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Crisis and Language in Ray Bradbury's *The Last Night of the World*

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Abstract. Language use in social crisis situations is usually described as being highly ideological, and it exhibits features of affect involving the use of negative evaluation of the perceived social enemies. The present study aims to explore the characters' language use in Ray Bradbury's short story entitled *The Last Night of the World* from a pragma-stylistic perspective. The fictional dialogue that takes place between the two protagonists creates and reflects the dynamics between them, where the unspeakable is only inferred rather than communicated. The analysis reveals special features of verbal communication in a crisis situation, especially focusing on the lexical and morphosyntactic properties, as well as on the verbal interaction and cooperation between the characters revealing their alignment. The results of the analysis prove that the verbal and non-verbal communication between the protagonists do not show the features described in crisis communication; therefore, the text of the story can be interpreted as subverting the generic language use in a critical situation.

Keywords: pragmalinguistic, fictional dialogue, crisis, dialogue

Introduction

Times of crisis occur in human life from time to time, and it can be literally vital how the people involved are affected by them: either as passive sufferers or as active shapers of events. Crisis situations have also been depicted in literary texts, and one of the main domains where such situations play a central role is science fiction literature. The present study proposes to examine the textual world of Ray Bradbury's short story entitled *The Last Night of the World* from a pragma-stylistic perspective, more specifically to have an insight into the conversation between the two characters. The short story, one of Bradbury's masterpieces, is particularly well-suited to address the topic of crisis and language relation. The linguistic approach to the text is meant to offer a rigorous analysis of the verbal

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manifestations of the two protagonists of the short story, through which their interrelationship and attitude towards each other and the world around them in a time of crisis can be perceived. The analysis is intended to approach the language of crisis as manifested in personal relationships and verbal exchanges, reflected in a sample of American fiction, testing the major hypothesis of the study as to whether the language of crisis as it is regularly described by the literature of the domain is confirmed or subverted by the Bradburian short story.

The structure of the study is as follows: First, the basic concepts of crisis and science fiction are defined, followed by a short survey of Ray Bradbury's oeuvre, especially focusing on the short stories of his volume *The Illustrated Man* (1951). A brief introduction into the language of crisis is then presented, followed by the methodological issues related to the analysis of verbal exchanges. The dialogue of the short story *The Last Night of the World* is then closely followed from a pragma-stylistic perspective, concluding with the results of the analysis and an outlook to some further research.

1. Genre, crisis, and language

The short story to be analysed belongs to the genre of science fiction defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Baldrick, ed. 2015) as "a popular modern branch of prose fiction that explores the probable consequences of some improbable or impossible transformation of the basic conditions of human (or intelligent non-human) existence". "It is a genre of fictional literature with imaginative content, but which is based on science. It relies heavily on scientific facts, theories, and principles as support for its settings, characters, themes, and plot-lines, which is what makes it different from fantasy."[1] Its authors use real science to create fictional stories to explore the possible future of mankind and the universe in a way that is both imaginative and realistic. In other words, science fiction is "a form of fiction that deals principally with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals".[2] Although earlier considered as a type of pulp fiction, the genre has gained greater respect in the 1950s due to the writings of Americans Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury and the British Arthur C. Clarke.

A more thorough consideration of the genre[3] (cf. Booker–Thomas 2009, Booker 2012, Hubble–Mousoutzanis 2014, Roberts 2016, Canavan–Link 2019) reveals that science fiction is usually distinguished as "hard" and "soft". While hard science fiction strictly follows scientific facts and principles, with its fixation on science and technology, focusing on natural sciences such as physics or

1 https://literaryterms.net/science-fiction/.
2 https://www.britannica.com/art/science-fiction.
3 https://www.britannica.com/art/science-fiction.

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astronomy, soft science fiction mainly focuses on social sciences involving human behaviour, such as psychology, politics, sociology, or anthropology, which entails that soft science fiction stories are mainly concerned with the possible scientific consequences of human behaviour, the aspects of near future, and "inner space". Ray Bradbury is one of the early representatives of "soft" science fiction. He is mainly interested in the advancement of science and technology according to its consequences on human beings and their character, having at their centre humans with their ordinary hopes and flaws, describing apocalyptic situations humans can cause themselves. His masterpiece, *Fahrenheit 451*, is a typical case in point. Bradbury's several short stories actually take place on Earth, and more often than not the stories are restricted to a small, familiar locale.[4]

One of the common topics of science fiction is linguistic connection with other civilizations, other intelligent beings in the universe. According to Walter E. Meyers (1980), science fiction is frequently concerned with the idea of communication, either with aliens and machines or using dead languages and languages of the future. In soft science fiction, however, an example of which is *The Last Night of the World*, human communication is at the centre of the text. As the conversation occurs in a critical situation, the concept of "crisis" will be briefly introduced in the following, while in the last section the language use of people in crisis situations will be outlined.

In general terms, crisis is defined as "a time of great danger, difficulty or confusion when problems must be solved or important decisions must be made" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). It also refers to a critical decisive moment when things are usually uncertain, difficult, or painful; a time when something very important for the future happens and when actions must be taken to avoid complete disaster or breakdown. On the other hand, "crisis is not necessarily a bad thing. It may be a radical change for good as well as bad" (Friedman 2002: 5, qtd. in Coombs 2010: 18). All these definitions are relevant when approaching the language of *The Last Night of the World* from a pragma-stylistic viewpoint due to the fact that – as the title of the short story indicates – the text presents a narrative and a dialogue in a fictional crisis situation set in a time of imaginary future. As the focus of this paper is on crisis communication, my approach is of linguistic nature.

Research has shown (cf., among others, Sellnow–Seeger 2013, Coombs–Holladay (eds) 2010, Chilluva–Ajiboye 2016) that language use in crisis situations is usually described as being highly ideological, and it exhibits features of affect involving the use of negative evaluation of the perceived social enemies. It intrinsically involves the expression of anger, fear, frustration, and it frequently entails the use of rhetorical elements such as exaggeration, metaphor, and irony – the tropes of indirect communication marking the speaker's detachment from the events eliciting their negative feelings.

4 http://www.editoreric.com/greatlit/authors/Bradbury.html.

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In this context, the term "crisis talk" is also brought into discussion, defined as "a dialogue genre that occurs in threatening situations of unpredictable outcome, with no obvious way out, and requiring spontaneous decision, unconventional strategies and unrehearsed actions in order to be mastered" (Sassen 2003: 45). As opposed to classical dialogues where the Gricean cooperative principle and the four maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner are followed, crisis talk is "disfluent, violates the Gricean maxims, is usually emotional, has high taboo word frequency, unterminated *uptake loops* (Gibbon 1981), *reprise utterances* (Ginzburg et al. 2001), and greater speech output quantity" (Sassen 2003: 45, emphases in the original). In the analysis of the Bradburian short story, it will be tested whether the characters' conversation can be described by these linguistic markers of crisis talk, in other words, whether the crisis situation is verbally reflected in the text.

2. The short story and its writer

Ray Douglas Bradbury (22 August 1920–5 June 2012) is an American fantasy, science fiction, horror, and mystery fiction author. Worldwide he is mostly famous for his novel entitled *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), but he is also known for hundreds of short stories written in the genre of science fiction. Some of his short story collections are: *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), *The Illustrated Man* (1951), and *I Sing the Body Electric* (1969), which made Bradbury become one of the most celebrated 20th-century American writers.

Bradbury's *The Last Night of the World* was originally published in the February 1951 issue of *Esquire* magazine, republished later that year in his collection of science fiction short stories entitled *The Illustrated Man*. The volume contains eighteen stories, the recurring topics of which are the harsh mechanics of technology and the psychology of people. Though apparently unrelated in their themes, the stories are still connected to each other by the frame story of the illustrated man, who is a vagrant former member of a carnival show, of an exhibition of biological rarities. The man's body is covered in tattoos which are individually animated, and each tells a different tale, representing visions of frightening futures. It must be remembered that – as several allusions are made to a war happening – the short story was written six years after the Second World War, four years into the Cold War, and one year into the Korean War.

As mentioned above, the story is a typical example of soft science fiction, as it does not mention any ray guns, space battles, green aliens with tentacles, or interplanetary politics. The story is relatively short and simple. The time is an explicitly stated day in the future, 19 October 1969, but one of the characters' fears of the atomic bomb and germ warfare point to the anxieties that characterized the America of the 1950s, when the short story was published. A couple awakens to

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the knowledge that the world is going to an end that very evening. Nonetheless, they go through their normal evening routines, acting and conversing calmly waiting for "the last night of the world". Finally, they put their children to bed, and they go to bed themselves, saying good night to each other with their hands clasped and heads put together. The summary of the story foretells the protagonists' "irregular" verbal and non-verbal behaviour regarding "regular" crisis communication outlined above. These irregularities will be pursued in the following analysis.

3. Methodology: Approaching fictional dialogue with pragmatic and stylistic means

The text of the short story will be analysed from a pragma-stylistic viewpoint, highlighting those aspects of the characters' conversation that reveal the verbal cues standing behind the speech context. It wishes to continue the line of research carried out in the domain of linguistic approach to literary texts (see Toolan 1985, 1987; Simpson 2004; Leech–Short 2007; Bronwen 2012; Short 2014; Lambrou 2014; Bousfield 2014; Chapman 2014; Nykänen–Koivisto 2016, among others). The linguistic analysis wishes to illuminate the interpretation of this piece of literary text by examining how the verbal behaviour of the characters underpins or even emphasizes one reading of the short story. The characters' speech, the language they use conveys "additional messages" about them to the audience (Short 1989: 149), while the "textual cues" (Culpeper 2001: 163) invite them to make inferences about the characters' personalities and motives. The pragmatic stylistic approach combines approaches from pragma-linguistics and -stylistics by answering questions about "how (literary) language is used in context and how it contributes to the characterization of protagonists in a literary piece of art or how power structures are created" (Nørgaard et al. 2010: 39). Following the line of research carried out in this borderline area, we are going to make use of pragmatic models of speech act theory, the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims, as well as methods of conversation and discourse analysis.

In this study, fictional dialogue is understood as a passage of character–character conversation, which has a double interpretation: on the one hand, it is a constructed text type, and, on the other hand, it makes use of the characteristics of everyday conversation. The techniques that have been developed by pragmaticians to analyse spoken (and written) conversation explore the patterns in the character speech including the areas of turn-taking, speech acts, inference, and implicature. Turn-taking, which looks at the processes involving conversational participants' contributions to a conversation in alternating turns, using a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic cues, is considered to be a good

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way "to see the overall character relations in a conversation" (Short 2014: 347). Speech acts are related to language use in context. The central idea of speech act theory is that when uttering a sentence, one also performs some sort of action (e.g. the acts of asserting, ordering, expressing feelings, committing oneself to some future action, etc.). Last but not least, the term implicature refers to the speaker's intended meaning behind the uttered words, while inference indicates the meaning deduced by the hearer from what is actually said by the speaker, meaning being based on the Cooperative Principle and the speakers' mutual contextual beliefs. The above enlisted notions will be applied in the scrutiny of the Bradburian text in order to draw valid and reliable conclusions from the characters' verbal manifestations.

4. Quantitative and qualitative analysis

Applying the quantitative method in the analysis of the text, based on the word count of the Word software, it can be claimed that the story sums up a total of 1,269 words, the great majority of which (909 words) comprises the dialogue, encompassing 71.63% of the total number of words. The narration detailing the characters' actions and kinesic signals is covered by 360 words, i.e. 27.58% of the total number of words, which shows a ratio of approximately 2/3 : 1/3 (see *Figure 1*).

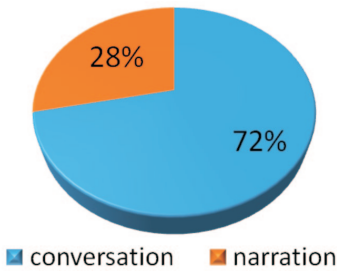


Figure 1. *Division of the text*

Counting the numbers of turns allocated to the two speakers, it can be observed that the speaking partners share a total number of 66 turns (adjacency pairs) of the conversation in equal measure, each having 33 turns, which shows a perfect balance and harmony between them. Thus, it can be inferred that neither of them is in power position, both contributing to the verbal exchange in an equal way.

In the following, we turn to the qualitative analysis of the text from the perspective of speech act theory and conversation analysis.

The temporal and spatial frame of the story is very restricted: the two characters are enclosed in a relatively restricted space – their home, together with their

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two children playing serenely in the neighbouring room. The time frame is also reduced: the action takes place from early evening till almost midnight, but references are made to earlier events that took place days before in the man's office and related to the women in the block. The restricted time and space, the limited time span until the literally meant *dead* + *line* heightens the intensity of the verbal interaction of the two protagonists.

Dialogue – as defined by the OED – is "a conversation carried on between two or more persons; a colloquy; talk together". As highlighted by McIntyre (2016: 430), the term dialogue is frequently (mis)understood as "referring to speech between two persons, perhaps through associating *dia-* with *di-*" (i.e. "two") [emphasis in the original]. In the present short story, the term dialogue is referred to as *duologue* (the term also used by McIntyre, as opposed to "monologue"), a term for conversation between two persons specifically. This is especially important in this case, as there is an extremely intensive "togetherness", intimacy, and understanding in this dialogue, as the verbal interaction between them (and its analysis below) will hopefully demonstrate.

From a pragmatic perspective, more specifically, from a speech act theoretical point of view, a story itself can be viewed as an utterance: it begins with an abstract, followed by orientation, a narrative sequence that complicates the action, eventually coming to a resolution and ending with a more or less evaluative coda (see Traugott–Pratt 1980). The Bradburian story does not conform to this model. The narrative does not follow the standard structure of a story: there is no introduction or orientation, the author places the reader *in medias res*, the first line of the story being at the same time the introductory question of a conversation, having an astonishing content: "What would you do if you knew this was the last night of the world?" At this moment, there is no indication of the identity of either the addresser or the addressee or the circumstances of the exchange. The dialogue continues in a similarly vague vein:

(1) "What would I do? You mean seriously?"
"Yes, seriously."
"I don't know. I hadn't thought."

The reader is left in suspense regarding the identity of the initiator of the dialogue (for the sake of the analysis, at this moment called Speaker 1) and of the person answering the question (called Speaker 2). However, there are certain linguistic cues referring to their relationship: the informal style of the verbal interaction. The use of the second person singular pronoun "you", the relatively short adjacency pairs, the contracted forms of auxiliary verbs (*don't*, *hadn't*) mark the social proximity of the speakers. Furthermore, the conditional present used in the opening question indicates the insecurity implied by Speaker

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1. The reply to the question seems irrelevant, as the replier (Speaker 2) returns the question with a similar question, being overwhelmed by the initiated topic. The uncertainty of Speaker 2 is further emphasized by the follow-up question ("You mean seriously?"), which refers to the seriousness of the suggestion, as if checking whether *Speaker 1* was only joking, i.e. whether he/she was actually cooperating with the speaking partner. Furthermore, the elliptic structure (lack of auxiliary in the question) also adds to the informality of the dialogue. This question does not provide a reply to the original question, but it refers to its mode of reference: enquiring about the implicature behind Speaker 1's utterance. It is only in turn 4 that the answer to the original question is provided ("I don't know. I hadn't thought."), implying that Speaker 2 is not prepared to face the critical situation implied by the initiator of the conversation.

It is only in line 5 of the text that the identity of Speaker 1 is partly revealed: "**He**[5] poured some coffee." This reference is made by the use of the third person singular masculine personal pronoun, which remains unspecified for the rest of the story, through which the character gains universal significance. It is also after the four initiating conversational exchanges that the spatial and temporal references are revealed, indicating a family home in the evening ("the two girls playing blocks" in the neighbouring room, "parlor rug", "hurricane lamp", "brewed coffee", "evening air"). From this context, it is a natural inference of the reader that the other person *He* is conversing with must be a *She*, i.e. the female protagonist. The relaxed, serene atmosphere of the domestic environment, also highlighted by the adjectives ("easy", "clean", "green") describing it, is heavily inconsistent with the topic discussed in the initial duologue (see the introductory section above). This incongruity foreshadows the crisis situation lurking in the background.

The seriousness of the opening question becomes even more urging when the man (who has been the initiator of the questions so far) continues with a suggestion: "Well, better start thinking about it." Apparently, he gives his wife a piece of advice (employing an elliptical structure instead of "you had better"), introduced by the hedge "well" in order to mitigate the face-threatening act implied by the suggestion. The man actually uses an indirect speech act, which has an indirect force as a directive ("Start thinking about it!"), implying that he addresses an imperative to his wife, from which it can be inferred that he is the more powerful in the relation. This powerful position is also underpinned by the facts that all through their conversation it is him who initiates most turns, speaks most words, and controls the topic. In spite of these conversational cues, there is no doubt that the woman might be in a less powerful position.

At this point, the two protagonists share their (and everybody else's) secret dream with each other as a sign of trust and closeness. This balance and bond existing between them is also detectable in the fact that they both initiate turns

5 Emphasis is mine, Zs. A.

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and react to them in equal measure, keeping the balance of power. The topic of the turns consists first of the outside world surrounding them, then clarifying the reasons for "the end", and finally returning to their own private microcosm, sharing their thoughts and feelings, enlisting the losses they will miss. What is most surprising is that in spite of the imminent end, both their actions and interactions remain calm. There are no linguistic markers of tension or psychological stress in their verbal manifestations, the affective bond between them being maintained.

Their unity is also demonstrated by the specific use of personal pronouns in their conversation. Trying to find a logical reason for the end that evening, the following verbal exchange takes place between them:

(2) "You don't get too excited when you feel things are logical. This is logical. Nothing else but this could have happened from the way **we**'ve[6] lived."

(3) "**We** haven't been too bad, have **we**?"
"No, nor enormously good. I suppose that's the trouble. **We** haven't been very much of anything except **us**, while a big part of the world was busy being lots of quite awful things."

The 1st and 2nd person singular pronouns used so far in their statements and questions addressed to their partner change into the 1st person plural exclusive "we", involving both the speaker and the hearer. The pronoun *we* could also have a generic meaning, to be interpreted as including all the people on earth, but this interpretation is not valid in this context: it explicitly refers to themselves, that is, where the couple's remorse lies hidden. Although they were aware of the horrible events that were happening on earth, they did not stand up against them, they did not take any responsible action. They only cared about themselves, being self-absorbed and behaving in a very selfish way. Perhaps it is this feeling of remorse and detachment that makes them behave calmly and peacefully ("You don't scream about the real thing."). There is also a self-reflecting exchange that exhibits even their own surprise and bewilderment regarding their reaction (or, better said, non-reaction):

(4) "How can we sit here and talk this way?"
"Because there's nothing else to do."
"That's it, of course; for if there were, we'd be doing it."

It is noticeable that while in the first question the active voice is used to indicate the wish for action, the reply contains a structure with a dummy subject (no action is possible), while in the third turn the conditional present is used, in

6 Bold emphases are mine, Zs. A.

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this case describing a hypothetical situation, "which is contrary to known facts" (Foley–Hall 2003: 122), denoting a condition that is impossible to fulfil. Several other cases of the use of the conditional present tense can be detected in the couple's conversation:

(5) "I wonder … **[i]f** the door will be shut all the way, or **if** it'll be left just a little ajar so some light comes in."
(6) "I wonder **if**[7] the children know."

All these grammatical structures mentioned above also underpin the feelings of uncertainty and resignation that pervades the whole conversation.

When they are not in intense communication, as Goffman (1963) termed it, in "focused interaction", silences complete the gaps in the flow of their continuous exchange. As opposed to silences as displays of surprise, or uncomfortable silences suggesting alienation (cf. Wilkinson–Kitzinger 2006), their silences are comforting. They simply sit next to each other, without engaging in conversation, being in an "open region" which may license a conversation at any time (see Goffman 1963: 134). These pauses are the signs of deep trust and intimacy, which gives space for shared personal thoughts about the present and memories of the past. Besides verbal cues, their silences also function as forms of non-verbal communication to explicitly express their alignment (Goffman 1974, Stokes–Hewitt 1976).

Their implicit alignment is also signalled by their non-verbal communication: the use of laughter and body language. At the end of the story, an interesting scene takes place. When the whole house has been left in perfect order, the dishes have been neatly washed, their daughters have been put to bed and kissed, they retire to their bedroom for the night. When they are both lying in their bed, the wife suddenly gets up and goes to the kitchen as she has forgotten the tap open. This seems to be so funny that both of them start laughing. Despite the dramatic situation, they are able to adopt a jocular attitude, laughing together in the face of death as a sign of complete relief. Their close relationship and love is also signalled and underlined by their body language: "their hands clasped, their heads together".

The imminent end is not named, only implied. Possibilities that might have generated it ("war", "hydrogen or atom bomb", "germ warfare") are enlisted by the wife in the form of questions as if in doubt. In the latter part of the conversation, the inevitable is referred to only by implicature: "Things would **stop** here on Earth"; "that'll **go**"; "It'll take twenty-four hours for it all **to go**"; "Do we deserve **this**?"; "the women on the block talked about **it**"; There's nothing in the paper about **it**"; "**This** is logical"; "Nothing else but **this** could have happened". The presence of the verbs *go* and *stop*, the third person singular neutral personal pronoun *it*, the proximal deictic terms signal that neither the husband nor

7 Emphases are mine, Zs. A.

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the wife are in the mental position to explicitly name the unspeakable. They just imply it, but as they both had the same dream, they both share the same "mutual contextual belief", it is clear and obvious for both of them what their conversational partner refers to.

There is only one example in their verbal exchange, when the male protagonist uses the trope "the closing of a book", implying that the end is just a simple and natural consequence of the life people lived in the world. This metaphor is in close relation with the phrase "close the books" meaning 'to decide that a particular situation has ended; to conclude something; to stop considering something as an option',[8] as well as with the idiom "to close the book on something" meaning 1. 'to end something unpleasant that has been continuing for a long time'; and 2. 'to stop working on something because you do not believe that you will achieve your aim'.[9] These meanings, together with the implicature arising from the use of the indefinite article ("closing of **a** book"),[10] lead us to the assumption that what the speaker (the husband) refers to in this context is not something permanent that cannot be undone, it does not suggest a pessimistic ending. On the contrary, it implies that there might be other books to open for other people at other times. And perhaps that is why the final exchange of the couple wishing each other good night is not to be interpreted ironically, flouting the maxim of quality, but literally, on face value: an honest wish for one's spouse at the end of a day.

Conclusions

In this study, we have pursued a pragma-stylistic analysis of Ray Bradbury's *The Last Night of the World*. Considering the short story as a masterpiece of soft science fiction, we carried out a quantitative and qualitative close analysis of the text by examining the protagonists' verbal manifestations in a threatening crisis situation, reflected in their turn-taking strategies, their interrelation, their unsaid, only implied meanings.

Our findings demonstrate that contrary to the expectations suggested by the literature on language use in crisis situations and elicited by the title of the text, the verbal and non-verbal interaction of the two unnamed characters suggests only slight uncertainties regarding their evaluation of the situation (underpinned by the use of conditional sentences, indirect statements – the man's directive speech act formulated in the form of advice –, the elusive references to the end in the form of the pronoun *it*, the proximal deictic term *this*). In the second part of the story, these uncertainties change into perfect harmony and balance between the

8 https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/closing+the+books.
9 https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/close-the-book-on-something.
10 My emphasis, Zs. A.

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characters, marked by the lack of emotive marks in their verbal use, the presence of the inclusive *we*, the equal number of turns in their conversation, their supportive silences, and one example of a metaphor ("the closing of a book").

The affective bond between the conversational partners cannot even be impaired by "the end of the world". Their love for each other prevents them from spending their last night in a typical crisis situation, panicking, screaming, and shouting in despair, but it embraces them and gives them the opportunity to look back at their lives with resignation and face their end with dignity.

The study deals with a very current topic in 2021: crisis communication, and for that reason it is hoped to be of interest to a wider audience. We have carried out an analysis of a literary work from a linguistic perspective, which can serve as an example to follow and will facilitate similar analyses.

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