

Identity as Performance: A Study of Character Construction in *The Story of Your Life* from the Perspective of Goffman's Dramatic Theory

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Abstract: This essay examines the construction of identity in Ted Chiang's *The Story of Your Life* through Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, with Gérard Genette's narrative theory and social role theory as supplementary perspectives. It argues that Louis's identity is not a fixed and unified essence, but a dynamic performance shaped by social contexts, role expectations, and interactions with different audiences. The analysis focuses on three major roles: government scientist, language learner/translator, and mother. As a scientist, Louis manages her self-presentation under governmental and military observation; as a language learner and translator, she constructs professional competence through repeated interaction and backstage preparation; and as a mother, she performs an emotionally complex role within the novel's nonlinear conception of time. The essay further argues that the novel's nonlinear narrative structure expands Goffman's concepts of front stage and backstage beyond ordinary social situations, allowing identity performance to operate across different temporal dimensions. By combining dramaturgical and narrative perspectives, this study demonstrates that identity in *The Story of Your Life* is continuously negotiated through social expectations, audience relationships, and personal choices.

Keywords: *The Story of Your Life*; Erving Goffman; Dramaturgical Theory; identity performance; nonlinear narrative

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1. Introduction

Science fiction literature is a literary genre that encompasses reality and imagination, spanning science and humanities. It usually reflects the position of humans in the universe and the relationship between humans and the universe in reality. Ted Chiang's novel *The Story of Your Life* is such a science fiction novel that combines philosophy and emotional tension. *The Story of Your Life* depicts the process of a linguist named Louis coming into contact with and learning an alien language, triggering her non-linear perception of the full picture of her life. It unfolds a consensus performance of multiple identities such as mother, government scientist, and translator.

This article aims to introduce social communication theory - Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory - as an analytical tool to re-examine the construction and expression of the protagonist's identity in the novel.

Therefore, this article will start from the perspective of dramaturgy and combine narrative theory to systematically analyze: (1) how Louis transforms her role identity and manages impressions in different social contexts; (2) How different "audiences" affect her self presentation strategy; (3) How nonlinear time reshapes the propagation structure of "identity performance". This article aims to reveal the dynamic construction process of character identity in the text by answering these questions, and to demonstrate the dissemination mechanism and cultural significance of "identity as performance" in science fiction narratives.

2. Theories Overview

2.1. The core concept of Dramaturgical Theory

Erving Goffman proposed the Dramaturgical Theory in his 1959 book *The Self Representation in Everyday Life*^[1]. He compared social life to a stage, where individuals express themselves in the "front stage" and prepare, adjust, and hide their true emotions in the "back stage" to successfully manage the audience's "expectations" in different contexts. The front-end and back-end are the division of behavioral expression space. The front-end behavior is controlled by the theme and expressed to others, while the back-end is the true state of individual relative privacy. The series of behaviors, including both verbal and nonverbal strategies, that individuals take in the foreground to maintain their social image are called impression management. In Goffman's theory, social behavior is seen as a continuous performance process, where individuals play corresponding roles in different contexts. The identity of the roles is not fixed, but is constructed by individuals through continuous interaction and negotiation with the audience.

This theory breaks the binary opposition between the "real self" and the "social mask" in human society, proposes the concept of "self is performance", and thus opens up the theatrical dimension of modern social behavior analysis.

2.2. Supplement of Narrative Studies

In order to more accurately analyze the dynamic mechanism of Louis' portrayal of her own identity in the novel, it is necessary to combine Gérard Genette's narrative framework theory. The three narrative dimensions proposed by Genette, namely time, focalization, and mood, can all be used to analyze the relationship between non-linear writing structures and identity performances in novels^[2].

In *The Story of Your Life*, after learning the Heptapods language, Louis gained a near precognitive ability. Her sense of time was overturned, and she could simultaneously perceive her own past and future. Time became a "smoke burning at both ends" for her. This non-linear time structure forms a cross temporal and synchronic identity reconstruction mechanism. In this novel, nonlinearity is not only a narrative tool, but also an important means of identity presentation, which allows Goffman's front-end and back-end theories to be deconstructed in the context of the text and placed into a more complex time frame.

2.3. Social Role Theory

This article also draws on the role multiplicity and environmental adaptation mechanisms in social role theory to assist in analyzing how the protagonist Louis constructs her roles as a mother, government scientist, and translator in different contexts. The social role theory holds that individual social behavior is determined

by their specific position within a particular group and system, which complements Goffman's dramaturgical performance model and can be combined to construct an analytical path of "performance scene identity".

3. Louis' Multiple Identity Analysis

3.1. As a government scientist's "performance"

In the novel, Louis is recruited by the government as a linguist to participate in a cross racial communication task of translating the Hetapods language of aliens. In this process, Louis not only needs to mobilize her knowledge of linguistics, but also perform a set of highly "front-end" scientist role performances in interactions with government, military personnel, and other researchers. The establishment and presentation of this role is more about social self presentation behavior, reflecting what Goffman called the "front-end performance" stage.

Firstly, Louis' portrayal of a scientist relies on the continuous use of professional language. When negotiating with the military, she needs to transform the progress in learning the Hetapods language into quantifiable and logical results reports, and always maintain a scientific and rational attitude to meet the government's expectations for "progress visualization" and the work attitude of scientists. This proactive adaptation of behavior is exactly what Goffman called "impression management of audience expectations".

Secondly, the interaction between Louis and research teams from Gale and other regions also demonstrated a "performative collaboration", where they cooperated to demonstrate vocabulary and corresponding actions in front of the Hetapods. This was not only a bridge of communication between Louis and the Hetapods, but also a staged presentation of "scientific research progress" and "secrecy work" under military observation. Louis' identity as a scientist not only faces the Hetapods, an extraterrestrial life form, but also the "audience" behind her, namely the political and military power of the country. As Goffman pointed out, "a successful performance often depends on the tacit cooperation between teams". The eye contact and suggestive gestures between Louis and Gale, as well as their verbal exchanges when facing the government and military, constitute a ceremonial "professional identity performance", strengthening their credibility as members of the scientific research community.

The novel also repeatedly features scenes of the government and military attempting to intervene in the scientific research process, further highlighting Louis' "front-end pressure". When faced with the government's demand for transparency in all research information and processes, Louis appeared to be obedient and cooperative on the surface, while also discussing their choices of presentation content with Gale in the background. The role split of "front-end obedience backstage negotiation" is precisely a typical phenomenon of character control in the Dramaturgical Theory.

So it is not difficult to see that as a "scientist", Louis is not expressing an internally stable self, but constantly adjusting her performance strategies in complex power relations and communication situations.

3.2. The character of a translator

In *The Story of Your Life*, the protagonist Louis' primary task is to understand and gradually master the language of the alien race Hetapods. This is not only her job, but also her own pursuit of language learning as a linguist. From the perspective of Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, even non demonstrative roles such as "learners" have their own performance components, as the language learning process itself is embedded in an impression management and social interaction framework.

Louis' internalized identity as a language learner is established in highly specialized behavioral rituals. In her interaction with the Hetapods, she repeatedly emphasizes the importance of gradual language learning and language visualization. These are not only her summaries and applications of language learning experience rules, but also her performances in front of the "audience", namely the Hetapods. This performance aims to showcase her own language learning ability and is a strategy to express herself to the seven legged bucket as a "communicative object".

Goffman believed that any individual in a "learning role" who demonstrates a sense of control and understanding in public can gain some form of performative authority within the social structure. Firstly, there is the "performance" that Louis presents to herself in her memories. She keenly captures every linguistic detail in her recollections, uses terminology in the process of learning and self explanation, and even provides structural explanations for many physics knowledge. These are not only knowledge behaviors, but also her "performance". However, the object of this performance is not the government, other researchers, or the Hetapods, but herself^[1].

Secondly, there is the "performance" in front of the Hetapods. Louis gradually established interaction between learning objects and learners through his contact with the Hetapods. Her repeated attempts in front of the lens, as well as her patience and meticulousness in the communication process, are actually role-playing aimed at the Hetapods. During this process, Louis gradually gained the trust of the Hetapods, especially her recognition of her "communicability" and professionalism - this does not mean that the article infers that the Hetapods has a human emotional mechanism, but rather that after Louis completed continuous accumulation of "comprehensible input", the Hetapods also cooperated with her learning pace to engage in communication behavior. This coordinated language behavior can be seen as a "corresponding feedback to the performance" from the perspective of drama theory, indicating that a part of the "performance" has been "recognized" by the audience.

Moreover, in the "backstage space", Louis has repeatedly reinforced her role as a language learner. She continues to engage in activities such as writing study logs, drawing language maps, and simulating visual language writing in her own environment. Under the framework of Dramaturgical Theory, the backstage space is not only a place for characters to vent their emotions, but also a place for character preparation and identity stabilization. Therefore, Louis' series of actions in the backstage have stabilized the generation and performance of this character.

But unlike typical learning behaviors, the language Louis learned had a fundamental impact on her cognition. Her understanding of time shifted from linear to non-linear, and this change in internal cognitive structure also affected her performance as a "learner". She is more inclined to "experience accept" changes in macro cosmic cognition. This change has not changed her performance structure, but has transformed the performance space from the traditional learning field to a cross temporal dimension with the whole person as the timeline.

So we can consider that Louis, as a language learner, does not lack performative qualities due to her "incompleteness". On the contrary, it is through continuous learning and self-renewal that she continuously completes the precise performance of her role through behavior, discourse, rhythm, and attitude.

3.3. As a mother's character

In *The Story of Your Life*, Louis' role as a mother has a completely different social and temporal context. This

makes the reader realize after completing the reading that Louis' perception of her "future daughter" is an experience of the future coexisting with the present. Under her temporal cognition after being influenced by extraterrestrial languages, motherhood is no longer a linear process in an individual's life, but a continuous, synchronous, and cyclical "identity performance".

Traditionally, mothers often rely on linear time to provide structural transformations such as conception, birth, nurturing, education, separation, and death. However, in the novel, her performance of the "mother" role is not a staged performance, but a symbol behavior that is forever reproduced. In her cognition, every moment, she is preparing to become a mother, is becoming a mother, and is also losing her motherhood.

Under this cognition, the performance of motherhood is no longer a collection of various parenting behaviors, but includes a series of highly complex behavioral systems such as accepting fate, facing foresight, maintaining and losing intimate relationships. Her behavior is a "informed consent performance" towards the future,. This is not only an interpretation of the concept of "maternal love", but also a deep and predetermined emotional impression management for the "audience", that is, her future daughter.

Goffman pointed out that emotional performance in family relationships is usually the most front-end, especially when family members need to maintain daily order through behavior^[3]. The series of daily interactions between Louis and her daughter constitute a series of front-end behaviors. In these front-end performances, although Louis is already aware of the "script" and knows that her daughter and she will win in those debates, she still cooperates with this "performance".

Louis' identity as a "mother" exhibits highly dramatic features in non-linear time and complex social structures. Her performance is not simply a biological motherhood, but a multiple negotiation of emotional responsibility, acceptance of fate, and social expectations. Through ritualistic control of front-end behavior, suppression of backstage emotions, and pre-set responses to audience reactions, Louis completed a "mother role performance" that runs through the entire dimension of life time. In Goffman's framework, this continuous performance not only constitutes the core of her social identity, but also presents the emotional depth and structural complexity of "identity is performance" in science fiction narrative.

4. Conclusion

Ted Chiang's *The Story of Your Life* stands out in contemporary science fiction for its non-linear narrative, exploration of linguistic philosophy, and themes of identity. This article applies Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory to analyze the protagonist, Louis, and the multiple identities she assumes in different social contexts, viewing these roles as performances. It explores how individuals construct and negotiate their identities within complex social and communicative frameworks, shaped by the expectations of different "audiences."

In state and military tasks, Louis performs the role of a "scientist," a clear example of Goffman's "front-stage" performance. As a language learner, her identity as a "translator" is not fixed but constantly evolving through experimental learning. In her future family life, Louis' role as a mother is a "family theater" that bridges temporal boundaries. Despite knowing the outcome, she raises her daughter, sustaining her maternal identity through repeated emotional rituals. This performance goes beyond emotional expression; it is a conscious act for a "future audience." Louis' maternal love thus highlights the performative nature of identity, affirming Goffman's idea that identity is shaped by the tension between social expectations and personal

emotions.

Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory provides us with an explanatory social behavior analysis tool, allowing us to understand the dynamic process of Louis' identity construction in *The Story of Your Life* from the perspective of characters. Her identity as a scientist, learner, and mother is not a static label, but a response to social expectations, a regulation of audience needs, and a coordination of role contradictions. This not only enriches our understanding of literary character shaping, but also reminds us that in contemporary society, identity is not a "being", but a social process of "being performed".

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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