Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 3 (52) – 2010

PROXEMICS AND IDENTITY IN *A BEAUTIFUL MIND*

Adina Ioana VELEA[1]

Abstract: *The paper aims at correlating identity with proxemics regarding the main character of the film A Beautiful Mind, namely John Nash. The film focuses on Nash's mathematical genius and his struggle with paranoid schizophrenia. Therefore, the analyzed data comprise extracts and several pictures from the movie representative for the human use of space. There is presented a theoretical background of proxemics and place/space is looked at as a topic and location for discourse, also exemplifying E.T. Hall's distance diagram. The analytical framework includes a semiotic approach added to the conversational analysis and discursive psychology. The conclusions of the paper sum up the identities of the main character that resulted from the conversational turns and the human use of space.*

Keywords: *proxemics, identity, discourse, fiction.*

1. Theoretical and analytical framework

Proxemics represents a meaningful issue that surrounds and concerns each of us if we are aware of it. The way in which people use their personal territory tells a lot about their identities and may provide guidence for a more efficient communication.

Within the literature of proxemics, there are several ways of looking at this term. For example, proxemics, according to Roventa-Frumusani (1999) represents the relation between the individual and the space. She also presents the perspective of the American anthropologist E.T. Hall, who saw proxemics as the study of the perception and use of space by the human being. He designed a diagram illustrating the intimate, personal, social and public distance (Figure 1).

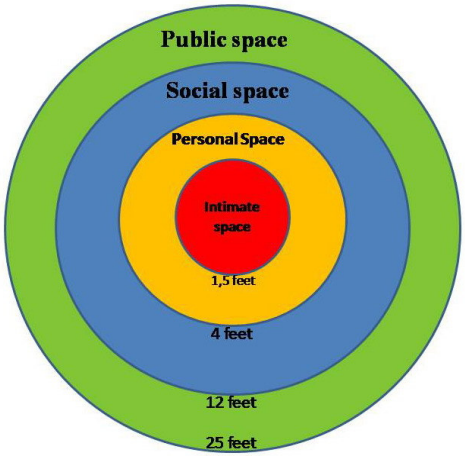


Fig. 1. *Hall's distance diagram*

[1] *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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According to Benwell and Stokoe (2006) there are two interrelated themes when talking about proxemics: (1) place/space as *produced in* and as a *topic of* discourse, and (2) place/space as the *location for* discourse. This dichotomy will be illustrated in chapters 3 and 4 of the article.

According to the Oxford dictionary, place is seen as "a particular area or position, a building or area of land used for a particular purpose" (Oxford 879) and the space is considered as "a gap or an area that is not filled in" (Oxford 1137). In *A beautiful mind*, a place may represent the tea room of Princeton University or even the University whereas the library windows may be considered spaces to be filled in by the main character's mathematical analysis.

Across the examples that are taken into consideration, there are numerous types of identity categories that are occasioned, ascribed and resisted to the main character: occupational, relational, familial and group identities. Each of these categories "is put to use in the course of accomplishing some practical action, and is connected to place and space through description and the locatedness of description" (Benwell & Stokoe 241).

Therefore, the article presents the relation between proxemics and identity, which is shaped by a semiotic approach, using the meaning of symbols, gestures and movements both in several pictures from the movie *A beautiful mind* and conversation lines between the main character and the persons he interacts with.

There is also taken into account a discursive psychology point of view, analytical method which was first brought into discussion by Edwards and Potter (1992) in their book of the same title. Its aim was to unpack and critique the topics of the social, developmental and cognitive psychology, and their methods of investigation (Edward & Potter 2001). Discursive psychology (DP) pays great attention to the use of language; "it comprises a fundamental shift from treating psychological states (for example, anger, intention, identity) as operating behind talk, causing people to say the things they do. In this way, DP challenges the traditional psychological treatment of language as a channel to underlying mental processes, and the experimental study of those processes. Instead, it studies how common-sense psychological concepts are deployed in, oriented to and handled in the talk and texts that make up social life. Thus language is not treated as an externalisation of underlying thoughts, motivations, memories or attitudes, but as performative of them" (Benwell & Stokoe 40). Using this point of view, the focus will be on conversational turns within the movie extracts and the social actions accomplished by them.

Next chapter gathers in a few lines information about the subject of the movie and introduces the relation between proxemics and identity; relation exemplified in chapters 3 and 4.

2. About *A beautiful mind*

The movie *A beautiful mind* presents the story of a real case study, named John Forbes Nash Jr., an American mathematician and economist. The film focuses on Nash's mathematical genius and his struggle with paranoid schizophrenia. His ambition is to succeed, to find an original idea to puzzle the world and distinguish himself from the others, all these against his disease and the weird looks of the world that surrounds him.

The director Ron Howard presents the story from the main character point of view, starting with John's life from the beginnings of his academic studies at Princeton University, the moment when the disease plays tricks on him, several illusions

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appearing in his life, the most important being Charles, the one John interacts with as his roommate and best friend, until later on in his life when he wins the 'battle' against his disease, due to his wife Alicia and is awarded the Nobel Prize for his accomplishments in Economic Sciences.

What draws the attention throughout this scenario is the fact that John has several interesting identities, most of them due to his use of space, as within the literature of proxemics, it is argued that "not only do people make spaces, but also spaces make people, by constraining them but also by offering opportunities for identity construction" (Benwell & Stokoe 211). Identity is therefore a fundamentally "spatial category, since the ideas of territory, self and "us" all require symbolic, socio-cultural and/or physical dividing lines with the Other" (Paasi 10). Spaces and places can "take on a symbolic significance around which identities are constituted and performed" (Hetherington 106).

Therefore, the article will discuss further on the way in which the place/space that Nash uses in the movie ascribes him several identities, and also how Hall's diagram of distance can be applied to the relation of Nash with different persons he interacts with.

3. Place/Space as a location for discourse

As Benwell and Stokoe (2006) remarked, place/space may be considered a location for discourse, where one's identity comes to light.

In *A beautiful mind*, the actor Russell Crowe presents John Nash as an introvert whose mind pictures patterns in light refraction, football matches, or flocks of pigeons (Figure 2), looking for his original idea that will make his life matter. The following extract consists of two turns between John and his colleague Martin and the comment of the other colleagues:

Example 1:

Martin: *Nash, taking your reverse constitutional?*

John: *I'm hoping to extract an algorithm to define their movement.*

The other colleagues: *Psycho…*

If the discursive psychology is applied to the conversational turns, the social action that John promotes is his **intention** to find an algorithm to define the pigeons' movement; it is the world that Nash constructs for himself in order to find the original idea. His reply makes his colleagues label him as *psycho*; the university courtyard where John analyses the pigeons represents the location where he develops his **occupational** identity. Figure 2 illustrates the movie picture including the setting representative for the above interaction and it also illustrates the **public** distance Nash exerts towards his colleagues that he treats as complete strangers.



Fig. 2 *Russell Crowe as John Forbes Nash, Jr. in A Beautiful Mind.* (www.imagesjournal.com)

Another movie scene where space is a location for discourse is represented by the following extract, an interaction between Nash and Alicia, on the occasion of her birthday; their meeting takes place in a restaurant, where John exerts his **intimate** distance, Figure 3, towards Alicia:

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Fig. 3. *Russell Crowe and Jennifer Connelly in A Beautiful Mind.* (www.imagesjournal.com)

Example 2:

John: *I did not have enough time to wrap it. Happy birthday! Reflective at every face of the glass, there are beautiful blinks. So if you look inside, you could see...Every possible colour.*
Alicia: *Every possible colour...*

As Figure 3 illustrates, John initiates an act of offering a present to his future wife. The semiotic approach includes the light refraction of the object offered by Nash. Colours are symbols of the world Nash develops inside him; the fact that Alicia repeats the same line: "Every possible colour" is a sign that she indulges with the special behaviour that John possesses. The restaurant, Alicia's birthday and John's gesture occasion a **relational** and **familial** identity for him, as a future husband.

4. Place/Space as a topic for dicourse

The second aspect when talking about proxemics according to Benwell and Stokoe (2006) is place/space as produced in and as a topic for discourse. This theme will be exemplified in two other scenes from the movie, correlating it with the ascription of identity.

The first scene is an example of space as a dynamic phenomenon as within the postmodern theory, "space and place are examined not as static, a priori or objective phenomena but as ongoingly and dynamically constructed tools of thought and action" (Lefebvre 26). The next lines illustrate a discussion between John and one of his illusions named Charles:

Example 3:

Charles: *Well, on the bright side, you have invented the window art*.
John: *This is the group who plays football. This is the cluster of pigeons fighting over bread and this woman here is chasing a man who stole a purse.*
Charles: *John, [...] that is weird.*

Applying discursive psychology and a semiotic approach to the above extract, it represents a conversation between John and his self, a sign of introversion. As Figure 4 illustrates, John invented the window art; space becomes a topic of discussion, as the character uses the library's windows for his mathematics analysis.



Fig. 4. *Russell Crowe as John Forbes Nash, Jr. in A Beautiful Mind* (www.imagesjournal.com)

His analytical framework includes symbols such as football, pigeons and purse. He uses events from the social external life in order to find an original

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idea to impress, therefore he tries to personalise his style of working, even if it is a weird one in comparison to the traditional perspective. Thus, he perceives his **personal** distance towards Charles, his illusion and to the symbols he illustrates in his analysis drawn on the library window. This setting involves John's **occupational** identity, the library becomes a place where he feels safe and also threatened if somebody violates his space.

The second scene that is discussed takes place in the tea room of Princeton University, a place that may be considered both topic and location for discourse. It is a place of exclusion, of threatening as the following lines illustrate:

Example 4:

Thomas King: *Shall we have tea?*
John: *I don't go in there. I usually just take my sandwich in the library.*
Thomas King: *Come on, John. Let's have some tea. It's a big day.*

The extract starts with an invitation to tea from Thomas King, the one who came at Princeton University to announce John about the Nobel Prize. The place where teachers usually drink tea at Princeton is not quite familiar to Nash; it is replaced by the library, a place for discussion and also for eating as far as John is concerned. He is encouraged to enter the room as it is a big day for him, thus the place becomes the location for discourse, too.

The place where John is afraid to enter is a special one, as it represents the room where the pen ceremony takes place. It is a ceremony that happens only in the movie, as there is no such custom in reality, in nowadays world universities. The faculty members labeled with capital letters present their pens to Nash (Fig. 5):

Example 5:

A: *Professor Nash*
B: *It's good to have you here, John.*
C: *It's an honor, sir.*
John: *Thank you very much.*
D: *A privilege, professor.*
E: *Professor.*
John: *Thank you. That is most certainly unexpected. Thank you.*



Fig. 5. *The pen ceremony*
(www.imagesjournal.com)

The place and the symbols that pens represent assign John a **group** identity that he never beneficiated of. It symbolizes that Nash was accepted and recognized in the mathematics community for his accomplishments. The event and the place occasion another ascription of identity to John as professor and sir. His reaction denotes his modesty: *That is most certainly unexpected*. If when entering the tea room, John manifested a **public** distance towards the people who stood there, this changes into a **social** one towards those who approach and offer Nash a pen.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has presented a general theoretical perspective on proxemics, as the relation between the individual and place/space in the fictional area represented by the film *A beautiful mind*. It was also analyzed the relation between place/space and the ascription of identity to the main character of the film.

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Thus, either place/space was seen as a topic or a location for discourse, the character being ascribed several types of identities such as occupational, relational, familial and group identity, subject positions also resulting from the discursive psychology point of view. Throughout several conversational lines and pictures from the movie, there was exemplified Hall's distance diagram, meaning the public, personal, social and intimate distance between the character and the persons he interacted with. Following the example of John Nash in *A beautiful mind*, it may be said that the human use of space is an essential research tool in shaping one's identity and in performing a better interpersonal communication.

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