

Educating Rita: to educate - transitive or intransitive verb?

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One of the hazards of globalisation is the increase of competition at the work place. In fact, the more competitive the market, the more education one seems to require in order to succeed. It follows that, in the past decades, continuous education became a fundamental feature in most technological societies. Consequently, more and more adults are going back to school hoping that education will help them escape the terrible fear of being left behind. It does not matter the age of the learner, the learning process should always be pictured as a social practice, i.e., learning takes place when social subjects negotiate knowledge through social action. Thus, by taking into consideration the socio-constructivist approach to learning and the systemic-functional approach to language I will investigate the learning process that takes place in the fictional story by Willy Russel - *Educating Rita*. I will be looking into important issues, such as: the real agent of the process of education, learner autonomy, power relation between teacher and student, reproduction of social practices and the voices of the participants involved in the process of learning.

Key Words: *learner autonomy, social practice, social identity, community of practice.*

BRIEF INTRODUCTION

“Our social context teaches us our language, and language makes us ourselves” (Richardson, 1992, 117). Although some linguists still believe that one can actually study language dissociated from its social context, in this paper I will claim that, as social beings, we use language for social interaction and that, consequently, learning should be seen as a social practice. Halliday and Hasan (1989) sum up this concept when they claim that “Knowledge is transmitted in social contexts, through relationships... And the words that are exchanged in these contexts get their meaning from... social activities with social agencies and goals.” Hence the authors highlight the importance of context in education. It follows that both context of situation and context of culture play a vital role in the learning process, that is, learning relates to the social action taking place, the relationship between participants and the institutional and ideological background of participants.

In addition, Allwright and Bailey (1991) call attention to the classroom as the place where hopefully learning takes place when teacher and student get together and interact socially. It is important then to realise that learning takes place as a result of a combination of several factors: learner's previous experience as a learner; his/her reason for studying; his/her background knowledge; the teacher's experience as a learner; the teacher's background knowledge; his/her knowledge of the subject etc.

In this essay, I will analyse the two-character play by Willy Russell: *Educating Rita*. The two characters are a university professor (Frank) and an adult student (Rita). Thus, by taking into consideration the socio-constructivist approach to learning and the systemic-functional approach to language I intend to investigate the learning process Rita goes through. Furthermore, I intend to answer the following questions. To what extent is Rita in control of her learning process? To what extent does Frank foster learner autonomy? What power relations come into play in the teacher-student interaction? In which ways does Rita construe and reproduce social practices? In this two-character play, which are the other 'voices' we hear? What do they represent?

It is worth pointing out here that, although the research object is a fictional piece of writing, it does provide a rather colourful and authentic illustration of the English society in the 1970's. Author Willy Russel was certainly able to mirror an ordinary real-life situation: a grown-up going back to school. Coming from a very similar background as his character Rita and having gone back to school as an adult himself, it is frequently argued that the play is in many ways autobiographical. Russel's official web site (<http://www.willyrussel.com>) supports this viewpoint:

[...] **Educating Rita**, which was inspired by his (Russel's) own experience of returning to education, is about a young woman working class woman who decides to study English with the Open University. Much of the comedy arises from her fresh, unschooled reaction to the classics of English literature, but she is never patronised by the author, who recognises from his own experience that education is a means of escape from one's own circumstances.

The Open University, online courses and other forms of schooling that can assure continuous education have become crucial to the globalised economy. It is actually through continuous education that the work force has been able to fight for a place in a highly

competitive market. Therefore, fiction becomes reality, i.e., Russel's fictional piece of writing becomes exceptionally relevant to our present day as it illustrates the search for education as a way to keep competitive. As pointed out by Professor Dhanarajan (1997), the president of the Commonwealth of Learning,

There is a fear that globalization is bringing about the dominance of knowledge by a few countries/actors and their power. [...] The twenty-first century is expected to be a knowledge-based one – livelihoods will be dependent on the control of airwaves, hard and software. One important strategy to develop, maintain and frequently restore competitiveness is through more and continuous education.

Functional approach to language

As mentioned before, I will adopt a systemic-functional view of language, that is, one that conceives language through its social use. Therefore, language can be seen “as sets of possible options, as systems of **choices**. In a context, there are a number of meanings that speakers might express, and a number of wordings that they might use to express them” (Thompson, 1996: 221). These choices can be organised functionally through 3 metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday, 1994). The *ideational* metafunction entails the use of language to represent the world. The *interpersonal* metafunction represents the language used for interaction among discourse participants. Finally, the *textual* metafunction is responsible for the way information is encoded in texts, either spoken or written.

According to Hasan (1999: 224) all linguistic choices are determined by the social context. Matthiessen and Halliday (1997) define context as “a higher-level semiotic system in which language is ‘embedded’ [...] It is realized through language; and being realized through language it means that it both creates and is created by language.” Thus, the functional approach to language defines two layers of context for all texts: context of situation and context of culture. The first one is determined by three parameters: field, tenor and mode. These parameters are respectively linked to the 3 metafunctions mentioned before, i.e., ideational, interpersonal and textual. The second layer of context (context of culture) consists of the cultural setting (linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects) in which language is embedded.

Moreover, the functional approach to language can also be viewed through Bakhtin's (1981: 131) eyes as he points out the difference between theme and meaning. According to him, the meaning of a word is an inferior stage, limited to the linguistic system (utterance level), while the theme belongs to a superior stage, i.e., beyond utterance level. The latter implies a choice from an infinite number of options in the linguistic system according to a particular context, which brings extra-linguistic factors into play.

Defining the context

Summary of the play

The story takes place in northern England in the 1970's. Dr. Frank Bryant is a disillusioned university professor who defines his daily practice as an appalling teacher teaching appalling students. He is depressive and has a severe drinking problem. Divorced once already, he is also in an unhappy relationship with his current girlfriend.

Rita is a working-class woman who is fed up with her profession (hairdresser) and lifestyle. She believes herself to be different from other women her age because she does not want children. She also feels lonely because nobody around her seems to understand her needs, not even her husband. She wants to discover herself and ultimately change her life through education. Therefore, she enrolls for an Open University programme.

Author Willy Russell was born to hard-working parents just outside Liverpool, England. His father was a factory worker and his mother worked in a warehouse. The play may seem autobiographical, as Russell also faced similar difficulties when gaining his education.

Context of situation

In order to establish the context of situation in the play, one has to analyse its three parameters (field, tenor and mode) in relation to the metafunctions of the language (ideational, interpersonal and textual). Firstly, the world is represented in the play via a teaching practice, actually, one-to-one literature tutorials at the Open University. Secondly, the relationship between the participants, Frank and Rita, is very informal, quite different to a regular class at UK universities. For example, during the class, smoking, drinking and

swearing are allowed. In addition, the teacher/student relationship is very often replaced by what resembles a chat between two old mates or even two lovers.

Frank: Because – I think you're marvellous. Do you know, I think you're the first breath of air that's been in this room for years. (p.178)

Rita: Because you're a mad piss artist who wants to throw his students through the window, an' I like you. (p.180)

Rita: Are you married?

(...)

Frank: Is my wife at all relevant?

Rita: What? You should know, you married her. (p.185)

Finally, the information in the play is conveyed through spoken and written discourse, that is, the face-to-face interaction between Frank and Rita, and Rita's essays.

Context of Culture

The story takes place in a stratified society marked by social class discrimination, where going to university is a privilege working-class people cannot normally afford, unless they are accepted to an Open University programme, for instance. In addition, individual social status is, for example, determined by how prestigious their jobs are and how they speak. Thus if one does not speak 'The Queen's English' one is often considered less important, or even ignorant.

In order to have a clearer picture of the context of culture here, it is necessary to point out a few intertextual references. Firstly, the Open University is an educational organisation founded by the UK Labour Party, aiming to provide opportunities for those wishing to pursue higher education on a part-time or distance learning basis. Therefore, it is very popular with those who cannot attend traditional university classes, namely, the disabled, prison convicts, and people in full-time employment. This is why Rita does not consider the Open University a 'proper' university with 'proper' students.

Rita: I was dead surprised when they took me. I don't suppose they would have done if it'd been a proper university. The Open University's different though, isn't it? (p. 171)

Rita:[...] You work for the ordinary university, don't y'? With the real students. The Open University's different, isn't it? (p. 171)

Actually, Rita's concern is not so unlikely since Frank, a representative of the academic world, also displays prejudice against the Open University. Below is a part of Frank's phone conversation with his girlfriend just before Rita comes into his office for the first time.

Frank: [...] Of course I'm still here... Because I've got this Open University woman coming, haven't I? [...] I probably shall go to the pub afterwards, I shall need to go to the pub afterwards, I shall need to wash away the memory of some silly woman's attempts to get into the mind of Henry James [...] Oh God, why did I take this on? (p.169)

I have highlighted some words to point out Frank's prejudice. Firstly, he does not refer to Rita as an Open University student, but as 'this Open University **woman**'. In addition, he expresses his disbelief in her being able to learn ('**silly woman's attempts**') as well as his belief that the process of teaching her will be rather painful to him ('**wash away the memory**' and '**Oh God**'). Finally, Frank does not mitigate his opinion at all, on the contrary, he shows great engagement in what he says, which can be seen by the use of modality ('**Of course**', '**probably shall go**', '**shall need**'). "Modality means the speaker's judgement of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he is saying. A proposition may become arguable by being presented as likely or unlikely, desirable or undesirable – in other words, its relevance specified in modal terms" (Halliday, 1994: 75).

There are two other really important intertextual references one should consider in order to characterize the context of culture. The play has been described by many as a parody of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. In Greek mythology, Pygmalion, the lonely sculptor, falls in love with his own sculpture, Galatea - a woman made out of ivory. Indeed, one could make such analogy, as Frank falls in love with Rita, his creation.

*Rita: If you were mine an' y' stopped out for days y' wouldn't get back in.
Frank: Ah, but Rita, if I were yours would I stop out for days? (p.187)
Frank: ... What I'd actually like to do is take you by the hand and run out of this room forever. (p.188)*

Another common analogy attributed to the play is the one with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, which is actually mentioned in the play. Frank is probably referring to the fact that he believes he has created a monster out of the '*the first breath of air*' that once

entered his room. Actually, creation turns on creator and creator has no longer power over it.

Frank: Oh, I've done a fine job on you, haven't I?

Rita: It's true Frank. I can see now.

Frank: You know, Rita, I think – I think that like you I shall change my name; from now on I shall insist upon being known as Mary, Mary Shelley – do you understand that allusion, Rita? (p. 227)

Rita: Can't bear what, Frank?

Frank: You, my dear – you...

Rita: I'll tell you what you can't bear, Mr Self-Pitying Piss Artist; what you can't bear is that I'm educated now. (p.228)

Socio-constructivist approach to learning

In this paper, I will be looking into learning as part of human nature just like any one of our senses. Since we are social beings, learning is also conceived as a social phenomenon. In other words, I will contemplate learners as “being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. [...] Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (Wenger, 1998, 4).

According to Halliday (1978, 1), “the construal of reality is inseparable from the construal of the semantic system in which the reality is encoded”. Thus, language establishes a dialectical relationship with society where language constructs social practices as well as reproduces them. Indeed, as put forward by Bakhtin when criticizing more formalist linguists, it is a mistake to try and dissociate language from its ideological or life meaning (Jobim e Souza, 1994: 98).

It follows that there is a strong connection between the social environment and our capacity of thinking, speaking as well as learning. Vygotsky (1994, 46), for example, highlights the importance of taking the social perspective into consideration when conceptualising learning by revealing that “the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the individual”. In reality, human knowledge can only be understood as socially and collectively built. As a consequence, the school becomes an institution based on difference, i.e., difference in

knowledge, power, age and, very often, social class (Pedro, 1992: 21). That is why any pedagogical event can only be analysed if its social context is taken into account.

Some principles on the social perspective of learning

I will now present examples from the text to illustrate some of Wenger's principles (1998: 226-228) on the social perspective of learning.

a) "Learning is inherent in human nature". Therefore, one should be able to learn at any point in life. However, Rita is in two minds about going back to school at her age on account of what society (here represented by her husband) dictates.

Rita: ... He says there's a time for education. An' it's not when y' twenty-six an' married. (p.209)

b) "Learning is fundamentally experiential and fundamentally social." One learns through experience and competence. In the example from the play, Rita produces a passionate essay on *Macbeth* – the first play she saw at a professional theatre. Frank is faced with a rather paradoxical predicament: he wants to praise her work, which represents an enormous victory in life (having gone to a theatre), but her work does not follow the academic genre conventions required to pass an exam. In other words, Rita learnt a lot through this personal experience, nevertheless, her written work was not good enough, just an 'emotional statement' lacking academic style.

Frank: It's an unashamedly emotional statement about a certain experience. [...] But in terms of what you're asking me to teach you of passing exams... [...] In those terms it's worthless. It shouldn't be, but it is; in its own terms it's – it's wonderful. (p.210)

c) "Learning transforms our identities." In the process of learning one changes one's identity, taking on different practices and taking part in different communities of practice. In the extract below, Rita points out that Frank has helped transforming her identity – she is now an educated woman. She also accuses Frank of not being supportive of this process. She believes he resents the fact that he is losing control over his creation.

Rita: ... I'm educated, I've got what you have an' y' don't like it because you'd rather see me as the peasant I once was; you're like the rest of them – you like to keep your natives thick, because that way they still look charming and delightful. (p. 228)

d) “Learning is a matter of social energy and power.” The essence of *Educating Rita* is the assumption that one can escape his/her own unfortunate social condition through education. Hence Rita’s attempt to achieve social energy and power by educating herself. However, it takes Rita a while to figure out that the process of learning consists of a constant negotiation of meaning, in which things make sense if they become relevant to the learner. According to Demo (2001, 51) learning only takes place once the subject of the process achieves creativity and critical analysis; before that there is only manipulation of someone else’s views. Whilst learning, Rita ‘borrows’ other people’s opinions until she is able to build her own and, consequently, realise the power of her discourse. In fact, Rita’s social empowerment is only achieved through realisation of her own power of discourse.

Frank: I could have told you; but you'll have a much better understanding of something if you discover it in your own terms. (p.195)

e) “Learning means dealing with boundaries.” In the process of learning Rita goes through different identities, that is, she pushes the boundaries of her identity and experiment with other identities whilst building herself a new one. Unfortunately, Frank fails to identify the process Rita goes through and accuses her of having no identity of her own. In other words, Rita is not the same person she was the first time she knocked on Frank’s door. That identity is gone for good. Now she seeks a new identity, one that matches her new level of education. Frank’s inability to realise this process upsets Rita tremendously since she believes Frank is not concerned with her lack of identity, but the fact that she, somehow, abandoned the one he had shaped for her. In other words, the creation has turned on the creator.

*Rita: Yeh, that's what you say, Frank; but Trish and me and some others were talking [...]
Frank: What I'm saying is that it's up to the minute, quite acceptable, trendy stuff about Blake; but there's nothing of you in there.
Rita: Or maybe Frank, y' mean there's nothing of your views in there. (p.222)*

Roles: teacher and student

In the socio-constructivist approach to learning the roles of teacher and student are different from the traditional classroom in which students have a passive status. To put it another way, students are seen as agents in the construction of their own knowledge (Pedro, 1992: 18). Actually, teacher and student are at the same time tutor and tutee as they constantly interact in a process of negotiation of meaning (Freire, 1998: 25). In fact, it becomes clear in the play that Frank benefits from the tutorials, as he learns from Rita.

Frank: My God. You think you've reformed me? (p.182)

According to the same author (1979, 28), one has to be responsible for their own learning process, therefore, the verb educate should be envisaged as intransitive. In other words, no one can actually educate another person. This certainly opposes to the very title of the play in question – *Educating Rita*.

Being part of the working class and living in the 1970s, Rita was brought up to think of a teacher as the fountain of knowledge and a student as an empty bottle. Thus, Rita, consistently, reproduces that social practice in her discourse.

Frank: What do you want to know?

Rita: Everything. (p. 173)

Frank: What can I teach you?

Rita: Everything. (p.179)

Rita: [...] I wish I could talk like that. It's brilliant. (p. 187)

Frank tries to put forward to Rita a rather different view of the roles of student and teacher. He explains that students cannot be seen as blank sheets of paper. On the contrary, as a teacher, Frank has experience in teaching and knows the subject he teaches really well, however, Rita as a learner does not go 'empty-handed' into the classroom (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 18). In fact, she has experience in learning and she also brings in her motivation for learning as well as the desire to have her objectives met.

Frank: Because – I think you're marvellous. Do you know, I think you're the first breath of air that's been in this room for years. (p.178)

Frank: [...] between you, me and the walls, I'm actually an appalling teacher. [...] appalling teaching is quite in order for most of my appalling students. And the others manage to get by despite me. But you're different You want a lot, and I can't give it. Everything I know – and you must listen to this – is that I know absolutely nothing. (p.179)

Frank: Well – if it'd make you happier you take my chair.

Rita: No. You're the teacher, you sit there. (p.181)

Although the learner is perceived as autonomous, Demo (2001, 52) points out that, living in society, one cannot wish for full autonomy without trespassing other people's rights. "Claims have been made, however, that autonomy should not necessarily imply total independence" (Aoki, 1999: 143). Paradoxically, then, autonomous learning to a certain extent still implies some sort of dependency on the teacher until learner cuts loose.

Frank: Rita, I thought you weren't interested in reforming me.

(...)

Frank: What do I do when, in appalling sobriety, I watch you go away and disappear, my influence gone forever?

Rita: Who says I'm gonna disappear? (p.215)

It is important to draw attention to the fact that Frank seems to be aware of the necessity for a healthy dependency as well as the need to let Rita go when she's ready.

Frank: ... but it will not be a tragedy, because I shall be glad to watch you go. (p.216)

Affect in the process of learning

Affect plays an essential role in human social interaction. If one is to consider learning in a social perspective, then, affect must be taken into account as well. "Intellect works in concert with feeling, so if I hope to open my students' minds, I must open their emotions as well." In other words, Palmer (1998, 63) puts forward the need to envision learners as complete human beings possessing both heads and hearts.

As Rita embraces her difficult mission of becoming educated, she realizes she will only succeed if she empathises with the teacher. As she cannot count on support from her husband, family or friends, a good relationship with Frank is paramount to her success. From the very beginning, Rita tests Frank to find out if he's the right tutor for her. She uses different methods, such as asking to smoke and using swear words. Frank was so receptive to her that she gives in and decides to carry on studying with him.

Rita: If I'd got some other tutor I wouldn't have stayed.
Frank: What sort of other tutor.
Rita: Y' know, someone who objected to swearin'.
Frank: How did you know I wouldn't object?
Rita: I didn't. I was just testin' y'. (p.174)

Bearing in mind the many differences educational institutions encapsulate, learners need to feel safe and respected in order to successfully learn. They need to feel that the teacher values their thoughts and, therefore, is not going to laugh at their questions, for example. "As learners, they are influenced by their feelings and do not learn when anxious or stressed. Learning for them is most effective when it is personally relevant and when information is presented through different sensory modes." (Arnold and Brown, 1999: 7) For Rita this is even more important, for losing face can be harder for an adult than a child. In addition, because of her working-class background, she believes she is not as clever as Frank. Rita signals that to Frank as she asks him not to laugh at her.

Rita: What does assonance mean?
Frank (half spluttering): What? (He gives a short laugh.)
Rita: Don't laugh at me. (p.175)

This example also illustrates an important pedagogical issue very often discussed in the socio-constructivist approach to learning: learning opportunity. As learning and teaching cannot be seen as 100% paired, that is, one cannot assure that what teachers teach is exactly what students learn, then it is essential to consider all possibilities of learning opportunities, both created by teachers or students (Allwright, 2003). In the exchange in question, Rita creates a learning opportunity by not being afraid to lose face. Frank realises that was perhaps the best moment to teach something that can be quite difficult (assonance), particularly because she was intrinsically motivated.

Throughout the play there are moments in which both Frank and Rita realise that talking about their personal lives is far more important than discussing literature. Thus, acting as mates instead of teacher and student, they try to help each other. They both compare these moments to being at the pub with a friend.

Rita: No. I don't wanna talk about him. Why was Chekhov a comic genius?

Frank: Rita. Don't you think that for tonight we could give the class a miss? [...] Let's leave it for tonight. Let's go to the pub and drink pots of Guinness and talk. (p.198)

Rita: Why did you stop being a poet?

Frank: That is a pub question. (p.199)

Frank: Perhaps you' like to take notes! When you have to answer a question on Forster you can treat the examiner to an essay called Frank's marriage!

Rita: Oh, go way. I'm only interested. (p.186)

Frank: What's wrong, Rita? (...) Where are you going to stay? (...) Look, come on, sit down.

Rita: It's all right – Ill be OK. Just give me a minute. (She dries her eyes.) What was me Macbeth essay like.

Frank: Oh, sod Macbeth. (p.209)

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, making the learning process relevant to the student is essential, particularly when they are supposed to be responsible for their own knowledge building. The more relevant the subject matter, the more intrinsically motivated learners will be. Nevertheless, neither the syllabi nor the exams take that into consideration, as illustrated by the following exchange.

Rita: All right. But I hated that book. Can't we do somethin' I like?

Frank: But the sort of stuff you like is not necessarily the sort of thing that will form the basis of your examination next Christmas. (p.185)

Social identity

During the process of education Rita becomes very confused about her social identity. Indeed, there is a stage in which, she feels like she does not belong anywhere. She does not quite belong to the 'educated people' community and definitely not in the 'pub' with her husband and friends.

Rita: ... Because I'm a freak. I can't talk to the people I live with any more. An' I can't talk to the likes of them on Saturday, or them out there, because I can't learn the language. I'm a half-caste. (p.208)

“The term communities of practice refers to genres and lexis, but especially to many practices and values that hold communities together or separate them from one another (...) People are born, or taken involuntarily by their families and cultures, into some communities of practice” (Johns, 1997: 52). In order to map out Rita's identity, one needs to contemplate her membership to numerous communities, namely: the British, married

women, hairdressers, the working class, university students, Open University students etc. Her membership to these communities was either by birth or by choice.

Being part of each of these communities implies that Rita has got certain category-bound features that define her as a category member. For the purpose of my analysis I shall concentrate on Membership Categorisation Device (MCD) of 'social class', therefore, Rita's membership to the working class category. For example, Rita watches ITV while Frank (middle-class) only watches the BBC; Rita mentions Elliot referring to 'Elliot Ness' (the TV cop who caught Al Capone) and Frank thinks of T. S. Eliot (American poet); etc.

Rita: You wouldn't watch ITV though, would y'? It's all BBC with you, isn't it? (p.177)

Frank: When you said Elliot I assumed you meant T.S. Eliot. (p.176)

In addition, the lexical choices one makes can also be considered a feature of one's category. Therefore, when Frank shows interest in a very informal expression Rita has used (be off one's cake = be soft, mental), she points out that his using the same expression would be rejected by other members of one of his communities of practice: his 'proper' students.

Rita: You can't. If you do it, it's slummin' it. Comin' from you it'd sound dead affected, wouldn't it? [...] You say that to your proper students they'll think you're off your – you know...(p. 183)

It is important to highlight, however, that "not only do categories imply features, but features imply categories" (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998: 2). In other words, if one is to display some features of the middle-class category, consequently one should, theoretically, get membership to that category as well. Rita despises her membership to the working class and displays certain characteristics which are commonly related to the middle class. In fact:

discourse communities are not monolithic and unitary. They are composed of individuals with diverse experiences, expertise, commitments and influence. There are considerable variations in the extent to which members identify with their myriad goals, methods and beliefs, participate in their diverse activities, and identify themselves with conventions, histories or values.

Hyland (2000, 9)

For this reason Rita believes that she will be able to gain membership to the middle class through education. Nevertheless, Rita's quandary lies on the fact that she is still perceived by society as a member of the working class, since this social identity was ascribed to her from birth and she is economically and culturally bound to it.

Rita: When I was a kid I always wanted to go to a boardin' school. [...] I told me mother once. She said I was off me cake. (p.182) → Boarding schools were not part of the script to be followed by a working-class girl.

Rita: I've been realizin' for ages that I was, y' know, slightly out of step. [...] See, I wanna discover meself first. (p. 178) → Instead of having babies at the age of 26 just like any other working-class girl, Rita allows herself to dream of a different future.

Rita: [...] But sometimes I hate them. God, what's it like to be free? (p.174) → Rita despises her membership to the working-class, which she views as a prison to her individuality.

The search for self-characterisation

Owing to Rita's ascribed membership to the working-class, she seems doomed to assume a social identity, which might not be in accordance with her aspirations in life, but is expected by the other members of her community. As Widdicombe (1998, 53) puts it:

once a person's category affiliation has been assumed, it is always potentially the case that the sense or purpose of his or her actions, beliefs, opinions and so on, may be understood solely by virtue of what is known commonly or expected about that category, and without consulting him or her.

Social identities that are ascribed by birth and geography impose genuinely strong bounds, which are particularly difficult to break, hence Rita's predicament.

As Rita decides to use education to fight some shared features of the working-class membership, namely, conformity and loss of individuality, her ascribed social identity haunts her throughout the process. As a consequence, Rita does not feel like she belongs to the middle class. This inferiority feeling is consistently sustained throughout the play, particularly in the very beginning, when her ties to the working class are still very strong. As Halliday and Hasan (1989, 89) put forward "lexical cohesive relations are instrumental in permitting the interpretation of those implicit items that lack both a specific linguistic

referent, and a situational clue”. Consequently, lexical chains, for instance, can be used to reveal hidden agendas in texts. In the following examples, the words in bold are items of a lexical chain present in Rita’s discourse all the way through the play, which reveals a great feeling of inferiority and conformity typical of the working class. As a matter of fact, I believe that Rita subconsciously reproduces the social practices of her community in her discourse.

*I was **dead surprised** when they took me. I don’t suppose they would have done if it’d been a **proper university**. The Open University’s **different** tough, isn’t it?” (p. 171) → The Open University is the form of education available to the working class for it allows people to study while working full time.*

*[...] You work for the **ordinary university**, don’t y’? With the **real students**. The Open University’s **different**, isn’t it?” (p. 171) → Rita does not consider herself a real or a proper student, but a second-class student who studies at the Open University.*

*Rita: You probably won’t think it’s **any good**.*

Frank: Why?

*Rita: It’s **the sort of poetry you can understand**. (p. 172) → Even the kind of literature Rita reads is different from the one Frank or his ‘real’ students are used to reading.*

*Rita: The ones who come here all the time. The **proper students**. (p.182)*

*Rita: You can’t. If you do it, it’s slummin’ it. Comin’ from you it’d sound dead affected, wouldn’t it? [...] You say that to your **proper students** they’ll think you’re off your – you know... (p.183)*

*Rita: Then I’ll buy a **proper** dress, the sort of dress you’d only see on an **educated woman**, on the sort of woman who knows the difference Jane Austen an’ Tracy Austin. (p.184) → The adjective ‘proper’ is repeatedly used in the play associated with what Rita wishes for in life: to become educated.*

*Rita: So why are y’ **givin’** me an education?*

Frank: Because it’s what you want, isn’t it? (p.188) → Rita feels inferior to Frank. She believes he can actually give her an education. She cannot think of herself as able to work towards one herself.

As put forward by McKinlay and Dunnet (1998: 47) the self-categorization theory draws attention to the fact that one’s sense of self is dependent on the context. Consequently, is Rita making constructive efforts to pick a self-categorization that is compliant with her social aspiration? Rita’s membership to the working-class community of practice is involuntary – she was born into it. However, “academic communities, on the other hand, are selected and voluntary, at least after compulsory education” (Johns, 1997: 53). To put it another way, in order to become a member of the academic community Rita

will need to master the academic genre conventions both in written and oral formats, which is particularly hard for someone who is not daily exposed to academic discourse, as Frank emphatically points out in the example below.

F: [...] There is a way of answering examination questions that is expected. It's a sort of ritual, it's a game, with rules. And you must observe those rules. (p.193)

Ideological features in discourse

Bakhtin's dialogicality of the utterance can be described as a chain of utterances in which the one being uttered represents both previous or future ones and which is always addressed to someone, not necessarily the person being spoken to. Not always, though, can one identify the prior text, that is, the text being referred to. In this case, the reproduction of ideology is said to be more effective for it is less explicit. According to Fairclough (1992, p. 121), sometimes "the 'other text' is not an individual specified or identifiable other text, but a more nebulous 'text' corresponding to general opinion (what people tend to say, accumulated textual experience)." In other words, there could be reference to some values and beliefs shared by the members of a community of practice or a culture.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is basically the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, echo, and so forth.

(Fairclough, 1992, 84)

That is to say, texts are part of a 'communication chain' where one text repeats or makes reference to prior texts and is mentioned in subsequent texts. It follows that intertextual relations should always be analysed in a three dimensional perspective: text production, reproduction and consumption. Then, when creating a text, the author refers to past texts or general concepts according to his/her assumptions of the target audience. That is to say, authors are aware that coherence is not a property of the text, but depends on the intertextual relations readers make while interpreting the text.

*Rita: Trish says that no matter how difficult I may find it I must persevere.
Frank: Well will you kindly tell Trish that I am not giving a tutorial to a Dalek?*

In the example above, Frank uses the word 'Dalek' which refers to an evil creature that talks in a strange voice and kills people in the popular British TV series – Dr. Who. This piece of information is culturally bound to the people who watch the programme.

When texts are 'consumed', readers may or not interpret it the way the author intended. As Fairclough (1992, 136) highlights, "not all interpreters are compliant: some are to a greater or lesser extent, and more or less explicitly, resistant." To put it another way, author and reader engage into a negotiation of meaning, which will be highly influenced by the ideological orientation of both parties. "Text production and text reception constitute the major part of the process of human communication and, as such, are inevitably subject to constraints which ensure that we are dealing not with one text but two; the writer's text and the reader's", highlights Bell (1991, 212). For instance, the use of 'Dalek' by Frank establishes a very strong ideological agenda that can only be put forward if the reader knows the TV character. By comparing Rita to a Dalek, Frank is criticising her for losing her identity and being influenced by Trish's. Dalek's strange voice is actually Rita's attempt to 'talk properly'. In addition, mentioning Dalek here is yet another reference to *Frankenstein*, that is the 'monster' that Rita has become.

Rita: I have merely decided to talk properly. As Trish says there is not a lot of point in discussing beautiful literature in an ugly voice.

Frank: You haven't got an ugly voice; at least you didn't have. Talk properly. (p. 217)

Guess who's really talking

As mentioned before one cannot conceive language without its ideological value, everything one says actually reveals ideological viewpoints. Indeed, ideology depends on the way reality is presented. Nevertheless, since any representation of reality depends on language, it also depends on choosing from a diversity of options in the language system. As a result, any account of reality can hardly be considered the truth, but how the writer chose to describe it. In short, as stated by Hodge and Kress (1979, p. 17) "Short of having been there ourselves and witnessed the 'same' event, we can get no nearer the truth than this."

It is feasible then that the discourse of a community of practice can picture its social subjects in such a way that its well-established power relationships cannot be altered, but,

instead, seen as natural, general opinion. In the short exchange below, Rita challenges the idea that pulp fiction is not considered literature. Frank does not give any thought to her question, but reproduces the domineering social values by treating the matter as a piece of shared general knowledge and, therefore, indisputable.

Frank: I said refer to other works but I don't think the examiner, God bless him, will have read, (he consults the paper) A Stone For Danny Fisher. (p.189) → Reference to Harold Hobbins.

Frank: Devouring pulp fiction is not being well read.

[...]

Frank: Yes. Yes. But you seem to be under the impression that all books are literature.

Rita: Aren't they?

Frank: No.

Rita: Well – well how d'y' tell?

Frank: I – erm – erm – one's always known really. (p.190/191)

Consequently, extra linguistic factors are pictured as a constitutive part of the utterance and so are the other voices present in one's discourse (Amorim, 2001). In other words, because we are social beings bound to a social context, so is our discourse. By the same token, our discourse construes and reproduces social practices, therefore, in our utterances we do construe and reproduce what other members of our social context, our communities of practice think and say. "Social category memberships thereby become internalized as aspects of the self-concept and hence identity has a real psychological existence; it is an intrinsic and relatively stable aspect of the self-concept" (Widdicombe, 1998: 193). In other words, some of the values shared by a community of practice become so fossilized that its members reproduce them without thinking. In fact, when one of the members starts questioning the rules, then other members become insecure and may consider him/her a traitor. This is what happens to Denny, Rita's husband.

Rita: ...He said I betrayed him. I suppose I have [...] I know he's right. But I couldn't betray meself. (p.209)

Rita: Denny tried to stop me comin' tonight. [...] He hates me comin' here. Its like drug addicts, isn't it? They hate it when one of them tries to break away. It makes me stronger comin' here. That's what Denny's frightened of. (p.195)

Rita: See, if I'd started takin' school seriously I would have had to become different from me mates, an' that's not allowed. (p. 183)

Rita tries to break free from the ties that bound her to working-class values, but her discourse is full of snatches representing other people's voices. This subconscious repetition of other people's ideas is a clear example of how discourse reproduces social practice of a particular community of practice.

Rita: All right. It'll probably have a job findin' my brain. (p.172) → The line refers to an earlier comment that smoking may kill brain cells, Rita echoes the voice of her community of practice and reproduces the idea that working-class people are less intelligent.

Rita: You wouldn't watch ITV though, would y'? It's all BBC with you, isn't it? (p.177) → Again Rita echoes what she's heard all her life, i.e., that ITV is meant for poor people and, therefore, not as good as BBC, rather than just different.

Rita: I'm twenty-six. I should have had a baby by now; everyone expects it. (p. 178) → Once more it is not Rita talking, but the voices of her peers.

R: ... I didn't want to come to your house to play the court jester.

F: You weren't being invited to play that role. I just – just wanted you to be yourself. (p.207) → Again Rita reproduces what Denny and her mum think, that is, that she belongs to the working class and trying to deny it is silly.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to draw some conclusions, I would like to revisit the questions I pointed out in the beginning of this paper as an outline for my investigation. Firstly, to what extent is Rita in control of her learning process? Throughout the paper I tried to convey that, during her educating process, Rita goes through different identities until she finally finds one that suits her social aspirations. From the very beginning, Rita seems aware of the difficulties involved in the process. She knows that getting an education would mean drastic changes to her identity.

Rita: But these women, you see, they come to the hairdresser's cos they wanna be changed. But if you want to change y' have to do it from the inside, don't y'? Know like I'm doin'. Do y' think I'll be able to do it? (p.178)

She realizes her becoming educated is a rather tough challenge and by accepting it she would have to give up quite a few things in life, even her marriage. In short, she realises she has to be in the driver's seat, make choices in life and take the consequences. And sometimes, making choices means conforming to a new set of rules as she describes as follows.

Rita: I could have done. An' you'd have been proud of me if I'd done that an' rushed back to tell you – wouldn't y'? But I chose not to. I had a choice. I did the exam. (p.231)

Secondly, to what extent does Frank foster Rita's autonomy? In the beginning of the play, Frank stands up for a more social perspective of teaching, where the learner is responsible for their learning process. Therefore, he seems aware of the fact that the dependency on the tutor has to end one day. He even states that Rita will have to leave him when she's ready. However, the creator falls in love with his creation and it becomes too hard to depart from Rita. Therefore, he does not make it any easier for Rita to become more independent. In the following extract from the play, Frank questions Rita's attempt to get a new identity. He actually indicates rather sarcastically that she might not ever be accepted as an educated lady.

Frank: Found a culture have you, Rita? Found a better song to sing have you? No – you've found a different song, that's all – and on your lips it's shrill and hollow and tuneless. Oh, Rita, Rita... (p.228)

Thirdly, what power relations come into play in the teacher-student interaction? To start with Rita is totally dependent on Frank. She is breaking away from her social group and Frank is the only person to support her decision.

R: Well I just – I just had to tell someone who'd understand. (p.203)
R: Valuable? What's valuable? The only thing that I value is here, comin' here once a week. (p.210)

Frank and Rita establish a very informal relationship in which Frank claims no power for himself. His decisions concerning the tutorials are geared towards her main objective: passing the final exams. Nevertheless, as he falls in love with her he seems to begin to enjoy the power he has over his creation. In addition, this power can keep them closer to him for longer.

One could claim that Frank has a very hypocritical attitude towards Rita: he preaches that Rita should be more independent, but actually, tries to keep her on a short

leach. However, Rita realises that this hypocrisy is one of the features shared by the members of her new community of practice and that she would have to get used to it.

Frank: Read it, by all means read it. But don't mention it in an exam.

Rita: Aha. You mean, it's all right to go out an' have a bit of a slap an' tickle with the lads as long as you don't go home an' tell your mum? (p.191) → Rita refers to the fact that Frank tells her she can read pulp fiction but should not use it as reference in an essay. (A 'slap an' tickle' is a rather informal way to refer to a lighthearted sexual liaison.)

Rita: She spends half her life eatin' wholefoods an' health foods to make her life longer, an' the other half tryin' to kill herself. (p.231) → Here Rita refers to the hypocritical lifestyle her new friend Trish leads.

Finally, in which ways does Rita construe and reproduce social practices? Which are the other voices we hear? What do they represent? In the play, Rita goes from uneducated working-class Rita to educated Susan. She adopts the fake name because of a book she had read. Changing names is an attempt to sound more sophisticated. However, as explained earlier, she realises the change has to come from inside. The voices one hears in Rita's discourse show that Rita reproduces shared values from her community of practice. As she becomes more educated she starts building her own social practice.

By denying some shared values she acquired by birth and seeking others, she moves into different communities of practice. For example, she decides not to have a baby at the age 26; goes back to school; leaves home; changes jobs; and finally changes her name back to Susan when she realises she has a new identity. This movement represents a conscious effort on Rita's part to becoming educated. Having said that, the title of the play seems rather inappropriate as it portrays Rita as a passive participant. Therefore, I propose a 'proper' title – *Rita, Educating herself*.

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