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PSYCHOLINGUISTIC PORTRAYAL OF NEBULA (MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE): THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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The paper focuses on the thematic analysis of a Marvel Cinematic Universe female character speech. Nebula features two Guardians of the Galaxy franchise films and two Avengers films. She represents two cinematic archetypes, namely the antagonist Backstabber and the protagonist Father's Daughter. The plot twists involve time travel, which results in coexistence of two Nebulas: the villain Past Nebula and the antihero Present Nebula. The psycholinguistic thematic patterns of the character's speech are the means to evaluate the character's morality and her perception by the viewer. First, two broad themes were formulated: What defines the Backstabber psycholinguistic portrayal? / What defines the Father's Daughter psycholinguistic portrayal? Consequently, five common codes for each theme were developed to demonstrate the similarities between the archetypes (based on the same protoarchetype): 1) the character's primal need for belonging; 2) the group Nebula strives to belong with; 3) the group missions she participates in; 4) her attitudes towards the group members; 5) the heroine's characteristics in the narratives of other characters and self-referential narratives. Splits in codes depict speech peculiarities of the antagonist (the Backstabber) and protagonist (the Father's Daughter) embodiments of the archetype. The Backstabber's need for belonging is not met, while the Father's Daughter is accepted and appreciated in the group. Past Nebula is an integral part of several villainous groups, actively participating in genocidal missions. Present Nebula joins protagonist groups in their heroic salvation missions. The Backstabber envies, hates and despises other characters, while the Father's Daughter learns cooperation and having fun with newly found friends. In the rhetoric of other characters, Past Nebula is referenced with names having negative connotations, while Present Nebula is called by titles with neutral or positive connotations. The Backstabber sees herself underestimated and unable to change; the Father's Daughter is appreciated, loved and open to new possibilities.

ПСИХОЛІНГВІСТИЧНИЙ ПОРТРЕТ НЕБУЛИ (КІНОВСЕСВІТ «МАРВЕЛ»): ТЕМАТИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ

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Ключові слова: *кіноархетип, психолінгвістичний образ, архетип «Батькова донька», архетип «Зрадниця», тематичний аналіз, кіновсесвіт «Марвел».*

Дослідження презентує тематичний аналіз мовлення жіночого персонажа кіновсесвіту «Марвел». Небула з'являється у двох фільмах франшизи «Вартові галактики» та двох фільмах франшизи «Месники». Вона втілює два кіноархетипи: як негативний персонаж вона належить до архетипу «Зрадниця», як позитивний – до архетипу «Батькова донька». Сюжетна лінія подорожі у часі зумовлює співіснування двох Небул – злодійки Небули-з-минулого та антигероїні Небули-з-теперішнього. Психолінгвістичні тематичні особливості є засобами оцінки моральних якостей персонажа та її сприйняття глядачем. Спершу сформульовані дві широкі теми: «Що визначає психолінгвістичний портрет «Зрадниці»?» / «Що визначає психолінгвістичний портрет «Батькової доньки»?» Далі для кожної теми визначені п'ять кодів, що демонструють подібність між архетипами (заснованими на єдиному протоархетипі): 1) основна потреба персонажа – належати до певної групи; 2) група, до якої належить Небула; 3) групова місія, в якій вона бере участь; 4) її ставлення до учасників групи; 5) характеристика героїні у наративах інших персонажів та власних репліках. Розщеплення кодів демонструють мовленнєві особливості антагоністичного («Зрадниця») та протагоністичного («Батькова донька») втілення архетипу. Соціальна потреба «Зрадниці» належати до певної групи не задоволена, у той час як «Батькову доньку» приймають та цінують у групі. Небула-з-минулого є невіддільною частиною декількох злодійських угруповань, активно беручи участь у місіях масового винищення. Небула-з-теперішнього долучається до груп протагоністів у їхніх героїчних місіях з порятунку всесвіту. «Зрадниця» заздрить, ненавидить та презирливо ставиться до інших персонажів. «Батькова донька» вчиться співпрацювати та розважатися у колі нових друзів. У риторичі інших персонажів згадки про Небулу-з-минулого мають негативні конотації, натомість визначення Небули-з-теперішнього мають нейтральні чи позитивні конотації. «Зрадниця» вважає, що її недооцінюють, а сама вона не здатна змінитися. «Батькову доньку» цінують та люблять, вона відкрита для нових можливостей.

Problem statement. Despite broad investigation into the archetypes (including the archetypes of fiction characters), there appear to be few works focusing on speech characteristics of the characters depending on their archetype. Films as the media for scientific investigation have been increasingly gaining popularity among researchers over the previous two decades. In contrast with male characters, female heroines have been studied rarely as their depiction in the mass culture films is less frequent and their part is often narrowed to supporting or secondary roles. In

general, it brings us to the idea of composing a typology of psycholinguistic female archetypes frequenting mass culture films in the XXI century. The analysis of contemporary mass production cinematography provides a better understanding of the public, their needs, motives, fears and insecurities, all reflected in the language used by the fictional heroes and villains.

Objective. The objective of the present article is to establish similarities and differences between the Backstabber and the Father's Daughter (classification by Schmidt [1]) psycholinguistic archetypes by the

means of the characters' speech thematic analysis. The material under research consists of 123 turns of Nebula, a female *Marvel Cinematic Universe* villain turning antihero. The plot twists involve time travel, which results in featuring two Nebulas: the antagonist Past Nebula and the protagonist Present Nebula. The turns are extracted from four *MCU* films (2014–2019): *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* [2], *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* [3], *Avengers: Infinity War* [4] and *Avengers: Endgame* [5].

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic approach aimed at identifying patterns (“themes”) across qualitative datasets in the health and social sciences [6]. Themes reflect a pattern of shared meaning; they are organized around a core concept or idea. Themes capture implicit ideas “beneath the surface” of the data and more explicit and concrete meaning; they are built from smaller meaning units (codes) [6, p. 845]. Thematic analysis in the present paper is conducted within reflexive thematic analysis approach [7; 8], which is conceptualized as a fully qualitative approach, emphasizing meaning as contextual, reality as multiple, and researcher subjectivity as not just valid but a resource [6, p. 848].

Main findings. Data analysis was conducted in two phases. First, a template was developed in the form of codes organized into two broad themes: What defines the Backstabber psycholinguistic portrayal? / What defines the Father's Daughter psycholinguistic portrayal? The character's turns were extracted from the four researched films and divided into two groups, depending on the character's archetype. In the second phase, common codes for each theme were developed to demonstrate the similarities between the archetypes (as they are based on the same prototype Athena [1]). Splits in codes depict peculiarities of the antagonist (the Backstabber) and protagonist (the Father's Daughter) embodiments of the archetype.

Despite having the lowest percentage of female-speaking characters across Phases One and Two of the *MCU* [9, p. 176], the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise presents four female characters whose turns exceed 250 words. The researched character holds the second-highest position. According to the typology of fiction archetypes by Schmidt [1], Nebula throughout four films in *Marvel Cinematic Universe* represents first the villainous Backstabber archetype, later in the plot shifting to the antiheroic Father's Daughter archetype. Out of four types of affective processing within personality change stories, namely positive valence, negative valence, redemption, and contamination [10], Nebula's story is that of redemption. Morally ambiguous characters (MACs) or antiheroes have become prevalent in entertainment content in recent years. Unlike traditional hero characters, MACs often behave in immoral ways; however, they also have redeeming qualities that

differentiate them from villains [11, p. 390]. The public judge the morality of characters' deeds and motives to distinguish protagonists from antagonists. Usually, the characters established to be moral are liked, while those considered to be immoral are disliked [12].

The psycholinguistic thematic patterns of the character's speech are the means to evaluate the character's morality and her perception by the viewer. The psycholinguistic elements of the researched archetypes portrayal are organized according to the themes and revealed in five codes: 1) the character's primal need for belonging; 2) the group Nebula strives to belong with; 3) the group missions she participates in; 4) her attitudes towards the group members; 5) the heroine's characteristics in the narratives of other characters and self-referential narratives.

The first code encompasses the character's basic social needs for belonging, love and appreciation. The need is primal for both the protagonist Father's Daughter and the antagonist Backstabber archetypes, as they are defined by Schmidt [1] after the single prototype of the goddess Athena. This need is distinguished in Maslow's hierarchy of human needs [13] and is regarded as a fundamental human motivation by Baumeister & Leary [14].

D'Souza & Gurin [15, p. 184] develop Maslow's idea and propose four modes regarding the status of a particular need. According to the typology, first Nebula does not recognize her need to belong, love and be loved, she substitutes it with the aspiration to be respected. The need becomes overemphasized to the point that it is experienced as insatiable and a source of obsessive behaviour. Revenge on her sister and father becomes her goal. She repeatedly tries to kill both Gamora and Thanos. After the fight with Gamora, when she finally learns to put her wishes to words, she recognises the need for sisterly love before Gamora (“*You were the one who wanted to win. And I just wanted a sister! You were all I had*”). Here the need is not yet satisfied, though its satisfaction is being pursued in a healthy manner. When Gamora sacrifices the Soul Stone, she saves Nebula and dooms herself. Now Nebula knows that Gamora loves her dearly, and she finally accepts their relationship; the need is satisfied for a short period until Gamora is murdered by Thanos. That is the point of no return for Nebula; she asks no approval from Thanos after that.

The code is split: in the case of the Father's Daughter the needs are satisfied, while with the Backstabber the needs are thwarted. Being accepted, included, or welcomed leads to a variety of positive emotions, whereas being rejected, excluded, or ignored leads to potent negative feelings [14, p. 508]. The lack of acceptance turns Past Nebula bitter and revengeful, and defines her as a villain. The need to belong with some group distinguishes what Hall (2016) names an

emerging archetype of the Group Hero, whose team based heroism is about fighting for the greater good. All the team members are different and equally important, as they can achieve their goal only by cooperation [16, p. 214]. The Group Hero consists of separate (often socially handicapped) individuals striving to form friendship and find their place in a community; it reflects disconnectedness and emotional isolation of people in modern society. Throughout four films, Nebula tries to fit in with several groups. When she succeeds, her needs are satisfied and she is perceived as a protagonist.

The second code represents the group Nebula strives to belong with and be appreciated by. The group is changing with the plot progress, starting with her adopted family (namely Thanos and Gamora) and finishing with the Guardians (including Gamora) and Avengers. Her pledged allegiance to Thanos, the greatest villain of the *MCU* franchise (*"I swear... I will make you proud... I would never betray you. Never. Never"*) defines her as a villain too. When she gradually befriends the protagonist groups of Guardians and Avengers, Present Nebula acquires an anti-hero image.

The action genre of the film implies numerous quests and fights for the characters to participate. Thus, the third code revolves around the group missions Nebula partakes in. She craves appreciation and respect and by performing the said missions or parts thereof, she guarantees herself the recognition of her abilities and successes. The code splits between the archetypes depending on the mission's purpose. First, it is the mission of Thanos to collect the Infinity Stones and wipe half of living creatures out of existence (*"Father's plan is finally in motion. It's a start. If he gets all of them..."*), later it is the mission of Ronan the Accuser to destroy a planet (*"I will help you destroy a thousand planets"*). Past Nebula willingly participates in the genocidal missions, which defines her as a villain. Later Present Nebula joins the Guardians of the Galaxy in their mission to save the universe from Ego and finally the Avengers in their mission to save the universe from Thanos. Her assistance to the heroic groups depicts her as a protagonist.

The fourth code reveals Nebula's attitude towards the group members. The perspective changes dramatically as Past Nebula and Present Nebula feel differently about the people they want to belong with. For instance, the father figure is central for Past Nebula. She requires Thanos' approval (*"I swear... I will make you proud"*) and simultaneously hates him for underestimating her (*"I will hunt my father like a dog, and I will tear him apart slowly... piece by piece"*) and fears him (*"Even disassembled, I wanted to please him"*). Her hatred is that of selfish pride and hurt feelings. Past Nebula represents the type of betrayer, whom Dubrovskiy calls "traitor-punisher". The traitor

wants revenge and the assertion of one's ego. The prevailing thematic group for the type is violence [17]. As a protagonist, Present Nebula finds willpower to oppose Thanos openly and partially recognize his virtues (*"My father is many things. A liar is not one of them"*). She still hates him, but now her hatred is justified: Thanos murdered Gamora.

The peak-experience of losing Gamora brings about "a change in attitude, valuing reality in a different way, seeing things from a new perspective, from a different centering point" [18]. For Nebula it is a new perspective onto her relationship with Thanos. There comes a change in the patterns she refers to him. Being the Backstabber, she believes that calling Thanos "Dad" or "Father" somehow secures her position as his daughter. When she switches to the Father's Daughter archetype, she finds her true family in the Guardians of the Galaxy and later the Avengers; at that time, she refers to the Mad Titan predominantly by his name, thus alienating herself from him and his mission.

Past Nebula envies Gamora and hates her ardently (*"I will be free of these shackles soon enough, and I will kill you. I swear"*). Present Nebula loves her sister (*"...we become friends. We become sisters"*) and wants to protect her (*"We need to get off this planet"*). When Thanos murders Gamora, Present Nebula mourns her late sister. Past Nebula despises the Guardians (*"Idiots!.. All any of you do... is yell at each other. You are not friends"*), while Present Nebula learns cooperation (*"Romanoff! Come in, we have a problem"*) and having a good time in a friendly company (*"It was fun"*). She is self-conscious about her physical and moral traumas and seeks acceptance from Rhodes (*"I haven't always been like that"*).

The fifth code demonstrates the heroine's characteristics in the speech of other characters and self-referential narratives. They are of three categories: a) her family relation status; b) her psychological characteristics and/or c) her appearance (see Table 1).

In the rhetoric of other characters, Nebula is referenced differently according to her role in the plot and therefore, archetype. In both cases, there are neutral references stating her family relations (Thanos calls her "daughter", Gamora calls her "sister"), other cases predominantly have positive (for the Father's Daughter) or negative (for the Backstabber) connotations.

She sees herself differently as well. Past Nebula calls herself "a daughter of Thanos", while Present Nebula sees herself as a true friend and sister to Gamora. Past Nebula does not tolerate weakness in any form; she tells her Present self "You are weak" as the highest form of contempt. Past Nebula is partly a machine, brought up by a warlord to become his soldier and assassin, and being taught that emotions symbolize weakness. She is rigid in her opin-

Table 1

References to Nebula depending on her archetype

Speaker	Past Nebula Backstabber (antagonist)	Present Nebula Father's Daughter (protagonist)
Past Nebula	daughter of Thanos	–
Present Nebula	–	friend, sister (for Gamora)
Gamora	sister, psychopath	sister, other Nebula
Thanos	daughter	daughter, other Nebula, duplicate
Quill	an evil supervillain	Smurfette
Taserface	the biggest sadist in the galaxy	–
Ravagers	daughter of Thanos	–
Maw	a traitor	another Nebula, duplicate
Rocket	Baldy	–
Stark	–	the Blue Meanie
Rhodes	–	Blue

ions, unable to change. Present Nebula acquires new experience, learns to accept others and be accepted back; she is capable of changing and open to new possibilities.

Conclusion and prospects for further research.

The obtained results demonstrate that the psycholinguistic image of a villainous / antiheroic female character Nebula featuring four *MCU* films is determined by the Backstabber / Father's Daughter archetypes and characterized by the following thematic elements. The research applies reflexive thematic analysis to the turns of Past Nebula (the villain) and Present Nebula (the antihero) to describe the shift in the psycholinguistic portrayal of the character. The hypothesis of the research proposes codes defining the similarities between the archetypes, and the splits of these codes which demonstrate the differences. The analysis is based on two themes: 1) What defines the Backstabber psycholinguistic portrayal? and 2) What defines the Father's Daughter psycholinguistic portrayal? The similarities between the researched psycholinguistic archetypes are revealed through five codes, while splits in the codes depict speech peculiarities of the antagonist (the Backstabber) and protagonist (the Father's Daughter) embodiments of the archetype: 1) the character's primal need for belonging (satisfied for the Father's Daughter and thwarted for the Backstabber); 2) the group Nebula strives to belong with (villains for the Backstabber and heroes for the Father's Daughter); 3) the group missions she participates in (genocidal for the Backstabber and heroic for the Father's Daughter); 4) her attitudes towards the group members (negative emotions for the Backstabber and positive for the Father's Daughter); 5) the heroine's characteristics in the narratives of other characters and self-referential narratives (negative connotations for the Backstabber and positive for the Father's Daughter). Among the perspectives of the research is the verification of the received data with narrative and content analyses. Broader prospects

include the design of a comprehensive typology of the psycholinguistic archetypes frequenting the highest-grossing English-language films of the 21st century.

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