Troy Bolton's Linguistic Characterization in *High School Musical*
Breaking Free of the Status Quo on a Linguistic Level?

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Abstract: This paper investigates the linguistic construction of Troy Bolton's character in *High School Musical* through a pragmatics-informed analysis of direct characterization. Drawing on distinctions between self-presentation and other-presentation, the study examines how explicitly verbalized information contributes to the shaping of the male protagonist's on-screen identity. A systematically compiled transcript of the film serves as the basis for identifying instances of direct characterization, including clearly implied cases situated at the boundary between direct and indirect forms. The analysis reveals a striking asymmetry: while Troy's social environment—his teammates, peers, and father—consistently characterizes him almost exclusively through the lens of basketball, Troy's own self-presentation conveys a more multifaceted self-image. This discrepancy exposes tensions between entrenched societal expectations and the protagonist's desire to "break free" from the status quo. To account for the film's depiction of Troy's gradual character development, the study further incorporates selected indirect cues, including conversational structure, address forms, and paralinguistic features. These additional layers illustrate how the narrative ultimately negotiates and resolves the conflict between imposed stereotypes and Troy's emerging complexity.

Keywords: pragmatics of fiction, linguistic characterization, self-presentation, other presentation, *High School Musical*

1. Introduction

No, no, no
Stick to the stuff you know
If you wanna be cool
Follow one simple rule
Don't mess with the flow, no, no
Stick to the status quo
No, no, no
Stick to the stuff you know
It is better by far
To keep things as they are
Don't mess with the flow, no, no
Stick to the status quo
(*High School Musical* Cast 2006, "Stick to the Status Quo")

The captain of the varsity basketball team, Troy Bolton, auditions for a musical and suddenly the entire school's status quo is in danger. The quoted passage from the *High School Musical* song "Stick to the Status Quo" represents the pressure to conform to societal expectations and maintain established roles within a community. In the context of the movie, this song occurs when various students at East High reveal hidden passions that do not align with their ascribed social identities (e.g., a basketball player enjoys baking, a smart student loves dancing). The lyrics "Stick to the stuff you know," "Don't mess with the flow" and "Stick to the status quo" reinforce the idea that stepping outside one's designated role is discouraged. Ultimately, this passage showcases the social dynamics that the protagonists are faced with, emphasizing how challenging it can be to break free from rigid social categories. Yet this message evolves throughout the film, with characters eventually realizing the value of embracing their true selves and accepting or even supporting such a change.

The question arises as to whether this change in Troy Bolton's character, his breaking with the status quo, is conveyed and can thus be observed on a linguistic level as well. Hence, the present study examines his linguistic characterization throughout the movie, focusing on how the male protagonist is verbally and explicitly presented to the audience. The analysis of such instances of direct characterization seeks

to gain insights into Troy Bolton's character by considering how he presents himself while also contrasting his self-presentation with cases of other-presentation. Given that the combination of these two forms of presentation conveys a more comprehensive and nuanced picture to the audience, whether by reinforcing or by counterbalancing one another, this on the one hand offers a more complex understanding of his characterization throughout the movie. On the other hand, it allows for an investigation into the question of whether his social environment accepts his breaking with the status quo and ultimately even mirrors it in their other-presentation of him.

First, an overview of key concepts in fictional characterization will be provided, outlining distinctions between direct and indirect characterization as well as self- and other-presentation. This is followed by a brief summary of the data and the compilation of the transcript, after which the analytical methods, including the treatment of ambiguous cases, are explained. Finally, the theoretical framework is applied to an analysis of *High School Musical*'s male protagonist, Troy Bolton.

2. Direct Characterization

The reasoning behind the recent interest in fictional works for linguistic study from a pragmatic point of view is twofold: for one, fiction, in a larger sense that encompasses written and spoken varieties, as well as both spontaneous or scripted works, presents a very rich set of data for pragmatic theorizing (cf. Locher et al. 2023, 1; Jucker/Locher 2017, 5) and secondly, a so-called pragmatic lens can help provide new insights into fictional artefacts (cf. Locher et al. 2023, 1). Thus, this recent shift in thinking ends a long tradition of disregarding fictional data due to its artificial nature (cf. Jucker/Locher 2017, 4). Not only is fictional data more easily accessible than spoken language (cf. Jucker/Locher 2017, 4), but it is now recognized "as a variety of language that is sufficiently interesting in itself to deserve closer [investigation]" (Jucker/Locher 2017, 5). Nevertheless, this does not automatically imply that there are no similarities between the non-fictional and the fictional. As noted by

Locher et al. (2023, 1): "If we treat fictional and non-fictional artefacts and performances as 'texts' and ultimately as data, we will discover the many analogies to non-fictional data in interpreting and sense-making processes." As a result, the principles and frameworks of pragmatics promise to be well-suited for an application to various works of fiction, such as movies.

A central interest in that realm has been the study of characters and their so-called characterization. This is due to the fact that they hold an essential role within the story. Mittell (2015, 118) has pointed out that "[n]early every successful television writer will point to character as the focal point of their creative process and how they measure success—if you can create compelling characters, then engaging scenarios and storylines will likely follow suit." This statement is directed primarily at television series. However, I argue that the same is true for movies, in particular teen movies such as *High School Musical* as their audience does not watch these movies to appreciate the acting or the artistic composition but to feel with and for certain characters. Granted, this generalization might not take into account some exceptions, nevertheless, the mere focus of *High School Musical* merchandise on its characters supports this claim. Consequently, it is not surprising that characters, that is, people inhabiting fictional worlds (cf. Culpeper 2001, 2), and their characterization are met with great interest by scholars (e.g. Bednarek 2023; Landert 2021; Culpeper/Fernandez-Quintanilla 2017).

In literary studies, stylistics, narratology and media studies, the term *characterization* usually applies to the way writers instill certain characteristics, personalities or identities into the people in their texts (cf. Bednarek 2010, 98) but also "how characters are constructed in discourse or how readers infer certain characteristics from discourse" (Bednarek 2010, 98). Therefore, characterization conveys elements of the narrative level to its viewers, for instance "who the characters are, their histories and backgrounds, their individual and social character traits, their relationships to other characters and the role they play for the narrative" (Bednarek 2023, 3).

The manner in which characterization is carried out needs to be distinguished into direct and indirect, although the terminology in this regard may vary according to different authors (cf. Landert 2021, 111). Other scholars contrast between explicit and implicit characterization (cf. Culpeper/Fernandez-Quintanilla 2017, 106). Although these distinctions are similar in their nature, this paper will henceforth use the terms direct and indirect, the former referring to "instances in which a character's traits are stated verbally" (Landert 2021, 111) and the latter describing cases in which "a character's identity and traits are presented through their actions, their behaviour towards other characters, the attitudes they express and their style of speaking" (Landert 2021, 111). Despite being positioned as polar opposites, the boundary between them is often unclear and rather diffuse: "characterisation strategies in both the language-based and the visual and audiovisual media may appear more or less direct to the recipients, and in many cases it is all but impossible to define which is the case" (Eder/Jannidis/Schneider 2010, 33). As a result, it is suggested in Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider (2010, 33) that it be understood more as a continuum.

Direct characterization can be achieved either through self-presentation or other-presentation (cf. Locher et al. 2023, 47). The former presents instances in which a character explicitly reveals information about themselves (cf. Culpeper 2001, 167) and the latter describes the explicit revelation of information about other characters (cf. Culpeper 2001, 167). When dealing with such moments of direct characterization, one needs to consider their context to determine their reliability as this is not an absolute given (cf. Eder/Jannidis/Schneider 2010, 33). They can either be influenced by strategic considerations (cf. Culpeper 2001, 168) or a character's limited or even incorrect self-awareness (cf. Culpeper 2001: 170).

Indirect characterization, on the other hand, can occur in many ways (cf. Locher et al. 2023, 47), verbally or non-verbally and has to be inferred (cf. Culpeper 2001, 172). This includes conversational structure such as turn-taking, turn-length, turn-allocation or topic con-trol, and paralinguistic features like tempo, loudness or lexis, to name but a few (cf. Bednarek 2023, 17). Another indirect or implicit way of charac-

terization with particular relevance for visual works of fiction are kinesic features or appearance (cf. Bednarek 2023, 17). Due to performed fiction's multimodal nature, Locher et al. argue that scholars in pragmatics should also consider how elements such as "make-up and costumes, set design and lighting, sound and music, camera angles and movements" (2023, 30) combine with character dialogue to create a complex multimodal signal, situating linguistic cues within a broader multimodal context.

When audience members or other kinds of recipients form an impression of a specific character, the newly formed result presents a combination of both so-called bottom-up and top-down processes (cf. Culpeper 2001, 28; Culpeper/Fernandez-Quintanilla 2017, 105). While bottom-up encompasses all the stimuli from the fictional set of data (cf. Culpeper 2001, 28), both through direct and indirect forms of characterization as illustrated above, top-down refers to past knowledge (cf. Culpeper 2001, 28) in forms of schemata or categories that are activated (cf. Eder/Jannidis/Schneider 2010, 35) and guide one's process of sense-making (cf. Culpeper 2001, 65).

With regard to characters, there are those who are more stereotypical and hence conform more to these schemata than others. According to social psychology, these stereotypes are "unsophisticated and fixed mental images of individuals belonging to certain groups" (Schweinitz 2010, 276). Nevertheless, they serve a purpose regarding the narrative construction of fictional characters since they provide important points of reference (cf. Schweinitz 2010: 276). Given that "[p]eople frequently perceive others as members of social groups rather than as individuals" (Culpeper 2000, 294), "[t]hese groups are assumed to provide the basis for cognitive categories" (Culpeper 2000, 294). An example of such a category would be the *nerd* or the *jock*, the latter designating a prototypically male, committed athlete (cf. Eckert/ McConnell-Ginet 1995, 7) like Troy Bolton.

3. Data and Methodology

The present study discusses the Disney movie *High School Musical*, which was produced and released in 2006 (Ortega 2006). Due to its immense success (cf. Potter 2011), two more sequels followed in 2007 and 2008, but the study conducted for the purpose of this paper focuses exclusively on the first movie. The following section will offer a brief summary of the plot of the movie and then provide an overview of the methods used for the analysis.

The story begins during winter break, when Troy Bolton, the popular captain of the East High *Wildcats* basketball team, and Gabriella Montez, a shy but academically gifted student, meet at a New Year's Eve party. They are called on stage to perform a karaoke duet together, which they enjoy despite their initial hesitation. When school resumes, Gabriella transfers to East High, so they unexpectedly meet again. Both are drawn to the idea of auditioning for the school's spring musical, a major departure from their expected social roles—Troy as an athlete, and Gabriella as a *brainiac*. However, their desire to break out of their stereotypical roles disrupts the established social order at East High. Especially the school's drama queen siblings, Sharpay and Ryan Evans, who always dominate the school's musicals, see Troy and Gabriella as a threat. Meanwhile, Troy's basketball teammates and Gabriella's academic decathlon team also disapprove of their involvement, worrying that their focus on the musical will jeopardize their respective team's success. Thus, Troy and Gabriella must navigate peer pressure, expectations from friends and family, and their own self-doubt to pursue their shared interest in music. In the end, they audition for the musical with the support of their friends, proving that it is possible to be more than just one thing.

Given this paper's research question, the analysis focuses uniquely on Troy Bolton, the movie's male protagonist, and his direct linguistic characterization through explicitly and verbally provided information.

Thus, as a first step, I searched for a transcript on fan sites[1] to serve as a starting point. I then checked the chosen version for accuracy by repeatedly and carefully watching the movie in question. I also used Disney's subtitles as a means of support in this endeavor but did not solely rely on them as I quickly realized that they often presented abridged versions of the actual dialogue. Throughout this process, I corrected (spelling) mistakes and added missing passages, notes on context and the speakers' names. Furthermore, I excluded the passages where one of the movie's songs occurred. This does not negate their relevance with respect to the plot of the movie; nevertheless, this step was taken to only examine the actual dialogue between characters as one cannot simply apply the same conventions to the musical parts as well.

Following this, I divided the transcript into scenes. The scenes vary greatly in length since my main focus was not to create equally long scenes throughout the movie. Instead, I tried to separate them into logically coherent parts, which was often primarily based on changes in location. Once the transcript was adapted, I manually checked each of the scenes for cases of direct characterization through a close-reading and then classified them as either self-presentation or other-presentation.

In-depth examination of the transcript gives rise to the realization that instances of direct characterization are not always as obvious or straightforward as one might have assumed or hoped. The boundary between direct and indirect characterization in particular is rather fuzzy, which is why this study follows Landert (2021, 115), who includes cases of "clearly implied direct characterisation." The following example will illustrate and clarify what is considered to be "clearly implied":

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[1] The script which served as the basis for the transcript was taken from a fan website (Script-o-Rama n.d.). Despite the fact that "Troy's father" and "coach" refer to the same individual, the transcript alternates between them based on context.

Excerpt 1: Scene 29, 0:56:28–0:56:39
(1) RYAN: They must be trying to figure out a way to make sure Troy and Gabriella actually beat us out. <u>The jocks rule most of the school, but if they get Troy into a musical, then they've conquered the entire student body.</u>

The underlined part is seen as a clearly implied direct characterization of Troy as a jock since the only way Ryan's reasoning holds up is if Troy is also a jock, probably even *the* jock of the school. Otherwise, his involvement in the school musical would not have any impact on the jocks and would not increase their influence within the school and its student body.

In the next step, the resulting cases of direct characterization were clustered into categories, such as social or kinship role, appearance features, character traits and dreams, goals and interests. This categorization is mostly based on my own assessment; the social categories established by Culpeper (2000, 294) served as an orientation. Additionally, the category of address forms was included as they also directly reveal information about Troy, for instance, when he is called "son" or "Captain," which provides information about his roles. Nevertheless, one needs to consider the context of such utterances and the respective character relations as well, as they influence such statements. Hence, the subsequent analysis will, firstly, provide a schematic overview of the direct characterization of Troy Bolton but secondly and most importantly, contextualize the findings in order to gain a deeper understanding of the male protagonist and the way he is presented by others and himself.

4. Direct Characterization in *High School Musical*

The table below illustrates the character information on *High School Musical* protagonist Troy Bolton revealed through direct characterization. The self-presentation and other-presentation are contrasted and will be further commented on and discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Table 1: Overview of the direct characterization of Troy Bolton in *High School Musical*

	self-presentation	other-presentation
social role/kinship role	• son	• (coach's / all-star) son • team captain • leader • *Wildcat*'s superstar • playmaker • jock
appearance features		• beautiful • hot
character traits	• scared • committed to the team	• dedicated to basketball • leading capacity • cool • not just a guy
dreams/goals/interests	• snowboarding • basketball • singing • to be just a normal guy	• basketball
address forms		• (the) man • Captain • dude • son • Troy • Mr. Bolton

4.1. Other-Presentation of Troy Bolton

The table above illustrates the quantitative imbalance between self-presentation and other-presentation with a visible surplus for the latter. I argue that this fact is not surprising, as in everyday conversation or in movies alike, people or characters who talk extensively about themselves tend to be regarded as self-involved and therefore are not held in the highest favor by the listeners or audience. Given that Troy Bolton

represents one of the likeable protagonists fighting against the obstacles created by the movie's two antagonists Ryan and Sharpay, this way of revealing most of the direct information about him follows said pattern.

The information revealed about him through other-presentation stems largely from his teammates and friends but also from his father, who is his coach as well, and the other students at school. They characterize his role in various terms with respect to basketball, his team or his status as captain. The only other role ascribed to him is the one of son. However, oftentimes even this kinship role is closely linked to basketball when it is combined with "coach's" or "all-star," thereby reinforcing the essential role of basketball in Troy's life and how he is defined by others almost exclusively in relation to it. His appearance is explicitly characterized as attractive, however only in one instance. This is not to say that his physical attributes are not central to his character, it is primarily a testament to the multimodal nature of movies as this aspect of characterization can easily be conveyed through casting, clothes, haircut or other visual components.

Examining the character traits attributed to Troy, the first impression from the corresponding column in the table above seemingly indicates a coherent picture of the talented and generally well-liked jock of an American high school. However, considering the context of his direct characterization as a "cool guy" highlights the importance of both context and character relationships. Coming from a random member of the student body or even one of his teammates, one could assume that the adjective *cool* would in fact refer to a varsity athlete's social status and popularity. Yet, in the specific situation at hand it is Gabriella who utters this characterization, which already changes the implications, given that she is part of his other interest and has come to know another side of him. Furthermore, she even explicitly voices this distinction, hinting at the fact that she is aware of the usual implications of her choice of adjective in Troy's social environment:

Excerpt 2: Scene 23, 0:49:33–0:49:38
(1) GABRIELLA: You're a cool guy, Troy. But not for the reasons your friends think.

Hence, in this case, the direct characterization of Troy Bolton provided by Gabriella does not reinforce the image centered around the proto-typical basketball player but instead breaks with this stereotype imposed on him by others and supports his efforts to present himself as a more complex, rounded character.

The fact that the only interest of Troy's revealed through other-presentation is basketball further demonstrates that he is set out to be a rather flat character centered around his ability to play basketball. This is emphasized by the various terms of address used by other characters to reference the male protagonist. If one excludes the term indicating his kinship role as son and the more formal "Mr. Bolton" employed by Miss Darbus due to their relatively distant relationship as teacher and student and the typical use of a character's first name, one is left with "man," "Captain" and "dude." These three terms of address all rely on his status within the team, as well as the target's social status at school resulting from his athletic abilities and his according coolness. He is *the man*, the one who can make great things happen for the *Wildcats* and thus for the entire East High School: "The male varsity athlete is seen by the school institution as representing the school's interests, and this gives him institutional status and privilege" (Eckert/McConnell-Ginet 1995, 7). Hence, it is not surprising that these terms are primarily used by students who, remaining anonymous, represent the entire student body and the way it looks up to Troy and his status as captain. They are also used by Chad, his best friend, given that their relationship seems to be built primarily on their shared interest in basketball. However, one instance of the usage of the term "man" is in fact a bit striking: Even Troy's father calls him "man" in the very first scene they both appear in:

Excerpt 3: Scene 2, 0:00:44–0:00:58
(1) TROY'S FATHER: Keep working left, Troy. Got a guard in the championship game we're expectin'. You'll torch 'em!
(2) TROY: Am I going left?
(3) TROY'S FATHER: Yeah. He looks middle, you take it downtown.
(4) TROY: OK, like this? *(goes left and makes a basket)*

(5) TROY'S FATHER: Whoo! That's it, <u>man</u>. Sweet. Let's see that in the game.

This usage does not highlight their familial relationship but instead imitates the way Troy and his teammates, particularly Troy and Chad, talk to each other, thus emphasizing their belonging to the same team instead of family. Consequently, even Troy's father foregrounds his son's role as a basketball player.

4.2. Self-Presentation of Troy Bolton

Although self-presentation provides comparatively little information, it remains important as the few instances in which Troy Bolton reveals something about himself offer valuable insights into his character: To whom is Troy revealing something personal and why in this particular moment? The examination of these instances will further the under-standing of his character.

Nevertheless, one can already learn quite a lot about him as a character by merely looking at the contrasted overview in Table 1. With respect to his role, Troy only expresses the one of son by talking about his parents or calling his father "Dad," which clearly implies and consequently directly characterizes him as a child. So, unlike the char-acterization through his social environment, he does not convey his role with regards to basketball but to his family. This could be motivated by two different possible factors: For one, it could be due to the fact that his surroundings already do so and thus, Troy does not have to. In this scenario, he would still accept and even like the roles attributed to him by other-presentation but appear modest at the same time. The second scenario would have him reject this exclusively basketball-related definition of his role(s) in the world. Hence, his self-presentation solely as someone's son would emphasize his humanity as opposed to the athlete who is seen as a machine that always functions or performs in order to win. Simultaneously, the positioning as son also underscores the fact that he is still a minor trying to find his way while looking for some familial support.

In terms of self-proclaimed character traits by the protagonist, the one that presents an almost polar opposite to the image created through other-presentation is the adjective "scared." Considering the utterance's context, it becomes apparent that Troy voices this sentiment while he and Gabriella observe the auditions for the school's musical:

> **Excerpt 4:** Scene 17, 0:30:02–0:30:42
> (1) GABRIELLA: Hey! So, you decided to sign up for something?
> (2) TROY: Uh... No. You?
> (3) GABRIELLA: No. Um... why are you hiding behind a mop? Your friends don't know you're here, right?
> (4) TROY: Right.
> (5) *(Kelsi plays intro and girl auditioning does not start singing)*
> (6) MISS DARBUS: Thank you. Next.
> (7) TROY: Miss Darbus is a little... harsh.
> (8) GABRIELLA: The *Wildcat* superstar's afraid?
> (9) TROY: No, no! I'm not afraid, I... <u>I'm just... scared.</u>

At first, this comment is clearly directed at Miss Darbus' harsh behavior and judgement towards the other students who did choose to audition (5, 6). But at a second glance, the adjective's reference seems to go even further to Gabriella's observation that his friends do not know that he snuck into the theater during auditions (3). Hence, it can also be seen as him opening up to Gabriella that he is in fact scared (9) because his interest in singing and musicals does not conform to the image of the basketball jock that his friends and the school have of him. And he is scared to break open this (public) image and face the resulting consequences of it—notably his friends' reaction. This act of self-presentation thus reinforces the earlier interpretation that Troy's only self-proclaimed role as a son reflects his desire to be seen not only as an athlete but also as an insecure minor who is a little lost, looking for familial guidance.

The second self-presented character trait is in line with the corresponding other-presentation. Troy states that he is committed to his team by declaring that he is "for the team" and that he has "always been for the team" (scene 33). However, when examining its context in more

depth, one finds a case of an unreliable self-presentation, which emphasizes that the validity of presentations of character information may be affected by strategic considerations (cf. Culpeper 2001, 168):

> **Excerpt 5:** Scene 33, 1:00:26–1:01:05
> (1) TROY: Guys, if you don't know that I'll put a 110% of my guts into that game, then you don't know me.
> (2) CHAD: But we just thought...
> (3) TROY: I'll tell you what I thought. I thought that you're my friends. Win together, lose together, teammates.
> (4) CHAD: But suddenly the girl... and the singing.
> (5) TROY: <u>Man, I'm for the team! I've always been for the team.</u> She's just someone I met. *(computer beeps because they turn on a webcam)* All right, the singing thing is nothing. Probably just a way to keep my nerves down. I don't know. It means nothing to me. You're my guys and this is our team. Gabriella is not important. I'll forget about her. I'll forget the audition and we'll go out and get that championship. Everyone happy now?

In this scene, Troy is being ambushed by Chad and the rest of his teammates and confronted with his newfound interest, which causes his team to question his loyalty and dedication to them. Consequently, Troy is focused on appeasing them and reassuring his friends and teammates of his commitment to them to get them to stop criticizing and judging him. This is emphasized by his final rhetorical question, "Everyone happy now?" (5). Moreover, this is made explicit later on in the movie when Troy talks to Gabriella and tries to explain to her that he did not mean what he said: "What you heard the other day, none of that is true. I was sick of my friends riding me about singing with you, so I said things I knew would shut them up. I didn't mean any of it." The strategic considerations behind this specific utterance negate its validity, thus excluding this self-presentation from the overall characterization of Troy Bolton.

    The category of dreams, goals and interests poses an exception in the sense that it presents the only case of a surplus of information revealed through self-presentation. This mere quantitative way of looking at the character of Troy Bolton mirrors the struggle the movie is

centered on: Troy is the prototypical jock, the basketball guy and captain of his team. And his social environment, particularly his friends and teammates but also his father or the school, only see and characterize him as such. However, he himself reveals that his interests go beyond basketball, stating that he is more complex and cannot be reduced to the stereotypical varsity athlete. It is through this clash of other characters' perceptions and their presentation of him with his own perception and presentation that, firstly, the character of Troy Bolton becomes less flat and more round, and secondly, the plot of the movie is driven. The audience witnesses a protagonist who gradually tries to break free[2] from his association with one stereotype and forges a more "individual and complex intellectual and psychological profile" (Schweinitz 2010, 278) as he interacts with the course of events set out by the movie's script (cf. Schweinitz 2010, 278).

Besides basketball, singing and snowboarding, which are all tangible, concrete hobbies or interests, Troy also voices one interesting and more abstract dream or goal:

> **Excerpt 6:** Scene 23, 0:48:01–0:48:31
> (1) GABRIELLA: Well, I'm sure it's tricky being the coach's son.
> (2) TROY: Makes me practice a little harder, I guess. I don't know what he's gonna say when he finds out about the singing.
> (3) GABRIELLA: You worried?
> (4) TROY: My parents' friends are always saying, "Your son's the basketball guy. You must be so proud". <u>Sometimes I don't wanna be the "basketball guy". I just wanna be a guy.</u> You know?

The desire to be just a guy (4), to be normal and not strictly defined by one aspect of his character, is entirely in opposition to his life up to this point, which is why it is not surprising that it is Gabriella he shares this thought with. She is new in his life and therefore not a part of this tradition of reducing him to one role and one interest. Moreover, it is Gabriella who witnessed him discover his passion for singing, which is

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[2] Although the songs are excluded from this analysis, it is worth noting that the theme of "breaking free" is also central to the film's most famous song of the same title.

something they went through together. Hence, he can open up to her about this new part of him and his resulting internal struggle with his previous role and status and his desire to abandon it in order to be free to explore more things in life, like any normal guy or person would be. However, the fact that this is not the case for him is even explicitly stated by his father who says: "But you're not just a guy, Troy," showing that his established social environment, including his father, does not accept this change, which reinforces Gabriella's role as his confidant.

4.3. Beyond Direct Characterization

The information about Troy Bolton revealed through direct characterization as presented and discussed up until now shows a noticeable discrepancy between his self-presentation and other-presentation. However, the question whether his social circle does eventually accept this new version of him remains unanswered. This leads to the assumption that this part of the movie's plot is conveyed through other, less direct means. In the following, the analysis seeks to examine such instances in more detail.

As pointed out in the theoretical framework above, the distinction between a direct or indirect characterization is not always clear-cut. But the definition laid out in this earlier section does not cover questions, specifically rhetorical questions, such as the one presented to the audience in the following scene:

> **Excerpt 7:** Scene 27, 0:54:29–0:54:45
> (1) COACH: But you're a playmaker... not a singer, right?
> (2) TROY: <u>Did you ever think maybe I could be both?</u> *(drops the ball and leaves the gym)*

Therefore, the example will be treated as an instance of characterization going beyond the direct nature. Nevertheless, I still believe that a well-founded argument could manage to treat it as direct self-presentation as well: During the conversation between Troy and his father, in which the latter scolds his son for missing practice and accuses Gabriella's influence and the singing of being the reason for it, Troy asks his father

if he ever thought that he could be both a playmaker and a singer (2). Now at first this might seem like a genuine inquiry into his father's opinion which would not qualify as remotely close to a direct self-presentation. Yet, if one looks at its immediate context, one realizes that Troy does not really expect an answer to his question. This, then, makes his question rhetorical, which is further supported by the fact that this is Troy's way of ending the conversation as indicated by his dropping of the basketball and leaving the gym, without giving his dad a real opportunity to answer his question. Thus, it could be argued that he only veils his self-presentation as a question and instead uses this time to inform his father that he sees his (social) roles as son but also as playmaker and more importantly also as singer.

Moving away from this instance that can be located somewhere in the gray area between indirect and direct characterization, one finds other situations that reveal more information about *High School Musical*'s male protagonist. And given that a character's identity is not only created and presented through direct characterization but also to a great extent "through their actions, their behaviour towards other characters, the attitudes they express and their style of speaking" (Landert 2021, 111), this more indirect way of presentation promises further interesting insights into Troy Bolton which could potentially support the previously established aspects of his character and also answer the remaining question whether his social environment eventually accepts his change in character.

For instance, when he first speaks to Gabriella again after their initial encounter during their vacation, the audience already encounters his aforementioned internal struggle but this time through a sort of meta-comment:

> **Excerpt 8:** Scene 5, 0:11:30–0:12:04
> (1) GABRIELLA: Well, my mom's company transferred her here to Albuquerque. I can't believe you live here. I looked for you at the lodge on New Year's Day.
> (2) TROY *(whispering)*: We had to leave first thing.
> (3) GABRIELLA: Why are you whispering?

(4) TROY: What? Oh, uh... my friends know about the snowboarding. I haven't quite told them about the singing thing.
(5) STUDENT *(to Troy)*: What's up?
(6) TROY: Hey.
(7) GABRIELLA: Too much for them to handle?
(8) TROY: Oh no, it was cool. But, you know, my friends, it's, uh... <u>It's not what I do. That was, like, a different person</u>. So, uh... anyway, welcome to East High. […]

His "it's, uh… It's not what I do. That was, like, a different person" (8) indicates that he is aware of the image others have of him and the way they see and characterize him and knows that his self-perception and consequently self-presentation clash with the former. As a result, he offers an explanation that would rectify this non-conformity on his part: he was a different person on vacation. Clearly, this statement is not true, and cannot be true, in the literal sense, but it does convey his struggle to combine his new persona with his old, established and especially accepted one. From a paralinguistic point of view this phenomenon is already hinted at by the fact that Troy is whispering and not speaking at a normal volume (2), trying to hide this part of himself from his social environment. That this makes him uncomfortable is further illustrated by the fact that he tries to gain control of the conversation topic by shifting it away from what causes him unease to something lighter that could even be considered small talk: "So, uh… anyway, welcome to East High" (8).

On an explicit level, the term of address of "son" has previously been excluded from a more in-depth consideration since, initially, this may not seem particularly note-worthy as it presents a typical way of "expressing the addressee's relation to another person" (Braun 1988, 10f.). However, in the scene in question, it needs to be considered as a deviation from a usual form of address by Troy's father, who used to address him almost exclusively by his first name. Usually, such a deviation signals a rupture in the relationship between characters, which marks a critical instance in the storyline (cf. Rodríguez Martín 2021, 54). Against this background, I argue that in this case the term of address chosen by Coach Bolton does not serve "as a means of avoiding

the addressee's personal name" (Braun 1988, 10f.) as it often does (cf. Braun 1988, 10f.). Instead, it indirectly marks the moment Troy's father starts to see his son as the individual, complex being he is and chooses to accept that he is more than a basketball player or captain and not only a member of his team but of his family.

However, this shift in address does not fully occur without any prior hints to it since it is prepared to a certain extent by another previous instance:

> **Excerpt 9:** Scene 46, 1:18:02–1:18:41
> (1) COACH: You know what I want from you today?
> (2) TROY: The championship.
> (3) COACH: Well, that'll come or it won't. What I want is for you to have fun. I know all about the pressure. Probably too much of it has come from me. What I really want is to see <u>my son</u> having the time of his life playing the game we both love. You give me that, and I will sleep with a smile on my face no matter how the score comes out.
> (4) TROY: Thanks, Coach... uh... Dad.

Here, Coach Bolton, Troy's father, does not directly address him as "son" but calls him that in his presence, indirectly addressing him as such (3). The fact that this presents a deviation from the expected is shown by Troy's reaction: First, he reacts by addressing his father as "Coach" (4), which corresponds to the conventionalized interactions primarily founded on the relationship as coach and player. He needs a second to realize the shift and reciprocate accordingly in order to respect the principle of address symmetry (cf. Braun 1988, 13). The pragmatic marker "uh" (4) shows his surprise since he did not expect this specific term of address. Hence, his initial reaction is not appropriate in this context, which is why the "uh" introduces the self-initiated repair (cf. Tonetti Tübben/Landert 2022, 11f.) and thus emphasizes the significance of the second, corrected term.

I have previously shown that, until the end of the movie, Troy's father also limits his definition of his son's character or personality to basketball and his role in that very realm. The next scene illustrates this phenomenon and especially his refusal or even inability to hear his son

when he tries to change his perception. The conversational structure during one of their private practice sessions at home reveals the dynamic of Troy's relationship with his father, who is his coach at the same time:

> **Excerpt 10:** Scene 15, 0:23:27–0:23:59
> (1) TROY: Hey, Dad? Did you ever think about trying something new but were afraid of what your friends might think?
> (2) TROY'S FATHER: Mean like, going left? You're doing fine. Come on.
> (3) TROY: Well... no. I mean, what if you wanna try something really new and it's a total disaster and all your friends laugh at you?
> (4) TROY'S FATHER: Well then maybe they're not really your friends. That was my whole point about team today. You guys gotta look out for each other. And you're the leader.
> (5) TROY: Dad, I'm not talking… *(is interrupted)*
> (6) TROY'S FATHER: There's gonna be college scouts at our game next week, Troy. Know what a scholarship is worth these days?
> (7) TROY: A lot.
> (8) TROY'S FATHER: Yeah. Focus, Troy. Come on.

In his opening question, Troy tries to confide in his father about his struggle and fears related to his changed interests or at least open the door to it, figuratively speaking (1). His father's answer, however, closes the door immediately by assuming that his question must be about basketball and this new move they have been practicing (2). The fact that he sees his son only as the playmaker or captain of the basketball team prevents him from keeping an open mind and really hearing his son. This pattern is repeated throughout the entire conversation; Troy does not give up immediately and keeps trying to broach the subject again and again (3, 5). Nevertheless, his father shuts him down each time by projecting his son's questions onto basketball (4, 6). At first it seems like he is taking his son and his concerns seri-ously when he offers an honest opinion (4) with respect to the scenario in question (3). However, it does not last long given that right after, he relates the issue back to basketball, the team, and ends his turn by reminding Troy of one of his basketball-related roles, this time "the leader" (4). This

back and forth between the two of them comes to an abrupt end when Troy's father stops respecting the conventional rules of turn-taking and interrupts his son's last futile attempt at getting him to really listen and hear him out (5). He thus manages to dominate the topic throughout the entire conversation, showing that he is in charge and holds the power, which is further underscored by the fact that Troy ends up accepting the topic of basketball and his resulting opportunities with regard to college (7). This yielding to his father's control and power is also indicated on the level of turn length, which, on Troy's part, diminishes step by step from turn 5 onwards. Moreover, this phenomenon is contrasted with comparatively long turns on his father's part and finally sealed by his father having the last turn and thus word (8).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *High School Musical* character Troy Bolton has shown that direct characterization can provide various types of information: Through self-presentation and other-presentation the audience learns about Troy's social or kinship roles, his appearance features, his character traits and also his dreams, goals and interests. Moreover, the contrast of his self-presentation with his other-presentation reveals a fundamental discrepancy between how he sees himself and the image his friends and teammates, the entire school but also his father, who doubles as his coach, have of him. They exclusively characterize and thus define him with respect to basketball and his role for the team as captain and playmaker, making him a rather flat character.

Only Gabriella presents an exception, given that she only recently entered Troy's life and therefore does not have the same background as his other friends. It is with her that he discovers his newfound passion for singing, making her a witness to and accomplice in his change from the start, which results in a special relationship of trust between them. Consequently, it is to Gabriella that Troy can reveal more of his true self through self-presentation, allowing him to appear and ultimately

become more complex and round as he voices explicit desires beyond the realm of basketball.

Nevertheless, the analysis of information directly revealed about Troy Bolton has also shown that the shift and the "breaking free" of the status quo that Troy undergoes during the movie is not conveyed on the level of direct characterization. Without the additional examination of more indirect instances of characterization one would not have seen that, for instance, towards the end, his father comes to terms with this new version of his son and accepts him as a complex individual that is defined by more than basketball. Moreover, the choice to complement the analysis of cases of direct characterization with considerations of more indirectly revealed information offers insight into the fact that direct characterization is not an isolated phenomenon but is supported by manifold ways of characterization that are not as obvious, such as turn length or topic control.

Given that direct characterization only conveyed the discrepancy between self-presentation and other-presentation but did not show an incorporation of the new and more round version of the protagonist into his other-presentation, it would be interesting to explore Troy Bolton's direct characterization throughout the two sequels. This would allow an examination of whether this new, more complex and round character is mirrored in them explicitly on a linguistic level from the start or whether *High School Musical 2* and *3* also rather show this through other more implicit and possibly visual means instead.

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