situation his father put his family in .

## Conclusion

In this paper, Willy has lost his job and his marriage has ended in failure. He is depressed and has no power any more, and commits suicide to end this situation. He thinks by committing suicide, he can gain his power back and with his blood money, change his family's financial problem. Different sociocultural factors such as power, politeness, impoliteness, and taboo words were observed in the play *'Death of a Salesman'*. Characters used different forms of language. Their speeches and dialogues were influenced by their situation, gender, hierarchy, and age.

Based on the analysis of the samples and the comments following them, it may be logically concluded that language is not merely a means of communication for passing factual information from one person to another; in Leo-Vigotsky's terms, it is also a tool for acting on the society and shaping our everyday social relationships as well as negotiating interpersonal meanings. When using language, we, unconsciously most of the time, give out some information about ourselves, our feelings, our desires and our relationship with the others. Language is a means to draw unconventional power borders among people. It is used to exercise power in direct/indirect ways depending on the situation.

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