



## A Discursive Analysis of *EastEnders*

John Wheatley  
University of Luton

### Introduction

Over the past 20 years, as critical attention has focussed on television, quite long after having begun seriously examining film, considerable attention has been devoted to the soap opera. Work has been done on the demography of its audience (perceived in the USA as being largely female), but it is less clear that this is the case in the United Kingdom. “Soaps” appear to be as popular with male and female Luton students. The World Cup has surprised advertisers in the UK by attracting as much female viewership as male. I suggest, similarly, that the soap opera is increasingly of interest, in the United Kingdom, to the male viewer.

Recent research has sought to explain the function soaps play in people’s lives and its appeal to viewers (Ang 1982). The open-endedness of the narrative has been explained and taken for granted (Allen 1992, Brown 1994), and soaps have been scrutinised from feminist perspectives (e.g. Altman 1989, Byars 1987, Petro 1986). Fiske has been very influential (see Fiske 1987 and 1992) in recognising the importance of soap opera to popular culture, as text which is open to or which viewers open up to multiple interpretations. While this paper recognises the importance of reader-centred approaches, I am building a text-centred analytical method that should prove quite compatible with what are now mainstream approaches that focus on viewer uses of soap opera (Ang 1982).

## Language-based approaches

Little work, however, appears to have been done on the language itself, on the discursive structure of a soap episode. What studies there are tend to focus on topical structure (Sutherland, J & Siniawsky, S. 1982, Fine, M. 1981), or on a broader range of stylistic issues (Butler, J 1986).

This is a failing, one which I hope to begin to redress through this paper's discursive approach to soap opera dialogue. It is taken as fundamental here that commentary on a text can only follow, and be a consequence, of textual analysis – otherwise one falls into meaningless generalisations or the simple offering of opinion.

The analysis will draw on the work on Anna Brita Stenström (1994) and, rather loosely, although quite importantly, on the early analytical work done by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) at the University of Birmingham. Some use is also made of later systemic work on conversation by Eggins and Slade (1997), especially in recognising the key features of evaluation in spoken text. These works provide the backbone of the analytical methodology; the functional descriptions of each dialogue “line” in an episode.

Rather than attempting any kind of exhaustive linguistic analysis of conversation – as is suggested by Eggins and Slade, the analysis here seeks to recognise the key features that occur in each scene of one episode of the popular UK soap opera *EastEnders*. It is recognised that there are insufficient data for conclusions to be drawn on the nature of soaps in general, but it is hoped that adequate evidence can be obtained for a preliminary survey.

Texts will thus be viewed from a discourse analyst's perspective with a view to recognising typical discursive patterns. Stenström, Sinclair & Coulthard, and Burton are fundamental to the way the analysis is carried out. The aim is to find a system of patterning in soap opera dialogue, to reveal communicative features of soap through linguistic analysis, not features of language through the use of soap opera dialogue merely as sample text.

## Analysis

The sample episode of *EastEnders*, shown in Britain in June 1998, had 32 scenes with an average length of 18 turns each. Dramatic scenes are short in

modern day UK soaps. Audience attention spans should not be threatened. There is always something else about to happen. There are other channels that can be surfed if the viewer's attention is not held.

### Hoey's Method of Text Analysis

A forthcoming paper (Wheatley 1998) will compare soap scenes with other dramatic scenes on TV to try and arrive at a definition of soap action in linguistic terms by means of contrastive analysis.

The analysis in this paper plans to make good use of Mike Hoey's work on text structure (Hoey 1983). This work has largely been applied to written texts rather than spoken, and to expository rather than narrative texts.

It (the model) eschews discussion of spoken interaction entirely, concentrating on written monologue throughout. (Hoey, 1983: 3)

Nonetheless, I feel that the Hoey model is a very useful one for the analysis of soap opera. Its merits are that it is a very simple model; its applicability is easy to see. Secondly, one can use the model as a means of understanding the structural patterns that soap opera dialogue serve. The Hoey model is both simple and powerful. It is this combination that makes it the best tool for the job I envisage.

Analysis so far indicates that a discourse analytic coding of key acts in each scene, in conjunction with a problem – solution analysis will be revealing of many key attributes of soap drama. The coding of acts has been performed on this episode in its entirety. This is seen as a necessary stage on the way to being able to say anything meaningful about the structure of soap opera.

### Do Soaps in fact move towards closure?

Viewed in the long term, soaps may have the open-ended narrative structure that is commonly attributed to them, (see Allen 1992, Brown 1989 & 1994). They have been described as a “serial form that resists narrative closure” (never-endingness) (Brown 1994: 49).

This can be restated in linguistic terms, using the Hoey model, that there are very likely to be many ongoing problem situations in the soap. My analysis shows too that these scenes are pushed towards solutionhood, however temporary this might be. Today's solution can become tomorrow's problem situation recast. Still, for today there can be a part solution. Soaps then, do incorporate closure, however temporarily. It is an important feature, and one, which we shall see, closes this particular episode of *EastEnders*. Indeed it is a feature that regularly closes episodes of *EastEnders*. This is the way that soap drama at least is.

### The Text of the Episode Under Study

This episode opens with what is very much a problem statement regarding the lives of three characters, Susan, Michael and Matthew.

#### Scene 1

Susan (*react + give more advice*)

Yeah, well next time get his side of it first.

Michael (*react to the advice*)

Well that's the problem. He won't even talk to me about it.

Susan (*advice*)

You're the one that wanted family life. Now you got it, moody teenagers and all. Just deal with it ay. If I come home to another evening of you two sulking I am turning round and going straight out again.

By the end of the episode, the nature of their problem will have been thoroughly explored. More importantly, an effort will be initiated by Michael to solve this problem – or at least to move it on a stage, so that they start to live together as a proper family again. By the end of this episode we will see what success this potential solution has. The next episode is required to see how things actually turn out. In terms of the Hoey model, we have a central problem for which a solution is offered.

Using Hoey's Problem – Solution means of analysis, this family's set-up looks as follows.

**SITUATION:** The family unit has come apart: Susan has got MS

**PROBLEM:** Michael wants to re-establish family life. **BUT :** His son doesn't trust him and Susan can't decide if what Michael wants will be good for her, or for their son Matthew.

**SOLUTION** (Mainly from Michael's perspective): First: Win the trust of his son. Second: Woo Susan back, over a romantic dinner for two.

**EVALUATION:** Does it work? Comment to follow in future episodes.

The full range of features of the Hoey model present themselves quite clearly in this analysis of an episode of *EastEnders*.

Evaluation is a key feature of the Hoey model of analysis, as it is key to Labov's narrative analysis too (1967). Slade and Eggins, following work by Jim Martin (in press), see a key role for it too in the general analysis of spoken language. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) recognised its importance in classroom language. That was thought to be a special type of discourse. Evaluation however is widespread and offers very good potential for analysis in the widest approach to spoken language.

Labov's model is too broad for its own good; and gets applied in areas of narrative it was never intended for. The Hoey model has been used on expository text to good effect. I hope this paper displays the value of this means of analysis to popular narrative. I believe I am at least among the first to test its applicability to spoken narrative. More work is needed however on the role played by evaluation in a range of spoken texts. The Slade-Eggins model is too detailed for my purposes here. Models are needed that explicate certain text types; a complete model is too cumbersome and often unhelpful for everyday use.

The purposes of this paper are primarily to show that the analysis of talk in soap opera is both feasible and worthwhile; that something of the nature

of soap opera can be shown through such analysis, possibly *only* through such analysis.

### The Overriding Problem-Solution Structure in Key Scenes

Let's look in some detail at the Matthew-Michael-Susan scenes. Firstly, the scenes that involve these characters are noticeably longer than the others. The average scene length when these characters are involved is 23.6 turns. In other scenes the average length is only 16.5. They also recur with greater frequency throughout the episode than any other sequence of scenes. Importantly too, they frame the entire episode at both its start and close. All these features must stand as a signifier of at least local importance for these scenes in the episode in question.

In Scene 1, Michael and Susan briefly discuss the problem of their son. We have a problem in need of some resolution, which will be offered in the course of the episode. On a positive note, at least Michael and Susan are talking like parents, blaming and offering advice on how matters might be improved. Problems that are under consideration in this manner contain the seeds of a potential solution.

The opening scene recaps for us the ongoing, and unknown to Michael and Susan, events between Matthew their son and Sarah, his erstwhile girlfriend. So it 'encapsulates' (Sinclair 1992: 10) the ongoing state of play and puts it to the forefront for our consideration. Then progress is presented as possible, if only by being mutually desired, for this family's problems, to which this episode will offer some resolution.

Susan (*give more ADVICE*)

Yeah, well next time get his side of it first

Michael (*react to the advice*)

Well that's the problem. He won't even talk to me about it.

Susan (*advice*)

You're the one that wanted family life. Now you got it, moody teenagers and all. Just deal with it ay. If I come home to another evening of you two sulking I am turning round and going straight out again.

## Talk types

There is talk about action and there is talk that is constitutive of action. This opening scene gives us talk about the action, even if it is talk from the key participants. As the later scenes unfold the talk becomes the action and constructs the main events of this episode of *EastEnders*. This shift from talk about to talk that is the action and then later back to talk about it is a key marker of scenes going through different stages of the *problem – solution – evaluation* model.

Scene 5 follows up on Scene 1 by illustrating the lack of trust and respect that exists between father and son. The issue is unimportant; other stall holders getting away with noise levels that Matthew would never be allowed. This is not to turn into an actual story line. It is simply there to provide the viewer with on going current evidence of the family problems that these people are suffering.

Scene 7 is a one of male bonding between Michael and Sanjay. This can be defined locally as a scene where there is no action and only agreement between the participating characters. The progress that Susan and Michael have been making is represented for us, encapsulation again. Some scenes take place to unfold the drama, others to ensure that the listener is up with the state of play.

The disbelief that Matthew is not pleased to see his parents close to reuniting is expressed by Sanjay as the prevailing wisdom, male wisdom at least; Michael is not disagreeing. This is very much the first part of the problem. The son seems unhappy that his parents are getting closer. Well, it makes for a good story doesn't it? So the family problem is restated, what does Matthew want? – He should be happy to see his parents together again.

Scene 13 shows us moves towards problem resolution. Now, instead of scenes commenting on previous action and talk, this scene is constitutive of the key action that is needed. Matthew and Michael need to talk, at least Susan and Michael think so. Michael offers to take his son to lunch. Michael's way of talking, his solution to the problem isn't the one that Susan envis-

aged. A smart viewer will know this as the father – son scene unfolds. It will be made very obvious before the episode ends in any case.

Michael (*offer*)

You going to lunch?

Matthew (*elicit / insert*)

Why, do I need your permission?

Michael (*offer*)

Come on I'll treat you.

Matthew (*reject*)

No thanks.

(*Michael prevails and eventually the offer is accepted.*)

Scene 15 is a long and important scene. The big problem for the episode is firstly how will Michael and Susan get back together and secondly how can Michael get closer to his son. The former problem can only be resolved if there is at least progress with the latter. Matthew needs convincing that his father is serious, that he won't be off again at the first sign of trouble. Michael informs Matthew that this won't happen. Some success starts to seem possible when Matthew agrees to stay in the restaurant and starts to open up and to tell his father through INFORM moves what is on his mind.

Matthew says he is not worried but he clearly is at the prospect of things not getting better between his parents, and that they might quickly get worse again. The problem is made clear as the talk provides some of the means to solve it.

Matthew (*inform*)

I mean , You don't tell what is going on between you and mum, that's completely different.

Michael (*reply / offer*)

I'll tell you anything you want to know – well go on, ask me anything.

Scene 17 is a return to the lunch scene much as when we left it. Real time may have gone faster than scene time for a change. This is also one of the longest scenes in the show, and, connected with the first half of the talking scene in 15 these two scenes between them account for 56 turns at talk; far more than any other single episode. Surely this is a soap signifier of importance.

Real progress is made here as Michael tells his son how he feels. Matthew offers his own care of his mum as a solution to her problem for his father's evaluation. He evaluates what Matthew did very positively but makes it clear that it is not the best solution; it is too heavy a burden for a teenager to carry. The implication is that a full family solution will work better.

Matthew starts to be convinced. Action happens then through this scene. It is not just talk about action somewhere else. The talk is constitutive of attitudes and emotions changing, changing in a way that make a solution to this family's problems attainable. This progress is clearly marked when Matthew agrees with his father, rare enough in itself but agrees that his childhood wasn't all unhappy. There is agreement therefore that the family unit has value and is worth trying to restart. The scene ends with ADVICE from son to father on how to solve the other side of the problem; how to get Susan to take him back.

The solution of the lack of trust problem between father and son allows for the cycle to continue with consideration of the problem between Michael and Susan. In case the audience missed the fact that they now have a small time solution on their hands the fact is encapsulated in the talk of Sanjay and Michael in scene 19. This both recounts the action for the audience, if they didn't catch its full import the first time round, and also acts as an evaluation of what has taken place.

The question-answer pattern provides a simple textual vehicle for this evaluative action to take place.

Sanjay (*elicit*)

So he's really alright about it now is he?

Michael (*reply*)

Yeah, I managed to convince him that I have got his mum's best interests at heart.

We have yet to really deal with the problem that besets Susan and Michael but the major problem that was besetting father and son can now be evaluated as 'alright.' Michael has 'managed to convince' his son. This at least temporary solution to one problem allows the major problem to be tackled, and with both men playing for the same solution. The rest of Scene 19 with Sanjay gives us a preview of Michael's chosen route to persuading Susan to have him back. The solution is aired to the audience; now we can watch and see how it actually turns out.

Scene 22 sees the solution to the family problem put to work. The pre-topic opening (Stenström 94: 135) sees Father and son getting along. Matthew is invited to stay but declines, to leave his father free space with his mother. Once she realises what is going on, Susan's first concern is for her son. She is a mother after all.

Susan (*elicit*)

What about Matthew?

Michael (*reply*)

Well I invited him but he felt he should clear off.

Susan (*follow up response (the evaluation is ironic)*)

Very cosy.

We move into the protracted cycle of problem – attempted solution – which raises further problems. Hoey calls this textual feature 'multilayering.' Multilayer-ing is a common phenomenon in the organisation of a discourse, and is built upon the fact that a negative evaluation is a signal of a problem. (Hoey 1983: 105)

Negative evaluation of a possible solution to a problem leads to another problem. The new problem, viewed from Susan's point of view, is that father and son are now conspiring behind the mother's back. Yes Susan wants Michael and Matthew to talk; to trust each other more. However she wants Michael to find out more about what has happened between Matthew and Sarah. Instead she finds that they have been plotting a course of action; a solution to the family's problems behind her back.

I put it forward as a likely feature of ongoing story lines in soaps that we have problem situations, attempted solutions which only lead to new and associated problems, which in turn also need to be solved. This may be a simple, generalised kind of analysis but it is at least a workable one and will allow more fine tuning as the work progresses.

Susan (*clarify*)

Well one minute the pair of you aren't talking and the next you're putting your heads together to sort me out, is that it?

Michael (*inform*)

We thought you'd be pleased.

Susan (*reply*)

It's not that simple Michael.

Susan's evaluation is crucial. Things are indeed not quite that simple. Susan needs her say, to play her part in making a solution happen too. She is not a passive object. Also, no progress has been made on the Sarah issue, the topic that Susan wanted her son and husband to talk about. Instead they have only been talking about her – which they both prefer but Susan is unsure. What is sure at this stage is that a huge outstanding problem remains.

The scene ends with the problem as seen from Michael's point of view. I put this forward as another likely feature of ongoing story lines, that problems are viewable from more than one perspective and that evaluation of any possible solution will be a contested rather than simple one sided site. Fundamentally, it is this multi-angular feature plus contestation that progresses that most clearly characterise the major action line of an episode. More on this in the next section.

Michael (*reply + elicit*)

Well what is the truth Susan? That Matthew is not the only one to have his hopes built up for nothing?

Scene 25 is the longest scene in the episode, 36 turns. This then is the enaction of the would be solution Michael and Matthew are driving for and is still the problem as far as Susan is concerned. Again, length is surely a signifier of importance.

Scenes are open to at least this much multiple interpretation. One participant's solution is quite clearly the other's problem. The discourse analysis model I am using is meant not to try and unduly limit possible interpretations, either by watcher or participant. On the contrary, the analysis should highlight the fact that different ways of interpreting a scene are available.

Susan's first solution is to return to the way things were, just her and Matthew. Michael has talked Matthew out of this, but not Susan yet. Michael gains ground by pointing out that this isn't very fair on the teenage boy. Susan's next solution is that she can live alone. As a sufferer of relapsing MS in remission this is not quite out of the question. It is still not the desired solution for Michael, or Matthew at the moment.

The crux of the problem, as seen from Susan's angle, makes for the last words of the scene.

Susan (*elicit*)

Why does giving in to you feel like giving up on myself?

The problem is paramount at this stage.

Scene 28 offers us a taste of solution for both Michael and Susan. Rather than being constructed through disagreement as was scene 25, the first solution scene, this one is constructed around the sharing of inner feelings, the admission of deep uncertainty by Susan, about her future. She just doesn't know yet what solution will work. She is being honest now rather than just problematical. Susan needs to be convinced that Michael really wants her. Once that is done there is hope for them. The solution might work.

Susan (*opine*)

Maybe I am not myself anymore.

Michael (*react + opine*)

Come on, come on, hey, you are stronger and beautiful, more maddening than ever.

Susan (*react*)

Oh, Michael. (*They kiss.*)

Any evaluation of this solution stage will have to wait until the next episode.

## Conclusion of the First Part

The point of all this is to show firstly that this linguistically formed analysis suits the way that soap opera dialogue functions. Secondly it is hoped that the nature of the analysis indicates that although soap opera narrative is open-ended: “Soap opera consists of an ever-expanding middle.” (Brown, 1989: 186)

Along the way there are mini closures all the time. The fact that there is no final closure matters little to the close up way in which scenes highlight problems and offer solutions to them; solutions which are both successful and positively evaluated and those which are neither. One might say, that in this soap opera is more like life itself than other media dramas.

I hope this introductory detailed analysis shows something of what a linguistic approach can do. Moving to a slightly more generalised position I would like to conclude this piece by examining the nature of evaluation in this episode and by attempting to account for the functions that different kind of evaluation may have.

## Part 2: Evaluation

Approaches to evaluation can be as thorough as that of Eggins and Slade (1997). They follow up on the work of systemic linguist Jim Martin (in press) to produce a model of evaluative analysis that is as complete as one could imagine. I hope to make more use of this approach in a forthcoming paper. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) provide at least a clue that this is worth a category all to itself. However, it seems that in soap opera, evaluation is more pervasive than this. There is no one point in any dialogue where evalu-

ation is to be expected. Its scope in soap is far wider than in a traditional classroom.

In this part, I wish to make use of evaluation as Hoey uses it, as part of a macro template for text analysis. I also wish to produce a systematic way of analysing evaluative language in soap opera. It may not work for other text types, casual conversation for example, but my focus here is on saying something useful about soap opera using language as a tool. I am not trying to examine language in general, using soap opera dialogue simply as example texts.

Hoey's four part model has evaluation in final position. In expository text we expect to find the elements described below.

#### Situation – Problem – Solution – Evaluation

In soap opera the situation is often given. Viewers will know that Susan has MS for example, before her marriage becomes the focal issue of the programme for an episode or two. Situation level text is relatively unimportant and not that common in a soap opera. This follows Mary Ellen Brown's notion that soaps are weak on beginnings but have 'expanded middles' (Brown 1994).

Problems are what soaps are all about. By and large soap scenes deal at one level or another with people's problems; far more so than with their successes in life. I have discussed already, how, in the episode's major action sequence at least, problems are pushed towards solution, with unclear degrees of success. However, all 32 scenes in this episode, which I am sure is typical – being a regular viewer of this programme, contain evaluation of one sort or another. It is not a phenomenon confined to an episode's major action scenes.

Hoey's model allows us to make some initial categorisation of this evaluation into types. Most of it is negative. If we leave the major scenes out of consideration for the moment then 20 of the other 22 scenes all contain some kind of negative evaluation. Negative evaluation signals some kind of ongoing problem status. This overwhelming amount of negative evaluation reminds us, should we be capable of forgetting, that soap opera is fundamentally about other people's problems.

For example, there are a set of scenes that deal with a developing problem for an Italian family of restaurateurs. A negative evaluation of Mum by Gianni signals that the family restaurant is becoming a problem. Scenes in a later episode will focus on what is to be done, on possible solutions. At this point negative evaluation of one family member by another clearly signals the problem state.

Scene 11

Gianni (*information elicit + action prohibit*)

What do you think you are doing?

Mum (*reply*)

Drumming up business what else?

Gianni (*evaluate*)

People are going to think you are mad.

This is typical of the negative evaluation to be found throughout the episode. We can label this negative evaluation that signals initial problem stage. This is how scenes develop into the major action focus for a later episode.

Another example of initial problem stage negative evaluation in this episode would be the evaluation that comes Ruth's way for her new 'independent' lifestyle and that Connor heaps upon himself as having aided the break-up of her marriage to Mark. In Scene 23, Phil negatively evaluates Ruth's behaviour and Connor gives negative evaluation to his own role in the marriage break-up.

Scene 23

Phil (*elicit*)

I thought you was having a go at Ruth this evening.

Connor (*reply*)

She had other plans. I came too late there.

Phil (*clarification request*)

How do you mean?

Connor (*clarify*)

She's got a hot date tonight.

Phil (*follow up*)

She ain't hangin about is she?

Connor (*inform*)

I feel terrible for Mark. (+ *elicit information*) What am I going to say to him now?

Most of the scenes that are not connected with the major action, of which more follow shortly hereafter, follow this pattern of offering negative evaluation of people's behaviour which can then be classed as problematic.

One other kind of negative evaluation, outside of the major action scenes, comes in the evaluation slot for a text as perceived by Hoey. In soap opera terms this is evaluation of a solution. Here, in this episode at least, all the evaluation of solutions that have been reached is negative.

Two such examples:

Scene 8

Tiff (*elicit information*)

You did tell him?

Bianca (*reply*)

Sort of.

Tiff (*clarification request*)

Well what does that mean? Either you did or you didn't.

Bianca (*GIVE INFORMATION / clarify*)

I didn't have to. He realised how stupid he was being.

Tiff (*ELICIT*)

What about the hepatitis?

Bianca (*INFORMATION/reply*)

Well Lenny's in the clear. He's never had hepatitis. That means I'm in the clear. What's the point in telling him?

Tiff (*REACT*)

I don't believe you Bianca.

Bianca (*evaluate*)

Well as far as I'm concerned if it's all over and done with.

Tiff (*elicit - opinion*)

Well what if Lenny says something?

Bianca (*reply*)

He won't. Why should he? I'll have a word with him.

Tiff (*evaluate + elicit*)

Oh what, it'll be your little secret again will it? Haven't you learned anything from all of this? What about openness, what about honesty?

Bianca (*reply*)

Well I told him everything that matters.

Tiff (*comment/ evaluate*)

Well it's your marriage.

This had been the major action of the soap during the previous week. The problem was that one of B's old lovers found he was at risk from Hepatitis B. What should B do? Rikki, her husband was threatening to leave her because her behaviour made him suspect she was having the affair now. One solution was to tell him everything; that was the solution urged on her by her close friend Tiff. Bianca chose a cowardly route and told Rikki no

more than she thought he needed to know. Now, some days later when that action is no longer the key action of the day, the solution that was adopted comes under scrutiny, by those who were involved but who did not have to produce it. Tiff finds reason to strongly negatively evaluate her friend's behaviour.

I feel that most solutions in soap opera receive at least some negative evaluation. It is this perhaps that makes people claim that soap knows no closure. What is meant I am sure is that soaps know no perfect solutions; there are no solutions that occur as endings. Soap, like life goes on and the solutions found always meet with someone's displeasure.

Here is a further example from the same episode and regarding the same action. This time the action involves Bianca and her former lover Lenny.

Bianca (*suggest*)

Then let's forget it. eh? The whole thing never happened.

Lenny (*accept + opine*)

Yeah, that's fine by me. I'm just glad to be back to where we were, you know, everyone friends again.

Bianca (*suggest*)

Well don't hold your breath Lenny, I'd stay away from Rikki for the moment if I were you.

Lenny (*half-accept*)

Yeah but he is my mate.

Bianca (*deny*)

Not anymore. He may have forgiven me but he still aint happy about it.

Lenny (*opine*)

But it's all in the past.

Bianca (*request for action*)

Just stay away from him Lenny please, you've caused enough trouble already.

Here, rather than Tiff offering negative evaluation of Bianca's behaviour, we the audience have a chance to see how good or bad a solution has been reached by Bianca as the post-solution action unfolds between the involved participants.

The scene allows the audience to add its negative evaluation to Tiff's given earlier. The consequences of Bianca's lack of real action are that Rikki and Lenny can no longer be friends. Such a solution at best can only partly be received positively. Each member of the audience is entitled to find its own view of the outcome (Fiske 1987:3). This kind of dramatic scene allows precisely for this kind of judgement to be made.

To show that not all evaluation in soap opera is loaded towards the negative, and at the same time to show that the key evaluation outside of the evening's major action will be negative, here are a couple of examples of positive evaluation, taken from the same episode.

Scene 16b, [the second consecutive scene in the cafe.]

Roy (*INFORMATION*)

So this Bill Pearson, it seems he is setting up a hire business. And he is looking for a regular supplier

Pat (*reply + positive evaluation*)

Well that is great, Roy.

Roy (*information continue*)

Late low mileage used cars, the full range, it's a big contract to fill.

Pat (*elicit*)

Yeah but have you already got it?

Roy (*reply*)

Well as good as, I've just got to square how I am going to finance it.

Pat (*clarification request*)

How do you mean?

Roy (*clarify*)

Well for this volume of work I need a line of credit or a sign of intent for the handling.

Pat (*elicit*)

It's not going to be a problem that is it?

Roy (*reply*)

No no, there's a few people I can call on. I'll sort something out.

Pat (*follow up / evaluate*)

I'm really pleased for you love.

Roy (*elicit + inform*)

It's about time isn't it? We can stop penny pinching at long last and start thinking about that summer holiday.

This is the first mention of this story line; Roy's attempt to get back into the used car business. Pat, his wife, is pleased for him and positively evaluates his dynamism. Even she sees the problem that lies ahead. The problems Roy, a man in his sixties who has just had a heart attack, will have getting suitable finance for a venture such as this. Positive evaluation tends to accompany situation level text and if, as is usually the case that situation is to turn into a story line, then it is the negative that will dominate. A problem will develop that needs to be dealt with, the bread and butter of soap opera activity.

Here is a second example. Although these scene types are sparse, at least one more can be found to support my arguments on the likely occurrence of and peripheral status of positive evaluation in a soap.

Scene 18

Lenny (*pre question + inform*)

Right, are you ready for it? I've got us a gig.

Mick (*clarification request*)

A gig where?

Lenny (*clarify*)

Titanic cat. Monday night, second spot.

Mick, Lola (*repeat*)

You got us on at the Titanic cat.

Lenny (*elaborate*)

Someone fell out, a mate of mine tipped me off.

Mick (*elicit*)

Who's the main act?

Lenny (*reply*)

Ah the Bisics? but they're rubbish.

Lola (*elicit*)

Are we really ready for the titanic cat?

Lenny (*reply*)

Look, I'm your manager – let me be the judge of that.

Lola (follow up/ challenge)

We've hardly got our set together.

This is again the scene where this situation arises for the first time. Mick's band, where Lenny is the manager land their first gig. Initial evaluation is positive. This sounds like good news but the story line will run with this as a problem as Lola in particular, the band's singer, negatively evaluates the time they have to get ready in. Early positive evaluation speedily gives way to negative evaluation as the gig becomes a problem and a story line rather than simply good news which is no news at all.

I want to develop what I say here in a paper to follow this one. Still, let it be said that evaluation in the main action is likely to be contested evaluation. That is, different characters evaluate the action differently. It is changes in the way that people evaluate that allows for solutions to become possible.

Let me give one example of contested evaluation, which we have seen, in part, above.

Scene 23

Michael (*clarification request*)

What do you mean?

Susan (*clarify*)

Well one minute the pair of you aren't talking and the next you're putting your heads together to sort me out, is that it?

Michael (*inform*)

We thought you'd be pleased.

Susan (*reply*)

It's not that simple Michael.

Michael's solution is to try and bring his family back together. He has got them under one roof. Now he wants to re-establish normal married life. Susan, though, has different ideas. It isn't going to be that simple. Major action scenes in a soap opera move the action forward from problem stage to solution phase. Because things don't happen that quickly in soap opera, and because there is a need for story lines to last, this move towards solution is rarely straightforward. In fact the typical case is as above where the solution which obviously has Michael's positive evaluation is opposed by Susan, whose consent is essential if the solution is to come into effect and actually change the lives of these soap characters.

## Altered Evaluation

Another key feature in the bringing about of solutions to characters' problems in soaps is that contested sites of evaluation become sites where characters' evaluation changes. It is this change of evaluative stance that allows for solutions to be even feasible, let alone successful. Here is an example from the same episode and from the same major action sequence.

### Scene 17

Michael (*reply*)

We had some good years.

Matthew (*comment*)

I must've missed them.

Michael (*elicit*)

Ah come on, are you telling me that your childhood was a miserable one?

Jianni (*opine*)

Ah you're back. I was wondering how we were going to manage once the stampede started (*snigger*).

Michael (self support)

I remember the three of us having a lot of laughs, going everywhere together.

Matthew (accept)

Yeah alright, it wasn't all bad.

Michael (*opine*)

It shouldn't have gone wrong. I don't know why it die. I got caught up in my work and well I can't blame your mum for looking elsewhere for the things I couldn't give her.

Before Michael can start convincing Susan that they should return to married life together, he has to convince his son Matthew that everything will be OK. He manages this over a lunch he offers to the teenager. The boy's change of heart is signified by his change of mind to accepting his father's view that his childhood was often a good one.

In case the significance of this change of heart isn't registered by the viewers it is picked up on in a following scene, where Michael discusses his plans and hopes with his mate Sanjay. The viewer is presented with strong evidence that what happened in scene 17 wasn't just a minor change of view from the son but that it was a fundamental change of attitude; that he would now trust his father and support his attempts to reunite with Matthew's mother.

Scene 19

Michael (*inform*)

Yeah he's even offered to go out tonight to give me and Susan some time to ourselves.

Sanjay (*information elicit*)

So he's really alright about it now is he?

Michael (*reply*)

Yeah I managed to convince him that I have got his mum's best interests at heart.

## Conclusions

1. Mike Hoey's problem – solution method of text analysis is applied here to narrative dialogue for the very first time to my knowledge. It provides a useful and straightforward linguistic model for understanding the nature of progression in soap opera episodes.

2. The model itself highlights the importance of problem to soap opera. The category of evaluation is far more widespread than the Hoey model gives credit for. Nevertheless the model raises the issue of evaluation as one that is of key importance.

3. Recognition of different kinds of evaluation allows one to classify soap scenes into a very limited range of types.

4. Contested evaluation and altered evaluation are key features of the major action scenes in a soap episode and the means by which solutions are brought about, of a temporary or lasting nature.

5. Detailed analysis of the function of each individual utterance is critical for making analytical judgements on the text. It leads to great familiarity with the dialogue and helps the analyst recognise patterns in what takes place. There is far more to be said about the choices regularly made by participants at different stages of the action. This will be revealed in a later paper.

6. What has been done here provides the basis for a great deal more further analysis, both of the particular text that has warranted attention here and of all other soap opera dialogue.

## Bibliography

- Allen, R. C. (1992) *Channels of Discourse Reassembled*. London: Routledge.
- Ang, I. (1982) *Watching Dallas*. London: Routledge.
- Altman, K. E. (1989) 'Television as Gendered Technology,' *Journal of popular film and television*, 17: pp 46-56.
- Brown, M.E. (1989) 'Motley Moments: Soap Opera, Carnival, Gossip and the Power of the Utterance,' pp. 183-198 in M.E. Brown (ed) *Television and Women's Culture*. London: Sage
- Brown, M. E. (1994) *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Power of Resistance*. Sage: CA.
- Burton, D. (1981) 'Analysing Spoken Discourse' pp. 61-81 in M. Coulthard & M. Montgomery (eds) *Studies in Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.
- Butler, J. (1986) 'Notes on the Soap Opera Apparatus: Televisual Style and As the World Turns,' *Cinema Journal*, 25: 53-70.
- Byars, J. (1987) 'Reading Feminine Discourse. Prime-Time Television in the US,' *Communication*, 9: 289-303.
- Eggs, S. & Slade, D. (1997) *Analyzing Casual Conversation*. London: Cassell.
- Fine, Marlene. (1981) 'Soap Opera Conversations: the Talk that Binds,' *The Journal of Communication*, 31 (3): 97-107.
- Fiske, J. (1987) 'TV: Resituating the Popular in the People,' *The Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, 1 (2): 1-8.

- Fiske, J. (1992) 'British Cultural Studies and Television' in R. Allen (ed) *Channels of Discourse Reassembled*. London: Routledge.
- Hoey, M. (1983) *On the Surface of Discourse*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Labov, W & Waletzky, J (1967) 'Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of People's Experience' pp.12-44 in J. Helm (ed) *Essays on Verbal and Visual Arts*. Washington: University of Washington Press.
- Martin, J.R (in press) 'Beyond Exchange: Appraisal Systems in English' in S. Hunston & G. Thompson (eds) *Evaluation in Text*. Oxford: OUP.
- Petro, P. (1986) 'Mass Culture and the Feminine,' *Cinema Journal* , 25: 5-21.
- Sinclair, J McH (1992) 'Trust the Text' pp. 5-19 in M. Davies & L. Ravelli, (eds) *Advances in Systemic Linguistics: Recent Theory and Practice*. London: Pinter.
- Sinclair, J McH & Coulthard R.M. (1975) *Towards an Analysis of Discourse: The English used by Teachers and Pupils*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stenström, A. B. (1994) *An Introduction to Spoken Interaction*. Longman: London.
- Sutherland, J & Siniawsky, S. (1982) 'The Treatment and Resolution of Moral Violations in Soap Opera,' *The Journal of Communication*, 32, 2: 67-74.
- Wheatley J. 1998. 'A Comparison of Eastenders and This Life in Discourse Terms,' A paper given at the Lisbon Conference on Culture and Identity 12/98.