

The art of murdering: a multimodal-stylistic analysis of Anton Chigurh's speech in *No Country for Old Men*

1. Introduction

When in Malta for a research period, I went to the cinema with some friends without any specific idea as to what film to watch. We finally opted for *No Country for Old Men*, (2008), the only film, among the films offered by that cinema, which had not been shot in or dubbed into Maltese, a language we could not speak or understand. We arrived a few minutes after the beginning of the film, but in time to watch the first long-lasting conversationⁱ involving the character of Anton Chigurh.

At the time, I had no previous information on the film, not even about the four Academy Awards it had won. I was not aware, therefore, of the plot, of the characters, of the setting, or of any other relevant detail. In other words, I had no knowledge of the co-text and context of the film. The bare text (in its linguistic, non-linguistic and multimodal aspects) and my knowledge of the world (KOW) were the only tools I could count on. And, even if at the time I thought I was simply taking a break from work, the development of the communicative exchange, the very tone the character imprints on the conversation, his appearance, (his clothes, the expression on his face, even his hairstyle), together with all the other multimodal elements necessarily present in filmic representation of a conversation, immediately triggered an analysis on my part, leading me to an immediate (and, I believe, correct) interpretation of the character – which was confirmed as the plot developed.

In this paper I will analyze the said conversation through stylistic (Leech and Short, 1981; Short, 1996; Culpeper, Short & Verdonk, 1998; Douthwaite, 2000; McIntyre, 2008) and pragmatic (Grundy, 2000; Huang, 2007) means, concurrently taking into account the multimodal elements contributing to compose it into the final product (O'Halloran, 2004; Rose 2007), in order to re-construct the first process of interpretation and understand how such a process took place. The conclusion of this analysis also represents the starting point of any linguistic analysis of a text, namely that the 'art' of stylistics offers the precious possibility to gain a deeper level of awareness of the mechanisms deployed in the careful construction of any text, or, as in the case above, to gain at least a first grasp of the communicative functions the text is meant to provide, which need to be confirmed by taking the co-text and context into consideration.

2. The text

The conversation to be analysed involves the characters of Anton Chigurh (hereafter AC)ⁱⁱ and of an unidentified shop assistant (hereafter SA). The scene is set in a country store. Viewers can guess the place because a) the external shot preceding the conversation shows a couple of small and basic buildings near each other surrounded by the desert, and b) because of the things on sale which can be found in the immediate surroundings of the shop assistant – the rest of the store is never shown.

[SA occupies the frame; then AC appears after having been introduced by the sound of his slow footsteps. They share the frame now, but only AC's back is shown]

1. AC: How much?
2. SA [writing on a small notebook and not looking at AC, but only at the things in his hands]: 69 cents.
3. AC [close-up on AC, who looks out of the window, presumably at his car]: And the gas?
4. SA [SA and AC share the frame now, AC's back is shown; SA keeps writing and not looking at AC]: Y'all getting any rain up your way?
5. AC [SA's back is now shown; AC holds his head up to stare at SA and starts eating the peanuts he hasn't paid for yet. He does not look happy]: What way would that be?
6. SA: Well, I seen you was from Dallas.
7. AC: What business is it of yours [SA occupies the frame now. For the first time he stops writing and looks at AC, an expression of surprise on his face] where I'm from, [camera on AC], friend-o?
8. SA [SA occupies the frame now, still surprised; AC's back is shown]: Well, I didn't mean nothing by it.
9. AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]: You didn't mean nothing? [AC smiles, mocking SA]
10. SA: I was just passing the time [SA's front and AC's back are shown; SA looks at AC intently]. If you don't want to accept that, I don't know what else I can do for you [AC occupies the frame for a moment - he seems to be getting nervous. Then SA is framed again, he goes back to writing on the notebook in his hands]. Will there be something else?
11. AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]: I don't know. Will there? [AC is still eating and staring at SA]
12. SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown; SA looks uncomfortable - he coughs before speaking again]: Is something wrong?
13. AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown; AC is still eating. He mocks surprise when he speaks]: With what?
14. SA: With anything.
15. AC [camera on SA first, then on AC, who smiles]: Is that what you're asking me? Is there something wrong with anything? [AC keeps eating]
16. SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown; SA looks almost desperate]: Will there be anything else?
17. AC: You already asked me that.
18. SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown. SA stops looking at AC and looks down, while AC keeps staring at him]: Well, I need to see about closing now.
19. AC: See about closing?
20. SA: Yes, sir.
21. AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]: What time do you close?
22. SA: Now. We close now.
23. AC: "Now" is not a time. What time do you close?
24. SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown. SA indicates the outside with a gesture of his left hand]: Generally around dark. At dark.

- 25.AC [close-up on him, who whispers]: You don't know what you're talking about, do you?
- 26.SA: Sir?
- 27.AC [looking almost exasperated]: I said you don't know what you're talking about. [close-up on SA, who looks petrified. Then close-up on AC] What time do you go to bed?
- 28.SA [close-up on SA, confused]: Sir?
- 29.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown. AC is still eating, his tone of voice becomes now louder and harsher]: You're a bit deaf, aren't you? I said, what time do you go to bed?
- 30.SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown. SA seems to be struggling to find the answer]: Oh... Somewhere around 9:30. I... I'd say around 9:30.
- 31.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown. AC keeps eating]: I could come back then.
- 32.SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown]: Why would you be coming back? We'll be closed.
- 33.AC: Yeah, you said that.
- 34.SA [looking down]: Well, I got to close now.
- 35.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]: You live in that house out back?
- 36.SA [hesitating]: Yes, I do.
- 37.AC [still eating]: You lived here all your life?
- 38.SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown]: Well, this is my wife's father's place, originally.
- 39.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown. AC coughs because the food seems to be gone the wrong way]: You married into it?
- 40.SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown. AC keeps eating]: We lived in Temple, Texas for many years. Raised the family there, in Temple [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]. We come out here about four years ago.
- 41.AC: You married into it.
- 42.SA [close-up on SA, who smiles embarrassed]: If that's the way you want to put it.
- 43.AC [close-up on AC]: Well, I don't have some way to put it. That's the way it is. [AC finishes eating and lays the empty packet on the desk. Extreme close-up on the packet slowly regaining its original shape after AC has crumpled it completely. Then close-up on SA looking at the packet]. What's the most you ever lost on a coin toss?
44. SA: Sir?
- 45.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown. AC articulates his words clearly when he speaks]: The most you ever lost on a coin toss.
- 46.SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown]: I don't know. I couldn't say.
- 47.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown. AC throws a coin in the air and then lays it on the desk]: Call it. [AC whispers]
- 48.SA: Call it?
- 49.AC: Yes.
50. SA: For what?
- 51.AC: Just call it.
- 52.SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown. SA looks seriously worried]: Well, we need to know what we're calling it for here.

- 53.AC: You need to call it. I can't call it for you, or it wouldn't be fair.
- 54.SA: I didn't put nothing up.
- 55.AC: Yes, you did [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didn't know it. [camera on SA, AC's back is shown. SA still looks seriously worried] You know what date is on this coin?
- 56.SA: No.
- 57.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]: 1958. It's been travelling 22 years to get here. And now it's here. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it.
- 58.SA [camera on SA, AC's back is shown. SA looks at the coin]: Well, look, I need to know what I stand to win.
- 59.AC: Everything.
- 60.SA: How's that?
- 61.AC [camera on AC, the expression on his face becoming hard and the tone of his voice threatening; SA's back is shown]: You stand to win everything. Call it.
- 62.SA [camera on SA, who looks at AC for a few moments, then at the coin. He takes a breath and then faces AC, whose back is shown]: All right. Heads, then.
- 63.AC [camera on AC, who looks at SA for a moment – SA's back is shown. Extreme close-up on AC's hand, showing the side of the coin which is up (heads). Camera on AC again]: Well done. [AC passes the coin to SA. Close-up on SA, who is going to put it in his pocket. Then camera on AC, SA's back is shown] Don't put it in your pocket, sir. Don't put it in your pocket. It's your lucky quarter.
- 64.SA [close-up on SA, who looks down at the coin]: Where do you want me to put it?
- 65.AC [camera on AC, SA's back is shown]: Anywhere, not in your pocket. Or [AC looks out of the window] it'll get mixed with the others and become just a coin. [close-up on SA, speechless. Then camera on AC, SA's back is shown]. Which it is.

[AC goes away with slow footsteps. Viewers are left with the speechless SA looking at AC going away]

3. The analysis

The conversation is introduced by an external shot, which underlines the state of desolation and silence (*viz.* absence of any sign of 'city life', including the presence of people – or witnesses) of the setting in which the conversation will take place.

The first character introduced by the camera is that of a shop assistant, whose name or identity viewers do not and will never know – this is the first (and last) time the character is introduced in the film at all. However, he is not the first speaker to take the floor. A second speaker, AC, takes the floor insteadⁱⁱⁱ.

AC does not open the conversation with the first part of the 'canonical' adjacency pair which is usually deployed to establish contact with an interlocutor, namely by greeting SA, but immediately reaches the core of the argument, asking for the price of the packet

of peanuts in his hands [1]. However, since, (at least at the beginning), this exchange can be identified as a 'business transaction' between a shop assistant and a customer, the absence of an initial greeting can be interpreted in two ways: a) it is not striking because it constitutes a typical pattern of goal-oriented conversations having a very specific purpose (that of paying for a packet of peanuts as soon as possible and going back to one's journey), or b) it is striking because, being the first contact between strangers, politeness is taken for granted, and even a very brief greeting is expected. Regardless of the option one might choose, the first turn immediately poses a question. In general terms, considering the linguistic structure of [1], namely a direct speech act in the form of an incomplete but meaningful question, (the grammatically complete, unmarked one being "How much is it?"), and the concurrent behaviour of SA might lead us to conclude that the main reason behind such a time-saving *incipit* is that AC might be in a hurry. The shop assistant's behaviour is, in turn, not very polite in general terms, since he appears too busy with his notebook to even look in AC's face. In [2] he only looks at the packet in AC's hands and completes the first adjacency pair [1-2] by deploying a similar non-grammatically complete but meaningful reply, providing the price of the food. [3] represents a twin turn with [1], being a non-grammatically complete sentence meant to convey an understandable meaning and to keep the conversation going. The aim is still completely goal-oriented: AC means to end the transaction and go back to his business.

Turn [4] represents, on the other hand, the turning point in the conversation.

Rather than duplicating his behaviour in [2] and completing the second adjacency pair [3-4] by providing the preferred response (a reply informing AC of the total price to pay), SA opts for a turn which, in actual fact, is meant to start an insertion sequence, (presumably before reaching what he expects to be the end of the conversation, namely being paid and seeing the customer leave the shop). For this purpose, he chooses one of the most typical and non-committal subjects of conversation between strangers in the western world: he asks about the weather. AC's reaction in turn [5] is immediately signalled by a change in expression, which becomes suddenly hard^{iv}. This change of facial expression is accompanied by two additional non-verbal elements which reinforce the impression something 'problematic' has just happened: AC starts staring at SA and starts eating the peanuts he still has not paid for, both deeds being considered slightly impolite in Western society, (the second one, if one wanted to take it to its extreme, could even be considered synonymic with theft, thus constituting an additional clue useful to unveil the criminal inclination of the man). The verbal counterpart of this physical behaviour is not meant to provide an answer to [4] at all, but it is represented by an additional question exploiting epistemic modality to ask for further clarification of SA's preceding turn. The new adjacency pair [4-5] is thus not completed but a new one [5-6] is created by AC.

Many reasons could justify the linguistic choice made by AC in [5]. In general terms, when one does not reply to a direct question and answers with another question, one does not want to answer the first question at all. Furthermore, that AC opts to ask for further information ("What way would that be?" = "What is it exactly that you know about my way?") could be concurrently meant to underline that SA should mind his own business^v. [6] completes the adjacency pair [5-6], for it constitutes the preferred response: the answer is meant to explain the degree of knowledge SA has about AC's way. Two main considerations can be made here, regarding a) the 'informal' linguistic style of the answer, (which is non-grammatical in canonical terms – "Well, I've seen

you are from Dallas” being the grammatically correct one), and b) the directness of the answer itself, which respects all the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. These two elements clearly show that SA is ‘chatting’, namely considering the exchange to be just a pastime (which he will make obvious in [10]).

[7] represents a second turning point. From this turn on, a ‘new’ conversation, radically different in nature, starts. The consideration made above about [5] representing an indirect way to suggest SA should mind his own business, is confirmed in [7], which is constituted by two Face Threatening Acts (FTAs – Brown, Levinson: 1987). The first (“What... from”) is a bald-on-record FTA towards SA’s positive face, and the second (“friend-o”) is a marker of identity used sarcastically to mean exactly the opposite of what it apparently claims, namely that the two are not friends with each other at all, (distance rather than closeness is underlined), thus constituting a second FTA directed towards SA’s positive face reinforcing the first FTA. The impolite power of this turn is underscored through multimodal and non-verbal means in SA’s reaction. Indeed, in the course of turn [7], the camera moves from AC to SA^{vi}, so that viewers can see clearly a) that SA suddenly stops writing and starts considering his interlocutor more interesting than his notebook (this being the first time SA looks AC in the eyes), and b) the expression of surprise on SA’s face, probably aroused by what SA considers to be an unexpected and possibly unnecessary impolite turn in the conversation, since, as underlined above, what SA was doing until this point was ‘chatting’, (while AC’s linguistic and non-linguistic disinclination to ‘chatting’ had already started in [5]). The camera then moves back to AC before he utters the second FTA, in order to further underline the degree of unfriendliness AC means to convey with this second and sarcastic FTA. SA’s confusion derived from turn [7] is expressed in [8], where SA is framed again, while he is providing an answer which flouts the maxims of Relevance and Quantity (Grice, 1975), constituting a justification of SA’s intentions, (or lack of negative intentions), rather than the expected answer to [7], (e.g. “It is not my business at all, sir.”).

AC’s dissatisfaction to SA’s reply is presented in [9] where AC mocks SA by a) repeating SA’s words, and b) smiling while doing it. Note that the repetition performed by AC is, grammatically speaking, a question constructed in the form of a statement, which is a domineering form of expression (Douthwaite 2000), meant to underline the dominant role AC has already adopted in the exchange, (and will adopt until its end): he is the first to speak, the first to impose an impolite tone to the conversation and the one who, when apparently performing an interrogative, claims rather than asking – he already knows, he does not need to ask.

As already mentioned, [10] is meant to provide a further justification reinforcing both [6] and [8], (“I was just passing the time”), and a concurrent attempt to bring the conversation to an end by a) underlining the impossibility for SA to say anything more than he has already said (“If you ... do for you”), and b) bringing it back to a ‘business transaction’ (“Will there be something else?”), which, together with the fact that SA goes back to writing on his notebook, makes it clear that SA thinks the conversation should be closed. Just as in [9], in [11] AC does not seem to be satisfied with SA’s turn [10], since he does not complete the adjacency pair by providing an answer to SA’s last question, but reopens the conversation, by formulating another question, thus flouting the maxims of Quantity and Relevance (Grice 1975) and concurrently implying “something else” has to be said. Turn [12] represents the verbal realisation of the suspicion that the tone the conversation has had so far has generated in SA, namely that

there must be “something wrong”, which is translated by an uncomfortable SA, (note that he coughs before speaking), into a direct speech act, to which AC answers in [13] signalling dissatisfaction, (*viz.* non-acceptance of SA’s implicit apology), by mocking surprise to SA’s question, thus pretending his communicative behaviour should not have generated it. Note that, once again, AC asks a question when he should give an answer, thus forcing SA to complete the new adjacency pair AC has opened.

Turns [14]-[17] construct an ascending climax of non-communication. [14] replies to [13] with a general answer, (once again he gives an answer rather than receiving one), meant to underline SA’s increasing confusion before AC’s linguistic and communicative behaviour. Turn [15] reopens the conversation again. Indeed, if we consider [13-14] as an insertion sequence which has been completed by SA in [14], then the sequence opened in [12] could/should be closed in [15] by AC with the expected response, namely an answer, (e. g. “No, there isn’t”/ “Yes, there is”).

AC asks not one, but two questions instead, refusing once again to give answers. Note that in [15] AC smiles again before speaking and keeps eating, thus signalling his amusement. For the third time in the exchange, (consider [8-9] and [10-11]), AC uses the same words used by SA against SA himself, asking SA the very same questions SA has asked AC. Note, also, that, while AC never provides the answers, SA provides them all. Turns [16-17] clearly show the impasse the interactants have reached, from SA’s standpoint, since SA, (who looks on the verge of desperation), repeats the final question of turn [10] and AC does not lose the chance to underline the redundancy (uselessness?) of his linguistic selection, ([17]).

In an attempt to close the conversation for the third time (consider [10] and [16]), SA starts a pre-closing sequence in [18], by claiming it is almost time to close the shop (*viz.* time for AC to leave him alone), to which AC replies with another example of blatantly domineering mode of expression: he asks another question rather than giving an answer, (even a non-verbal one, since he could simply pay and leave), using SA’s words against him. SA’s reaction in [20] constitutes another confirmation of the passive role he has had to adopt in this exchange, since, once again, he answers rather than being answered, and deploys a very formal term of reference (“Sir”).

AC does not allow the conversation to finish, and in [21] he reopens it adopting the same strategy as before: he asks a question, and an extremely redundant one, for a) the communicative function in [21] is the same as in [19], and b) he already knows the answer because SA has provided it in [18]. To a redundant question SA replies with a redundant answer in [22], by repeating the piece of information he already had given in [18]. Note that in [18] the adverb “now” bears end-focus, while in [22] it is up-shifted (Arts and Arts, 1982) to the level of sentence (“Now”) in the first part and is repeated in the following sentence, where it bears end-focus again – the urgency SA feels to stop this conversation is clear.

AC finds the way again not to bring it to an end in [23]. It is important to underline here that his linguistic behaviour in this turn resembles that of a father with a naughty child who has just said something ridiculously obvious. Note, however, that a) SA is clearly much older than AC (so that the roles, in ‘unmarked’ terms, should be inverted), and b) the redundancy expressed by SA in [22] is, as already mentioned, the product of the redundancy expressed by AC in [21] – to put it loosely, the redundancy of SA’s turn is in fact AC’s ‘fault’. However, it is SA’s inconsistent reply which is at stake in [23], where AC places SA’s final urgency-expressing word in thematic position to make it

the grammatical subject of a negation, implying SA has given a blatantly obvious (*viz.* communicatively pointless) answer. AC repeats then turn [21].

Turn [24] differs with regard to [22] only in the linguistic selection, since the propositional meaning is the same, namely “now” (which is confirmed by the gesture of SA’s hand indicating the window – the approximation of dark). It is interesting to note, that the linguistic structure of turns [22] and [24] constitutes a chiasmus, since they are both constituted by two sentences linked through parataxis, but the time adverbial which represents the repeated element (“Now”, “dark”) is up-shifted to sentence first and then repeated in end-focus in [22], while in [24] the opposite happens, which makes the focus even more marked, since the last element of the turn is phonologically salient and, being a prepositional phrase up-shifted to sentence, is assigned even greater salience. Therefore, while trying not to appear redundant, SA does not make any change in the information he provided and opts for a selection which, even if deploying a different linguistic exponent, still conveys the tone of urgency of SA’s preceding turn [22].

The trick does not work, however, since starting from [25] the tone of impatience in AC’s words and deeds becomes stronger. Just to start with, he is framed in close-up while whispering, (a behaviour which is synonymic here with an attempt not to lose one’s temper too quickly), and then utters a statement (= 100% certainty) with a concluding rhetorical tag question, whose expected answer is “No, I don’t”. The statement is a heavy one, since SA is ‘accused’ of having been talking in vain up to this point, as if he had failed to understand the real meaning of the exchange – which is probably true, since, even if the conversation is ‘weird’ enough for SA to want to finish it as soon as possible, he still does not know he is conversing with the man who incarnates death in the film^{vii}. To this it should be added that [25] flouts three out of four maxims of the Cooperative Principle: Quantity, Relevance and Manner.

To such an emblematic question, SA does not reply at all, but opts for a polite interrogative indirectly asking for further clarification ([26]). In the first part of [27] AC does not clarify but simply repeats himself, again using repetition in order to further diminish SA’s status, who is again treated as a ‘simple’ child who does not pay enough attention to the conversation taking place. In the second sentence of the turn he deploys the same linguistic structure of [21] and [23] to ask about the time, the only difference being that the question in [27] is not justifiable on a general social basis.

If, indeed, it is understandable that a customer would ask at what time the shop closes, it is not common or polite that an unknown customer asks at what time the shop assistant he is talking to, but has never met before, goes to bed. In other words, the question is too direct and too personal to be ignored and/or ‘liked’ (and, since a reaction of uneasiness is expected, a close-up of SA is shown just before AC asks the question, so that the force of SA’s discomfort is also underlined visually). Note that SA is too confused and, probably, too worried to perform any consistent utterance and limits himself to repeating the same linguistic selection as [26]. This time, however, the communicative function is different, for SA is not asking for clarification, but he is expressing his confusion and dislike for the question. In any case, repetition works against SA again, for its deployment makes SA look too weak to react, particularly if we consider how personal, namely usually avoided among strangers, the question is. Furthermore, if we recall turns [6-7], it can be noted that AC has blatantly told SA to mind his own business for simply asking about the weather, while, when asked about his sleeping routine, SA cannot do much better than perform a one-word question, with a polite term of reference referring to the man who has asked such an impolite question.

Turn [28] is therefore another clear indication of how SA's status has been diminished so far, rendering him almost powerless.

The diminishing process is further amplified in [29], where, after having treated him as a naive child until this point, AC suddenly treats SA as an impaired old man, ascribing him one of the impairments typical of old age: deafness. This FTA towards SA's positive face is followed by the repetition of the (very personal) question constituting the preceding turn, which constitutes an FTA towards SA's negative face, trying to oblige him to divulge personal information he might want to keep to himself. Here, the repetition has a twofold aim, namely that of treating SA as a simple child and as an impaired old man at the same time.

[30] could represent the chance for SA to respond to such a behaviour properly, by telling AC the information he wants to know will not be given. Instead, it represents the final step in the process initiated by AC, since not only does SA answer a question containing such a range of FTAs, but he also provides the information requested – although hesitantly, being he well aware of the uncommonness of such a situation. What might have been suspected in [27] and [28], namely that the curiosity about SA's sleeping timetable was not curiosity at all but hid a different aim, is realised in [31], where AC claims he could (would?) come back at 9.30 that night. A few points should be noted here. To start with, this is the first statement after a series of six questions, which makes [31] the sentence expressing the higher degree of certainty, (even higher than [25], which was concluded with a question, albeit a rhetorical tag). [31] might, therefore, be expressing an intention rather than a simple statement of fact, "could" being synonymic with "would" rather than with "be able to". Furthermore, to make sure about SA's sleeping time and to claim that one will come back at that very time, means one does not want to find SA still up, but hopes to find him asleep. And, if SA is sleeping, why should one come back to see him? Maybe because one does not want to *see* or *talk* to SA at all – maybe one wants to do something else, something which will be facilitated if SA is asleep.

[31] is, at the very least, worrying. SA must follow the same line of reasoning because he himself asks in [32] about the reason for such a claim and, again, is forced to act redundantly, by underlining the shop is about to close, and will be closed at night – which is not ignored by AC, who is again ready to underline how redundant SA has just been ([33]). While keeping the pressure up, the utterance also fails to answer SA's question, increasing SA's uneasiness.

[34] exploits the same strategy as [23], (which, in turn, had also been preceded by a turn by AC stressing the repetition in SA's speech; cf. [22]), namely to try and put an end to a conversation which has apparently reached its 'bottom', by claiming the urgency to close ("now").

Just as in [21], AC does not allow the conversation to finish, but asks another question to keep it going. The nature of [35] is, again, personal, besides representing another piece of the puzzle AC is completing about SA's life. Indeed, he asks about SA's house, but, note that, once again, he is not 'asking for information', but asking for *confirmation*, (the question is, in actual fact, a statement concluded with a question mark, it is not a question in strict grammatical terms). He must have deduced, because of the desolation around the store, that SA must live in the building nearby – confirmation which he receives from SA, who answers with a positive short answer ([36]).

[37]-[38] represent a couple of twin turns with [35]-[36], in the sense that AC asks for further personal information, and SA, who has already attempted to bring the conversation to an end twice, ends up providing the information requested. [39] hints and [41] claims that SA has in actual fact married his wife in order to take possession of the store, (thus diminishing SA's status even further and depicting him as a 'social climber'), which forces SA to give a justification of his conduct, ([40]), – if we agree one should justify his/her life with a complete stranger –, and to surrender to AC's line of reasoning in [42], even if not completely, since SA implies the conclusion is a subjective one ("the way *you* want to put it").

[43] represents another strategy with which AC aims at providing further support to his dominant role, by denying the subjectivity implied by SA's preceding turn [42], and claiming it as a statement of fact, ("the way it is").

[43] is also of paramount importance for two more reasons.

The first is represented by the visual metaphor of the crumpled packet of nuts which AC lays on the desk. That it is framed in extreme close-up while trying to regain (in vain) its original shape and that SA is closed-up while watching this ongoing process intently is another indication of AC's verbal and non-verbal domination in the exchange, AC being the one who has reduced something to an unnatural shape, (which is the usual status of anything/anyone AC has met), and left a powerless SA to watch the process. Secondly, the end of the turn is represented by another question, possibly more peculiar (and suspicious) than the previous ones. Indeed, this question: a) flouts the maxim of Relevance, b) violates the maxim of Tact (Leech, 1983), and c) constitutes an on-record FTA directed towards SA's negative face. Furthermore, the theme of the coin toss (*viz.* Fate influencing human conduct) is introduced.

The surprise and confusion generated by the final question of turn [43] is made blatant in SA's reaction in [44], where he adopts the strategy he has already used in [26] and [28], a single term of reference up-shifted to the level of sentence (= interrogative) meant to signal lack of understanding (or refusal to understand) on the part of SA. In [45] repetition is deployed again, AC articulating his request, (which has, in actual fact, become a claim after the elision of the *wh-* word), very clearly – just as if he were talking to a kid (or an impaired old man). Despite the grammatical structure is that of an affirmative sentence rather than that of a question, turn [45] obtains its response, for SA again furnishes the information requested without even having technically been asked, which is unsurprising by this point. What can be inferred by [46] is that SA must have not lost too much on a coin toss, for he has no memory of any specific/important loss.

[47] represents the beginning of the last part of the conversation. Chigurh acts as the catalyst of Fate: he throws a coin in the air, lays it down on the desk and, after whispering, (as if to signal the distance from the act and the sense of obligation he feels towards it – one whispers when one is going to do something he/she would not do if they could choose otherwise), performs a bald-on-record FTA by ordering SA to call it. It is SA in [48] who exploits repetition, but note that his goal is not that of mocking AC or diminishing his status, (which is the intent AC wishes to achieve when he deploys this strategy) – confusion and need to understand bring SA to perform another indirect speech act asking for clarification. The answer SA obtains in [49] is a straightforward one-word answer, namely another adverb up-shifted to the level of sentence, thus loaded with great salience: there is no choice but to call it. As an answer to this, SA again employs a different linguistic selection than the preceding one, but, even if directly this time, he conveys the same communicative function ([50]). The same can be

said for turn [52], which constitutes a further step in the climax of directness SA is constructing. To SA's confusion, which he tries to fight by asking questions more and more directly, AC once again replies in [51] by repeating his preceding order, ([47]), and, just like SA's linguistic selection in [50] is more direct than before, AC's selection in [51] becomes stronger thanks to the addition of the adverb "just" in thematic position, which stresses the necessity to obey the order. The main collateral effect, which will always be obtained by AC throughout the remaining part of the exchange, is not to give SA the answer representing the expected response to the question in [50].

[53], besides representing another element in the climax of directness AC is constructing in response to SA's communicative behaviour, ("You *need* to call it"), re-introduces the theme of Fate, of the inevitability of one's destiny, ("I can't call it for you, or it wouldn't be fair"), and of the necessity, (the verb "need" becomes suddenly value-loaded), to accept the consequences of one's choices – like that of asking a question about the weather when one could simply answer a question about the price of the gas.

[54] and [55] continue to deploy the same structure, which has become, by this point in the conversation, the communicative 'habit' of each character. SA renders his previous turn even more explicit and performs a direct speech act to underline what he has claimed in [50] and [52] and, in [55], AC replies to [54] flouting again the maxim of Manner, ("You've been...know it"), and exploiting the theme of Fate once again, by asking SA about the date on the coin – which is further clarified in [57] by declaring the date. Note that, besides constituting the only precise time reference which sets the film in the year 1980, the date "1958" constitutes a sentence on its own, hence is highly salient. The number of years it's been "travelling" (viz. meeting other people's destinies) is then introduced. The structure becomes then very regular: three subsequent sentences linked through parataxis and through the conjunction "And" as the first element of each sentence, which creates a regular rhythm, a *crescendo* each time giving the impression a new piece of information of equal importance is about to be introduced. Furthermore, the three sentences all constitute a flouting of the maxim of Quantity, since they say more than is strictly necessary, and create a highly redundant structure, since a) that the coin is in front of them is clear; b) that a coin has either heads or tails is equally clear; c) that SA has to say it has become clear in turns [47]-[55], in spite of SA's repeated attempts to put the moment off. Turn [55] is closed with the repetition of turn [47], signalling all the attempts made by SA to avoid the call were useless.

Turn [58] is particularly interesting. In fact, it exploits reformulation again, since the propositional meaning is not so different from all of SA's turns from [50] to [54]. However, it is interesting to note that the verb "win" bears end-focus here, signalling SA thinks, (maybe, hopes), he is going to *win* something. AC replies with a one-word sentence, ([59]), which is therefore phonologically, semantically and pragmatically highly salient. Furthermore, to claim that one is going to win everything is equal to claim that, in case of failure, one is going to *lose* everything. The tone of threat that was implicit in [31], [35] and [53] is made explicit here, which cannot be ignored by SA, who apparently asks for clarification in [60] but, in actual fact, performs an indirect speech act to convey his disbelief as to a toss which would allow him to win "everything".

[61] has a deep emotional impact reached through a variety of means. First of all, the camera is on AC, so that the hardening of the expression on his face is visually

immediate. The other important non-verbal element consists in the sudden change in AC's tone of voice, which conveys all the impatience and threat that was implicit in AC's previous verbal selections. With regard to the linguistic aspect of the turn, two utterances are emitted here. The first represents an extension of AC's preceding turn [59], the one-word sentence being turned into a complete SVO sentence – the keyword “everything” still bearing end-focus, hence salience. The second part of turn [61] is the fourth repetition of the bald-on-record FTA “Call it”.

The continuous repetition of this order and the insistence on the part of AC not to let SA ‘escape’ from the exchange, concurrently diminishing his status and leaving him verbally defenceless, brings about its final effect in [62].

The camera moves on SA to signal how crucial the moment is and a suspense music can be heard for the first and only time in the scene. SA has finally realised the conversation was not meant to be a ‘chat’ at all, and that his interlocutor has verbally cornered him, forcing him to stand in a position of subjection. Subjection which is once again expressed verbally when, after taking a breath, (signalling the complete realisation of the danger before him – note also his verbal selection “All right *then*”), SA gives the expected response: heads.

[63] opens with an intense non-verbal element, the moment when AC and SA face each other before AC looks at the coin and unveils SA's fate. The first sentence of the turn seems to signal the end: SA has done well, he will live.

However, AC still does not seem not to be fully satisfied, for he has one more order to give, and, unsurprisingly, to repeat in [63]. In spite of the fact that AC uses of the polite and formal term of reference “Sir” for the first time in the exchange, (which implies SA must have grown in AC's consideration), the patronizing tone AC has been using during the whole conversation is deployed again, by a) exploiting repetition, and b) concluding the turn with a statement of fact which, thanks to AC's intonation, is presented as something obvious SA has again failed to notice. SA's reaction in [64], which represents SA's last verbal turn in the conversation at all, is to ask AC for advice as to where he should put the coin, stressing the fact that, even if he has won “everything”, he has maintained his role of subjection until the end.

Besides being the first character to take the floor, AC is also the last character to speak, ([65]). Particularly interesting is AC's last utterance “which it is”. Thus, a) since it represents the closing turn, (hence it is pragmatically and psychologically salient), b) since it is a subordinate clause up-shifted to the rank of sentence, (hence, again, salient and foregrounded), and c) since it flouts the maxim of Quantity once again by providing obvious information, it reduces the whole conversation to a game decided by what is, after all, “just a coin”, but a very important one – which would be certainly amusing for the shop assistant, if his life had not been in danger.

The scene is brought to an end when AC walks away, (in this way, parallelism is created, for the sound of his slow footsteps closes the conversation as it had opened it), and a speechless SA is assigned the ‘last’ turn in the conversation, represented by attributable silence – he has not been assigned the right to speak at the beginning, he has been deprived of such a right in the end.

4. Conclusion

A very long and multifaceted conversation has been subjected to a necessarily brief multimodal-stylistic analysis. The analysis of the text outside context and co-text, which

has been supported for confirmation considering them in some points, has revealed the mechanisms deployed in the film to verbally and non-verbally construct and express the psychology of the character of Anton Chigurh.

He is depicted as a man who is not ready to accept any kind of intrusion in his life, not even the smallest, and is ready to react instantly, should this happen. A man who is able to translate domination into words and to corner his 'victim' on more than one occasion, until his aim has been reached. He is, in actual fact, the only character in the exchange who asks personal questions and obtains the relative answers, besides being the only one who performs all the Face Threatening Acts present in the exchange – the threat to politeness being the least important on this occasion. Furthermore, the repetition of the strategies he deploys to obtain his short-term and long-term goals, (e.g. to ask question when he should provide answers, to exploit the repetition of SA's words against him, and so on), is also indicative of how methodical his *modus operandi* is.

It is also important to note his adherence to Fate, or, to put it in different terms, his belief to be the 'tool' through which Fate operates, which, on the one hand, allows him to think he is right to act the way he does, (or not to have any other choice – consider the whisper in [25] and [47]), and, on the other, to distance himself from his actions, which, being driven by some superior force, always tend to be someone else's fault (“*You need to call it. I can't call it for you, or it wouldn't be fair*”).

Although the rest of the film has been on more than one occasion precious to support and/or confirm the interpretation of the conversation taken in isolation, the above conversation in itself, together with its non-verbal elements and its multimodal rendering, is enough, when subjected to stylistic analysis, to induce the personality of the character.

That night in Malta, I did not know that, before this conversation, Anton Chigurh had already killed two people and I could not know that, by the end of the film, he would kill every main character apart from the sheriff and, ironically enough, the man he was chasing after.

But, thanks to the tools of linguistic interpretation of texts stylistics has provided me with, by the end of the conversation, I was fairly sure he was a methodical maniac who was ready and not afraid to kill. And it turned out that I was not wrong.

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ⁱ The conversation which will be subjected to stylistic analysis in this paper is in actual fact preceded by another conversation involving Anton Chigurh and an unknown driver. However, this conversation a) is much shorter, (offering therefore less material to analyze in order to arrive at a detailed interpretation of the character), and b) is part of the co-text of the conversation considered here, namely constitutes support material which can be used to confirm (or disconfirm) the conclusions to which the analysis of the decontextualized conversation has led.

ⁱⁱ By this point in the film, the name of the man has not been pronounced yet. However, his name is introduced here for ease of comprehension.

ⁱⁱⁱ He looks like an ordinary man who is still relatively young, wearing ordinary clothes but with what looks like a demanding hairstyle: his hair is indeed medium-length and appears to have been done (probably straightened) into a very orderly hairstyle (the comparison with the very short and easy-to-be-done hairstyle of the shop assistant is immediate). The visual ‘communicative function’ behind this hairstyle is not of paramount importance in this conversation, but it is probably worth mentioning it here, since it will soon become clear, as the film develops, that it is meant to constitute the first visual impact of Chigurh’s methodical behaviour, that is that of a man who never fails to do what he has set off to do and always finds the time to take good care of details, starting with his hairstyle, which is always perfectly in order.

^{iv} It could be objected that the interpretation of non-verbal signs in conversation is highly subjective and should be, therefore, left out of the analysis. However, this choice cannot be made in this case for a variety of reasons. To start with, a film is a multimodal product which is forced by its very nature and space/time restrictions to rely on visual/non-verbal elements as much as it relies on linguistic elements (if not even more in some cases). Quite often this makes it impossible to overshadow the visual component of the film. The conversation considered here, in particular, relies on AC’s appearance and expressions so much they *do* constitute part of the text (and an essential one if we consider that Xavier Bardem, the actor performing Chigurh, won the Academy Award for best supporting actor). With regard to the ‘subjectivity’ of the judgement, it is, alas, a concept scholars need to co-exist with, particularly when dealing with a multimodal product. However, the interpretation of non-verbal elements in this exchange has been carried out opting for the maximum objectivity possible. Indeed, it has been done a) only when strictly necessary, and b) with particular regard to the most obvious and blatant cases, namely exploiting the KOW which the actors and directors of the film, on the one hand, and the writer of this paper, on the other, share, as members of the ‘Western’ society which has produced and realised the film and in which the film itself is set.

^v Considering the exchange outside context, this represents a general interpretation: a complete stranger in a desolate place asks about one’s business and one, who does not like the query, remarks that the stranger should not ask similar questions. If, on the other hand, we take the context and co-text into consideration, we know that, by this point in the film, Chigurh has killed two people already, one of whom was a policeman. Therefore, any sign of ‘intrusion’ into his runaway represents a danger, to which he reacts instantly (and we will see, as the film develops, that murder represents his ‘usual reaction’). Once again, if we take the whole film into consideration, the turn constitutes another clue of Chigurh’s lethally dangerous personality. On the other hand, if we consider only the exchange above, that AC performs [5] to answer to a general question about the weather, rather than replying with a simple “Yes” or “No”, (a possibility offered by the directness of [4]), immediately triggers suspicion in the viewer, for it represents, at the very least, a sign of a quick-tempered personality – in actual fact, the only character in the film who claims he is a friend of Chigurh, Carson, will describe him as a man who “doesn’t have a sense of humour”.

^{vi} That the camera constantly moves from one interlocutor to the other, closing-up on one of the two in some moments of the exchange, is a means the directors use to visually underline the ‘struggle’ between the two interactants. In the text above it will be stressed in those cases where it is considered of major importance.

^{vii} Towards the end of the film, Chigurh’s friend Carson has a conversation with Llewellyn, the man Chigurh is chasing after. Three turns are particularly interesting here:

Carson: Don’t worry, I’m not the man who’s after you.

Llewellyn: I know that. I’ve seen him.

Carson: You’ve seen him? And you’re not dead?