

Beyond Good and *Bad*:  
The Linguistic Construction of Walter White's Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*  
by  
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To my family.



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## Abstract

This thesis offers an analysis of the linguistic construction of Walter White's masculinity in the 2008-2013 television series *Breaking Bad*. The creator of the show, Vince Gilligan, has described Walt's drastic transformation from an unassuming high school chemistry teacher into a powerful methamphetamine manufacturer as the process of "turning Mr. Chips into Scarface," and media scholar Brian Faucette connects this linear transformation to Walt's masculinity when he argues that Walt gradually comes to embrace elements of hegemonic masculinity, such as violence and aggression, that are associated with Scarface. This thesis argues that Walt's transformation and his masculinity are both more complicated than this linear model would suggest.

The approach I adopt for this analysis is a linguistic one, inspired by the growing discourse surrounding the study of language in the media. This approach draws from speech act theory, as delineated by J.L. Austin and John Searle, in conjunction with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and additional scholarship on language, identity, and gender in order to analyze how Walt's utterances in his interactions with other characters construct his masculinity over the course of the series. The first chapter considers his interactions with his major adversaries in the meth business; the second analyzes his interactions with his wife, Skyler; and the third concerns his interactions with his former student and current partner-in-crime, Jesse Pinkman.

What emerges from these analyses is a portrait of the complicated, inconsistent, and multifarious nature of the construction of Walt's masculinity, which creates a stark contrast with the relatively simple and linear transformation from Mr. Chips to Scarface that Gilligan and many of the show's critics have proposed. I further suggest that this complex masculinity plays a significant role in establishing Walt's place in the trend toward male anti-hero protagonists in television drama series that began with Tony Soprano, from the 1999 series *The Sopranos*.

I argue that this thesis's focus on how Walt is *linguistically* constructed is what allows the complexities of his masculinity to be revealed. Whereas others have tended to focus on *physical action* (such as acts of physical violence) in analyzing Walt's construction and development, this thesis places emphasis on *language*, which is, as the discourse on language in the media contends, one of the most important tools with which creators of televisual media products build characters and the worlds they inhabit.



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Short Titles

“*BB*”: Gilligan, Vince. *Breaking Bad*. AMC. Albuquerque, NM, 20 Jan. 2008-29 Sep. 2013.

Television.

S##E##: Notation used to indicate season and episode number when referring to specific episodes, i.e. S01E06 = Season 1, Episode 6.



## INTRODUCTION

### **Turning Mr. Chips into Scarface?**

In the very first episode of Vince Gilligan's television series *Breaking Bad*, Walter White gives an introductory lecture to his high school chemistry class. "Technically, chemistry is the study of matter, but I prefer to see it as the study of change," he tells them. "It is growth, then decay, then transformation. It is fascinating, really." Here, in the span of less than a minute of apparently irrelevant dialogue, Walt previews the entire narrative arc of the show's five-season run. This seemingly innocuous teacher will soon be diagnosed with lung cancer, which will lead to his decision to put his mastery of chemistry to use in order to support his family. In a few short months on the show's timeline, many will know him as Heisenberg, the finest manufacturer of methamphetamine the southwestern United States has ever seen. And in less than two years, he will be dead.

Gilligan has described this extraordinary "chemical reaction" as the process of "turning Mr. Chips into Scarface," and many have joined him in describing Walt's characterization over the course of the show along a spectrum, with Mr. Chips at one extreme and Scarface at the other. This framework seems intended to track Walt's anti-heroic and even villainous qualities as he "breaks bad" over the course of the series,<sup>1</sup> and it also suggests that he gradually comes to embrace the aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are frequently associated with Scarface (as portrayed by Paul Muni in 1932 and Al Pacino in 1983) in popular culture: violence, aggression, and unwavering fearlessness, to name a few. Brian Faucette—a film and media scholar whose

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<sup>1</sup> The expression "to break bad," as I use it here, means something like "to go bad." This is the oldest and probably the most widely recognized meaning of the term (Rothman), and Jesse Pinkman uses it in this way in the first episode of the series: "Some straight like you, giant stick up his ass, all of a sudden at age, what, 60, he's just gonna break bad?" (*BB*, S01E01, "Pilot"). But Gilligan himself has defined it differently: "It's very much a Southern regionalism that I thought everybody knew. It means to raise hell" (American Film Institute). As it turns out, this phrase is actually associated with African-American slang, and it has been defined in a number of ways throughout its interesting and complicated linguistic history (Rothman). For more on this, see Rothman's article: <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/09/23/breaking-bad-what-does-that-phrase-actually-mean/>

essay about Walt's embrace of hegemonic masculinity is included in the book *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*—captures this perception of the character when he writes, “Scarface is a daring, violent figure who imposes his masculinity on the world using violence and intimidation” (73).

However, Walt's performance of masculinity does not neatly align with what Gilligan, Faucette, and many others seem to see as a clear-cut model of hegemonic masculinity. Though he does take on many of these characteristics as he enters the criminal world of the meth business and strives to provide for his family, he displays other traits that are not consistent with a typical, hyper-masculine criminal: his academic demeanor, his use of lofty diction in everyday speech, and his distinctive methods of persuasion, to name a few. These characteristics complicate the construction of Walt's masculinity to the point where fixed labels like “Mr. Chips” and “Scarface” feel insufficient; even when Walt seems to fully embrace the formidable “Heisenberg” persona that he develops over the course of the series, his performance of masculinity appears to be more complex than what Gilligan and Faucette describe.

The approach I take in exploring the construction of Walt's masculinity in this thesis is a linguistic one: I use several theories on language and identity as lenses through which to analyze how Walt's masculinity is constructed *linguistically* in his verbal interactions with a variety of different characters. This approach addresses a gap in the existing body of criticism on *Breaking Bad*, which has not heretofore examined the show's language in the way that I do here, and it demonstrates the possibilities afforded by the study of language in the media. Contrary to the simple, linear progression that the “turning Mr. Chips into Scarface” framework (which much of the previous criticism on the show has reinforced through a focus on physical action) would suggest, my analysis of Walt's language ultimately reveals his transformation and the

construction of his masculinity to be fascinatingly complex, multi-layered, and often inconsistent. This complicated portrait is significant because of how critics—and Gilligan, the creator of the show himself—have oversimplified Walt’s transformation in the past, and because of the connection I posit between Walt’s complicated masculinity and his construction as a part of the recent trend of male anti-hero protagonists in television drama series.

### **A Linguistic Approach: Where Has *Breaking Bad* Criticism Been—and Not Been?**

*Breaking Bad* is a relatively new show; it began in 2008 and ended in 2013. Even so, there is a substantial amount of criticism on it that has emerged in the past seven years: websites such as *The A.V. Club*<sup>2</sup> published weekly write-ups discussing every episode of the series as they aired, and, as I mentioned above, there is an entire book filled with essays about the series. This criticism has focused on a wide variety of topics: the themes that emerge over the course of the series; the show’s distinctive visual and cinematic style (particularly the gorgeous landscapes filmed on-location near Albuquerque and the signature use of creative camera angles and lenses), and, of course, the actual events that occur on the show, such as Walt’s murder of Krazy-8 early in the first season or his assassination of Gus Fring in the fourth season finale. Events like these—the kinds of events that television audiences prefer to avoid having “spoiled” for them—can generally be categorized as *physical action*. E. Deidre Pribram, in her essay “Feeling Bad: Emotions and Narrativity in *Breaking Bad*,” notes the distinction between physical action and what she calls “emotional action,” otherwise known as “‘talk’ or character interaction” (Pribram 193). She argues that while “acts of physicality are normally what we refer to when we speak of filmic televisual action,” emotional action is of vital importance in the way it “shapes and propels a narrative,” and it is ultimately the “dialectic relationship between emotional action and physical action” that composes narrativity in the televisual medium (Pribram 193).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.avclub.com/tv/breaking-bad/>

Much of the criticism on *Breaking Bad*, however, appears to be disproportionately weighted toward physical action. Walt's development along the "turning Mr. Chips into Scarface" paradigm discussed above, for instance, seems to hinge on plot points that rely on physical action; Faucette confirms this when he writes, "In season five Walt's transformation from 'Mr. Chips to Scarface' is completed when Walt sanctions the killing of a young kid who witnesses them rob a train ... and when he kills Mike Ehrmantraut" (84). For Faucette, it is acts like these—acts that revolve around physical actions such as murders—that push Walt toward a stage of "completed" transformation. But where does that leave emotional action? Weekly episode reviews such as Donna Bowman's for *The A.V. Club* frequently mention dialogue and verbal interactions between characters, but these are never the central focus. Audiences, meanwhile, have focused on dialogue to some extent in their responses to the show, but these discussions are often framed as lists of the show's "greatest" or most "badass" quotes.<sup>3</sup> Even Pribram, who stresses the importance of interaction and "emotional action," does not closely examine dialogue; she focuses on "emotional transactions" on a scale that does not involve analysis of the individual utterance or response (198).

My approach in this thesis, then, is a linguistic analysis of Walt's dialogue throughout the series. That is to say, instead of focusing solely on the physical action that moves the plot of the show forward, I examine Walt's use of language in order to investigate the development of his character, and more specifically the construction of his masculinity. This linguistic approach provides access to an especially rich vantage point from which to analyze Walt's masculinity, and it allows me to join the burgeoning discourse on language in the media, which has largely focused on the application of theories of "real-life" language to scripted and broadcast talk.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/breaking-bad-quotes-20-badass-612801>

Robin Queen, in her book *Vox Popular: The Surprising Life of Language in the Media*, explains the rationale behind this sort of approach. First, she claims that “language is just as important to setting up a story and making that story believable as are the visual, audio, and other special effects” (5). It isn’t just that characters *use* language—on some level, the characters and the stories they are a part of *are* language in that language is one of the primary tools with which they are constructed. Television content creators use this tool in a wide variety of ways, but one of the most significant—and one of the most helpful to the framing of the approach taken here—is through the exploitation of indexicality. This concept is discussed further in Chapter Three; for now, it will suffice to say that it involves the ways in which specific linguistic features can index, or point to, certain social meanings in order to create a link between a character’s language and the real-world types of people they are supposed to resemble (123-124). As Queen notes, “The narrative mass media seek both to differentiate characters from one another in a believable way and to minimize the degree of variability in the interpretation of those characters” (129). Television writers, then, use language to associate characters like Walt with certain, easily identifiable “types”—through, for instance, his frequent use of “teacherly” language—while simultaneously using it to *distinguish* them from others. Language thus serves simultaneously as a “shortcut” to establish characters as certain types of people and as a nuanced tool that helps writers to construct interesting and original characters. This makes a linguistic approach particularly appropriate for the questions that this thesis seeks to answer; it allows me to explore the complicated ways in which Walt’s language does *and does not* construct him as a man who is transforming into a hegemonically masculine “Scarface” type.

Queen further highlights the fascinating complexities that underlie the study of language in scripted media products when she writes:

...we can consider the scripted media to be fundamentally interesting precisely because of the ways in which they are of the culture of which they are a part, even as they play a role in shaping that culture ... what appears in the media derives from imagination and thus represents a highly edited version of social and cultural life. Thus, the scripted media offer a fairly contained, and edited, microcosm of the places from which their players come. In this sense, they are no more and no less 'real' than the unscripted media [such as talk shows, sportscasts, etc.] (21)

So, Walt exists as a part of a condensed version of real-life society—a world in which characters like “Mr. Chips” and “Scarface” and occupations like “teacher” and “meth manufacturer” already have particular associations with regard to masculinity. It is the imagination involved in juxtaposing these different preexisting associations, in presenting a performance of many different identities and social positions that overlap in an idiosyncratic way, that make him a novel character worthy of studying—a fictional “person” who is constructed in large part by how he talks and interacts with others.

One note concerning the “imagination” mentioned above: this thesis does not attempt to parse the complex web of intentions and performances of the people involved in creating *Breaking Bad*. It would be simply impossible to take into consideration how Walt’s linguistic performances are mediated by actor Bryan Cranston’s portrayal of the character, not to mention the influence of the many different directors and writers who contribute to the creation of each episode. Instead, I approach the narrative world of the show as a “highly edited version of social and cultural life” and consider how Walt’s masculinity is linguistically constructed within it.

## Speech Act Theory, Identity, and Performativity

The linguistic theory that underlies many of my analyses is speech act theory, as delineated by J.L. Austin and John Searle. I analyze key scenes from the series primarily in terms of how Walt’s utterances, or locutionary acts, give rise to the performance of illocutionary speech acts—that is, the “performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something”—by which he, for instance, asserts dominance over others through warning or intimidation, or strives to maintain control over the people around him by manipulating them or by using language to impose his reality of the world upon them (Austin 61).<sup>4</sup> Also included in these discussions are moments in which language carries out performative acts of self-definition, such as the much-discussed “I am the one who knocks scene” from the fourth season: it seems like Walt’s simple act of telling his wife that he is “the danger” and “the one who knocks” is what characterizes him as such (*BB*, S04E06, “Cornered”).<sup>5</sup>

Of central importance to the connection between Walt’s speech acts and the construction of his masculinity is Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler describes gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (900, italics in the original). In the context of this analysis, these “acts” are Walt’s speech acts (and, indeed, Butler refers to speech acts at the very beginning of her essay). This is also where the concept of indexicality comes into play: the social meanings indexed by Walt’s speech acts associate him with particular types of people—or, more precisely, with particular types of masculinity—which is ultimately what allows me to make claims about how his masculinity is being constructed in his interactions with other characters.

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<sup>4</sup> The first analysis of Chapter One serves as an in-depth illustration of how this works.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Two for a complete analysis of this scene.

The key phrase here is “in his interactions”: the idea that identity is negotiated interactionally is perhaps the most important concept of all to the foundation of this thesis’s linguistic approach. In their article “Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach,” Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall define identity as “the social positioning of self and other” (586), a definition that they expand upon when they claim that “identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and social actors” (598). The point, in terms of *Breaking Bad*, is that Walt’s utterances do not exist in a vacuum (contrary to what the list of most “badass” quotes I mentioned above might suggest); the language he uses in interactions with others is *always* constructing his identity and his masculinity. Not only does this concept provide a useful lens through which to examine the complicated nature of Walt’s masculinity and its construction, but it also reinforces the justification for taking a linguistic approach in the first place because of the vital importance of verbal interaction to the construction of identity—which is, again, a characteristic of both scripted media and real world interaction.

### **Walter White’s Masculinity in Context: The Anti-Hero Trend in Television Drama Series**

The construction of Walt’s multifaceted masculinity also establishes him as a part of a larger trend in television: the prevalence of male anti-heroes in recent drama series. Characters like Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos*, Vic Mackey from *The Shield*, Dexter Morgan from *Dexter*, and Don Draper from *Mad Men* have dominated the television landscape in recent years. These men are all the protagonists of their respective shows, and they are all, to some degree, identifiable and empathetic for American audiences—they are all American men whose lives are not perfect. At the same time, though, their actions and decisions are frequently characterized by a sense of moral ambiguity that makes it difficult to call them *heroes*. Tony Soprano, for

instance, is a family man struggling with anxiety and depression who also happens to be a member of the Italian-American mob; Dexter Morgan works for the Miami Metro Police Department but moonlights as a vigilante serial killer who dispatches murderous criminals when the police fail to bring them to justice. As for Walt's place in this trend, television critic Alan Sepinwall calls him "the recession era's everyman" who the audience in some ways continues to "feel for" despite "[his horrifying] chosen method for solving his problems" (357).

Anti-heroes like Tony, Dexter, and Walt are thus characterized by the relationship between their status as sympathetic protagonists and the consistently dubious morality of their actions. What results is a character that audiences tend to feel for, but in a complicated way: the anti-hero's not-so-heroic qualities continually threaten to undermine the audience's sympathies, but those sympathies are (usually) never abandoned completely. The audience's responses to these characters are thus characterized by *tension*: tension that is created by each character's complex web of motivations, intentions, and actions that pull sympathies in all different directions, often stretching them to their limits. The complex construction of Walt's masculinity seems to give rise to a similar sort of tension, between his dynamic nature as a character and his many different competing and often conflicting performances of masculinity.

Indeed, looking a bit more closely at Tony Soprano, who is perhaps the quintessential exemplar of the television drama anti-hero trend I have discussed, seems to confirm a correlation between *his* complicated masculinity and his construction as an anti-hero. In the pilot episode of the series, he tells his new psychiatrist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi:

Nowadays, everybody's gotta go to shrinks and counselors and go on *Sally Jessy Raphael* and talk about their problems. Whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type? That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelin's,

he just did what he had to do. See, see what they didn't know was once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelin's, that they wouldn't be able to shut him up. And then it's dysfunction this and dysfunction that and dysfunction *va fangool!*<sup>6</sup>  
*(The Sopranos, S01E01, "Pilot")*

Clearly, Tony feels uneasy about getting in touch with his feelings, and he is frustrated by the apparent disappearance of the “strong, silent type” of American man he associates with Gary Cooper. And yet, despite this frustration, despite the disdain he has for psychiatry, and despite the extreme stigma that surrounds “seeing a shrink” among members of the mafia, Tony continues to see Dr. Melfi throughout the entire series. As Brett Martin writes in his book *Difficult Men*, Tony becomes “a very modern, very relatable hybrid: an old school man—blunt, physical, taking whatever he wanted, a seductive if uncomfortable fantasy for men and women alike—in a postfeminist world” (85).

Like Walt, Tony's masculinity is complicated by the tension that arises due to the apparently contradictory nature of his character, and this complex construction appears to be an integral part of how he is developed as an anti-hero character. For this reason, my exploration of Walt's language also grapples with the relationship between the construction of his masculinity and his status as an anti-hero character. Walt is in some ways similar to Tony, but he is also markedly different because he *becomes* an anti-hero. Whereas Tony is a family man and a mafia member from the very beginning of *The Sopranos*, Walt does *not* begin the series as a meth cook; the audience *sees* the series of events that leads to his adoption of a criminal lifestyle. Walt's brand of anti-heroism, like his masculinity, is thus strikingly idiosyncratic even as it parallels many aspects of characters like Tony. By exploring the ways in which the linguistic construction of Walt's masculinity interacts with the establishment of this unique “brand,” I am

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<sup>6</sup> *Va fangool* means, roughly, “fuck you” or “fuck off”

thus able to see what others have missed about how Walt works as a character while simultaneously seeking answers about language's role in the anti-hero trend in general.

### **Structure and Organization of the Thesis**

The three central chapters of this thesis each focus on Walt's interactions with a particular character or set of characters. This structure productively allows me to investigate how Walt's complicated masculinity is constructed in his interactions with people who represent different aspects of his life. In each of these chapters, I analyze scenes that follow a particular pattern in terms of how Walt interacts with the relevant characters; the first two, for instance, deal with scenes in which he engages in some sort of negotiation with his interlocutors. These "patterns" are discussed in more detail at the beginning of each chapter.

Chapter One lays the groundwork for my linguistic approach to the construction of Walt's masculinity while exploring how this construction works in his interactions with the major adversaries he encounters throughout the series, including a number of his associates from the meth business and his DEA agent brother-in-law, Hank Schrader. Walt's interactions with his wife, Skyler, are the focus of Chapter Two. This section examines the linguistic construction of Walt's masculinity in his role as a husband and father, a context that is especially important to consider because of the societal expectations and ideals surrounding patriarchal masculinity. Finally, Chapter Three focuses on a series of Walt's interactions with Jesse Pinkman, a former student and his primary partner in the meth business from the beginning of the series. What ultimately emerges from these chapters is an intricate, nuanced portrait of Walt's masculinity that would be difficult to see without a lens that privileges language over physical action.

## **CHAPTER ONE: WALT AND HIS ADVERSARIES**

### **“A little tweak of chemistry”**

If *Breaking Bad* is really all about “turning Mr. Chips into Scarface,” this transformation would logically play out the most clearly in Walt’s work in the meth business. After all, this is the arena in which the show goes so far as to give Walter White a new name: when he meets with the frightening drug kingpin Tuco Salamanca in the sixth episode of the series, he introduces himself as “Heisenberg,” a pseudonym that sticks as the label for his criminal persona throughout the rest of his life. Furthermore, this is where any male criminal might be expected to perform hegemonic masculinity through acts of violence, intimidation, and fearlessness—especially considering how all of the characters involved in this criminal world, with the exception of the final season’s Lydia Rodarte-Quayle, are male. For these reasons, Walt’s interactions with the adversaries he meets in the meth business throughout the series are the focus of this chapter. The scenes I analyze here all involve verbal negotiation between Walt and one of his many business associates, whether it’s a business deal or a bargain to save one’s own life. At the end of the chapter, I also examine several pivotal interactions involving Walt and his brother-in-law, Hank, who happens to be the DEA agent responsible for the Heisenberg case. While Hank is not the same type of adversary as Walt’s criminal associates, he is the only adversary of Walt’s who is a constant force throughout the series, and Walt’s masculinity seems to be compared to Hank’s as early as the first episode of the show.

Taken together, my analyses of Walt’s interactions with his adversaries throughout the series paint a complicated, idiosyncratic picture of his masculinity: one that presents not a linear change from point A to point B, like the “turning Mr. Chips into Scarface” paradigm might suggest, but a more complex transformation associated with a tapestry of multifarious (and

sometimes even conflicting) performances of masculinity. This complicated picture is also a crucial part of how Walt is constructed as an anti-hero: even when his most violent and unpleasant tendencies are at the forefront, they tend to be juxtaposed with more sympathetic performances of masculinity.

In one of the most quoted scenes of *Breaking Bad*'s run, from the opening scene of an episode about halfway through season five, Walt meets with Declan, a rival drug dealer he hopes to make a deal with in order to expand his distribution. After Walt explains his plans to Declan—who was under the impression that the purpose of this meeting was nothing more than a trade of methylamine for cash—the conversation ends with the following exchange:

DECLAN: Who the hell are ya?

WALT: You know. You all know exactly who I am. Say my name.

DECLAN: What, I don't, I don't have a damn clue who you are.

WALT: Yeah you do. I'm the cook. I'm the man who killed Gus Fring.

DECLAN: Bullshit. Cartel got Fring.

WALT: You sure? [long pause] That's right. Now, say my name.

DECLAN: Heisenberg.

WALT: You're goddamn right.

(*BB*, S05E07, "Say My Name": "Say my name")

The phrase of primary interest here is "Say my name," which Walt utters twice.<sup>7</sup> Through the lens of speech act theory, this utterance involves, on one level, a locutionary act—or, as Austin defines it, "The act of 'saying something' in the full normal sense" (60). To be exact, "Say my name" is an imperative statement, and it is clear that Walt is issuing a command: he is literally telling Declan to say his name. At the same time, though, Walt is performing an illocutionary act, which can be defined as the "performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something" (Austin 61). Essentially, speech act theory provides

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that "Say my name" is the only speech act here. In fact, essentially any utterance can be analyzed as a speech act; Austin provides some explanation of this when he writes, "...in general the locutionary act as much as the illocutionary is an abstraction only: every genuine speech act is both" (65).

a way of distinguishing between a) the literal meaning of an utterance and b) the nature of the performance of that utterance as an *act* that may come along with additional, implied meanings.<sup>8</sup> Walt is not trying to get Declan to say “Heisenberg” just for the fun of it—he is making a point by drawing attention to his reputation as a drug manufacturer, both in terms of the superior quality of his product and in terms of the enemies he has taken down. He is first and foremost performing an act of intimidation; he uses language to get Declan to acknowledge his formidable reputation in order to get him to accept the deal he has proposed.

This act of intimidation works because Walt’s speech act is *felicitous*, a term that merits some explanation. In her book *Vox Popular: The Surprising Life of Language in the Media*, Robin Queen explains *felicity* as “the success of a verbal performance,” which can be assessed in terms of three central felicity conditions—authority, context, and citation—that must be fulfilled in order for a performance to succeed (188). The authority and context conditions are both rather intuitive: the former refers to “the authority to do the performance,” including “aspects of the identities of the people involved,” while the context condition requires the act to be done in “a context in which it *could* be successful” (188-189). In the context of, for instance, a wedding ceremony, this would require the speaker of “I now pronounce you husband and wife” to be someone who has the authority to officiate a marriage, like a minister, and the speech act would have to take place in the context of a wedding ceremony, or, minimally, in the presence of two individuals who intend to get married. The citation condition requires a felicitous speech act to be recognizable “as an example of a previously felicitous performance of the same type” (190). This is also very clear with the marriage example, since weddings are just about always carried

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<sup>8</sup> This thesis employs a somewhat loose definition of “illocutionary act.” Some linguists have attempted to separate different sorts of illocutionary acts into types or categories; John R. Searle, for instance, has proposed a taxonomy composed of “representatives,” “directives,” “commissives,” “expressives,” and “declarations” (“A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts” 354-358). I use the term “illocutionary act” in a more general sense, with the key point being the ability to make the distinction described here.

out in the same way, with the same final speech act making the marriage official. Walt's "Say my name" speech act is felicitous because it meets all three felicity conditions. He has the authority to intimidate Declan because, as he says, he is "the cook" and "the man who killed Gus Fring"; the context is right because a negotiation between rivals in an illegal trade is a perfectly reasonable place for an act of intimidation to take place; and the citation condition is fulfilled because Declan is able to recognize the illocutionary force of Walt's utterance (because if he recognized the locutionary act only, the command to say "Heisenberg" for no reason other than the fact that Walt has told him to do so, he probably would not say it at all). Throughout this thesis, felicity conditions are generally not pulled apart and analyzed individually as they are here, but the fundamental concept of felicity will arise in the analyses to come.

The way that Walt's felicitous speech act constructs his masculinity seems to align with the "Scarface" type of masculinity that Gilligan has in mind when he discusses "turning Mr. Chips into Scarface." Faucette builds on this characterization when he writes, "Scarface is a daring, violent figure who imposes his masculinity on the world using violence and intimidation" (74). The "Say my name" speech act exemplifies these traits: for instance, Walt deliberately associates violence with his name and reputation when he directly refers to the assassination of Gus Fring. From the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of performative gender, Walt's masculinity seems to be following one of the "scripts" for the performance of gender that has been "reified and naturalized" in society over time (901). He uses language to carry out the persuasive strategy of intimidation, and in so doing he aligns himself with traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity—as Faucette writes, he "embraces the more traditional models of American masculinity that celebrated aggressive and ruthless behavior" (75).

As I have claimed, though, the construction of Walt’s masculinity does not simply adhere to these “traditional models” at all times. As Butler explains, gender is not “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed,” but “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (900, italics in the original). Even when his reputation as the dauntless and dangerous “Heisenberg” is firmly established, Walt’s masculinity does not permanently *become* the form of hegemonic masculinity represented by the “Scarface” extreme on the “turning Mr. Chips into Scarface” continuum. Rather, his masculinity is *always* being negotiated, from the first moment of the series until the last; it is, to borrow Butler’s word, “tenuously” constructed over time through interaction. An illustrative example of the fundamental instability at the core of Walt’s masculinity arises earlier in the scene from the “Say My Name” episode, when Walt uses a different strategy to persuade Declan:

WALT: I know all about your operation. See my partners here tell me that you produce a meth that’s seventy percent pure, if you’re lucky. What I produce is ninety-nine point one percent pure.

DECLAN: So?

WALT: So, it’s grade school t-ball versus the New York Yankees. Yours is, uh, just some tepid off-brand, generic cola. What I’m making is classic Coke.

DECLAN: Alright, okay, so um, if we just waste you, right here right now, leave you in the desert, then there is no Coke on the market right? See how that works? There’s only us.

WALT: Do you really wanna live in a world without Coca-Cola?

(*BB*, S05E07, “Say My Name”: “Classic Coke”)

The strategy Walt uses to convince Declan in this exchange is different from the intimidation-focused one that he turns to later in the scene. Here, he uses an argument that relies on logic and metaphorical analogy in order to persuade Declan to see things his way. He begins by using purity statistics to simply *say* that his product is superior, but Declan’s response shows him that this is not enough. When Walt then compares his product to the New York Yankees and Coca-Cola, he is trying to convince Declan that he should take the deal because a higher purity actually

makes a difference, and it makes him sound more like a teacher or a member of a debate team than a meth dealer. The association with teaching is particularly fruitful to consider: as Robin Lakoff argues, academic men are often viewed as “effete” and as “analogous in some ways to women” (*Language and Woman’s Place* 47, 108), making this teacherly performance stand in stark contrast with the hypermasculine performance of intimidation in the “Say my name” exchange. The illocutionary act enacted by, “What I’m making is classic Coke,” is thus one of persuasion, but it also complicates the construction of Walt’s masculinity; it constitutes his gender in a less hegemonically masculine way than what might be expected of a drug dealer making a deal in the middle of the desert.

This idea is affirmed by Declan’s reaction to Walt’s analogy: he immediately resorts to a threat of violence by telling Walt that he could easily just kill him, which would eliminate the competition created by his superior product. While Declan’s response is clever in the way it plays along with Walt’s analogy, the fact that he adopts a strategy of violent intimidation is significant because it suggests that he is unable to effectively counter Walt’s logic apart from eradicating it completely through violence. In effect, his response suggests that Walt’s use of analogy is not par for the course in the criminal world. Walt is doing business in his own way, which involves a speech act that constructs his performance of masculinity as something that does not quite align with that of the stereotypical drug dealer. It is also worth noting that even after Declan makes an overt threat on Walt’s life, Walt shows his dedication to the persuasive technique he is using by sticking to the analogy rather than making a threat in return. He does, of course, turn to a form of intimidation in the “Say my name” exchange at the end of the scene, but he uses this other tactic first. This scene is thus an apt illustration of the tension between forms of masculinity that seems to be typical of how Walt’s character is constructed.

Another scene that presents a complicated juxtaposition of different nuances of Walt's performance of masculinity occurs earlier in the series, in the first episode of the fourth season. Walt has just barely prevented Gus Fring from killing him, and he is trying to convince Gus that Victor (one of Gus's henchmen) cannot replace him in the meth lab. When Victor tells Gus, "Been watchin' him for weeks. Know every step of his cook," Walt replies:

WALT: Oh! Do you really? You—really. Oh so please, tell me. Catalytic hydrogenation, is it protic or aprotic, because I forget? And if our reduction is not stereospecific then how can our product be enantiomerically pure? I mean is 1-phenyl containing 1-hydroxyl 2-methylaminopropane containing, of course, chiral centers at carbon's number one and two on the propane chain, then reduction to methamphetamine eliminates which chiral center is it again? Because I forgot. Come on, help me out, professor!

(*BB*, S04E01, "Box Cutter": "Catalytic hydrogenation")

To the average viewer of *Breaking Bad*—and to everyone who hears Walt's tirade within the narrative world of the show itself—the meaning of these lines is basically impenetrable.

Regardless of what "enantiomerically pure" means, though, Walt's use of this dense chemistry jargon does some important linguistic work in establishing power.

As Robin Lakoff writes in her book *Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives*, "Within disciplines, we develop special languages. Like any linguistic code, these play two roles. Toward the outside world, they are élitist: we know, you cannot understand, you may not enter. But for insiders they are a secret handshake" (148). In this scene, Walt is the insider: he has a vast knowledge of chemistry that he has developed over the years through an extensive education, lots of research experience, and a career in science education. Victor, on the other hand, is the outsider: in Walt's eyes, he is nothing more than a criminal who ignorantly thinks that knowing "every step" involved in cooking meth—rather than understanding how the chemistry behind the process works—is sufficient to do the job well. In order to convince Gus that Victor is inadequate, Walt uses his "Catalytic hydrogenation" speech to perform the

illocutionary act of telling Victor, “You cannot enter,” which he does by demonstrating his extensive knowledge of chemistry and using words that he knows Victor will not understand. Walt’s strategy proves effective when Victor responds, “All his bullshit aside, it’s called a cook. Everything comes down to following a recipe” (*BB*, S04E01, “Box Cutter”); clearly, Victor does not know chemistry’s “secret handshake.” In terms of the construction of Walt’s masculinity, the strategy he uses to block Victor out and to mock him for not knowing this “handshake” is an aggressive display of dominance. At the same time, though, there is that notion of Lakoff’s that academic men are “analogous in some ways to women” that simultaneously pulls the construction of his masculinity in a conflicting direction (*Language and Woman’s Place* 47).

While Walt is verbally assaulting Victor’s intelligence, there is something else going on in the background that is crucial to how this scene plays out linguistically: Gus is very slowly changing into protective lab gear, not saying a word the entire time Walt is talking. Walt acknowledges this in the middle of the long speech that initially breaks the silence of the scene:

WALT: Alright, let’s talk about Gale Boetticher. He was a good man, and a good chemist and I cared about him. He didn’t deserve what happened to him. He didn’t deserve it at all. But I’d shoot him again tomorrow. And the next day, and the day after that. When you make it Gale versus me or Gale versus Jesse, Gale loses, simple as that. This is on you, Gus, not me, not Jesse, Gale’s death is on you. I mean really what-what-what did you expect me to do, just simply roll over and allow you to murder us? That I wouldn’t take measures, extreme measures to defend myself. Wrong! Think again. And whatever, whatever it is you’re planning there, whatever, whatever it is the point that you’re trying to make here, let me, let me suggest that you keep one thing in mind. Without us, without Jesse and myself, you have NO ONE to make your product. Certainly not him. This-this person doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing!

(*BB*, S04E01, “Box Cutter”: “Let’s talk about Gale Boetticher”)

This speech goes on uninterrupted until Victor interjects a mere eleven words, after which Walt cuts in again with his “Catalytic hydrogenation” speech. Then, after a brief response from Victor (the lines mentioned earlier that begin with, “All his bullshit aside”), Walt continues his tirade:

WALT: Ah, is, is that, is that what you want? This—this—short order cook? You’re not flipping hamburgers here pal. What happens when you get a bad barrel of precursor, how would you even know it? And what happens in summer, when, when, when the humidity rises and your product goes cloudy? H-how would you guard against that, huh? Gus. You do this, all you’ll have left is an eight million dollar hole in the ground. This lab, this equipment is useless without us, without-without Jesse and myself, you have no new product, you-you-you have no income. Your people up there will not be paid! Your distribution chain collapses. And without us you have nothing. You kill me you have nothing. You kill Jesse you don’t have me.

[long pause as Gus walks toward Victor]

WALT: You won’t do this. You’re too smart. You can’t afford to do this. Please, let us just go back to work. We’re here. Let us work, we’re-we’re-we’re ready to go to work. We’ll just pick up right where we left off.

(*BB*, S04E01, “Box Cutter”: “You have nothing”)

In these lines, Walt is trying to accomplish several different things. For one, he is trying to explain to Gus why he and Jesse had to kill Gale. At the same time, as previously discussed with the “Catalytic hydrogenation” passage, he is trying to persuade Gus that Victor is incompetent and that the lab cannot be run without him and Jesse. The most salient aspect of these samples of dialogue, though—and the reason I have transcribed these passages in their entirety—is Walt’s verbosity in accomplishing these tasks. He utters the vast majority of this scene’s dialogue, and his utterances become quite repetitive, especially toward the second half of the “You’ll have nothing” passage; Walt could have expressed his ideas here in far fewer words.

The implications of this observation will be discussed below, but some additional context is necessary first. Right after Walt says, “We’ll just pick up right where we left off,” Gus suddenly slits Victor’s throat with a box cutter, spraying blood everywhere and leaving his henchman’s body in a heap on the floor. This is why Gus was putting on the protective lab gear; this is the “whatever it is you’re planning there” that Walt referred to minutes earlier. This is, of course, captivating and horrifying television, but perhaps the most interesting aspect of this moment is linguistic: Gus still does not utter a single word until after he has removed the

protective lab equipment and walked up the stairs toward the exit. Just as he is about to leave, he says, “Well? Get back to work,” and exits the lab.

As Tony Soprano’s notion of the “strong, silent type” of masculinity might suggest, the sort of silence that Gus employs here can be a very powerful linguistic strategy. Tony associates Gary Cooper’s unemotional silence with the *real* American man who “just did what he had to do” (*The Sopranos*, S01E01, “Pilot”). In this scene, then, Gus embodies Tony’s idea of the hegemonically masculine male. But where does that leave Walt, with his comparatively extremely high volume of dialogue? Jane Tompkins’s book, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, which discusses the role of language in the Western genre, provides some compelling answers.<sup>9</sup> She writes, “Silence establishes dominance at the same time as it protects the silent one from inspection and possible criticism by offering nothing for the interlocutor to grab hold of” (Tompkins 60). This explanation of what Tompkins sees as the primary functions of silence as a linguistic strategy is highly relevant to what Gus is doing in this scene. By remaining silent even after Walt says, “And whatever, whatever it is you’re planning there, whatever, whatever it is the point that you’re trying to make here...,” Gus prevents him from gaining any insight into his intentions. He completely preserves the enigma surrounding the murder he is about to carry out.

Even more interesting, though, is what Tompkins writes about the effect of this sort of silence on other interlocutors: “The effect is to force the speaker into an ineffectual flow of language which tries to justify itself, achieve significance, make an impression by additions

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<sup>9</sup> Although for the sake of simplicity I incorporate Tompkins’s discussion of the Western genre as if it applied generally to power dynamics in language—a choice that I feel is appropriate based on the unmistakable parallel between the scene and what Tompkins is talking about—there has, in fact, been much discussion of *Breaking Bad* as an incarnation of the Western genre. Gilligan himself has said as much: “Gradually, after the first *Breaking Bad* episode, it started to dawn on me that we could be making a contemporary western. So you see scenes that are like gunfighters squaring off, like Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef” (“Contemporary Western”).

which only diminish the speaker's force with every word" (60). Gus's silence, therefore, not only makes him impenetrable; it also forces Walt to continue spewing out words, to ramble on and ultimately to repeat himself in an ongoing attempt to make Gus hear him out. The "You have nothing" excerpt illustrates this particularly well: when Walt says, "Please, let us just go back to work. We're here. Let us work, we're-we're-we're ready to go to work. We'll just pick up right where we left off," he begins to sound like he is begging rather than presenting Gus with an argument. It is Gus's silence that puts Walt in this position of weakness and vulnerability.

Tompkins's discussion also brings gender into the equation. In the Western genre, she argues, language is "always associated with women, religion, and culture," whereas "not-language" is associated with being male (55). When men use language instead of remaining silent, they allow that outer shell of unknowability to be penetrated, and the end result is emasculating. Tompkins writes, "For a man to speak of his inner feelings not only admits parity with the person he is talking to, but it jeopardizes his status as a potent being, for talk dissipates presence, takes away the mystery of an ineffable self which silence preserves" (60). By saying as much as he does, Walt makes himself vulnerable, and Gus ultimately maintains complete control over him. Through the contrast between Walt's abundant use of language and the "strong, silent type" of masculinity that Gus displays, it is clear that Walt's masculinity is constructed as something different from that hegemonic model in this scene.

A scene from much earlier in the series, in which Walt is placed in a position of even greater vulnerability, finds him even further distanced from that model. This scene is arguably the first time Walt takes part in a substantial negotiation with another criminal, and it comes about in the midst of a unique situation: Walt and Jesse have taken a prisoner, a drug dealer named Krazy-8, and Walt must decide whether or not he is going to kill him, since letting him go

could have disastrous results for Walt and his family. In an effort to come to a decision, Walt sits down with Krazy-8 and talks with him. As E. Deidre Pribram notes in her analysis of this scene, this conversation between Walt and Krazy-8, which leads up to Walt's ultimate decision to commit the murder, is one of the first times that the show slows down on the action to really focus on interaction between its characters (194-195). She goes on to claim that, despite the slower and less action-packed pace of this scene, it nonetheless serves as one of the series' first truly climactic moments because of the "emotional dramatic payoff" it provides (194); "the impact of the series," she writes, "does not derive solely from the audaciousness of Walter's actions but, also, through the emotional process by which he comes to believe he must commit those acts and how he justifies them to himself and others" (199). There is a sense, then, in which this scene deliberately pushes physical action to the background in favor of "emotional action," or verbal interaction (193).

After creating a list of pros and cons fails to help him get through this process (with a slew of cons and only "He'll kill your entire family if you let him go" in the pro column), Walt makes Krazy-8 a sandwich and sits down to talk with him. Early on in this conversation, the following exchange takes place:

WALT: So, that name, Krazy-8. Do I really have to call you that? I mean, no offense, but don't you have a real name?

KRAZY-8: Domingo.

WALT: Domingo. That's "Sunday," right? I'd rather call you that, if, if you don't mind.

KRAZY-8: Yeah, whatever. I can't say I ever liked it much.

WALT: So, Domingo, you from around town here or someplace else?

(*BB*, S01E03, "...And the Bag's in the River": "Domingo")

Despite the captor-prisoner dynamic that informs this conversation, Walt's strategy as the conversation begins is clearly not to intimidate, frighten, or assert dominance over Krazy-8. On the contrary, he strikes up a conversation with his prisoner as though he is catching up with an

acquaintance or chatting with a stranger at a bus stop. Walt is building this rapport for a specific purpose: as Pribram notes, he “is attempting to entice Krazy-8 to his side in order to escape having to kill him” (196). This claim can be expanded upon by looking at Walt’s lines here in terms of speech act theory. When Walt asks, “So, Domingo, you from around town here or someplace else?” he may be genuinely interested in where Krazy-8 is from, but he is *not* asking this question just to gain that information. There is, in fact, an illocutionary force behind this utterance: Walt is trying to win Krazy-8 over by acting friendly toward him and showing an interest in his life. Something similar is happening when Walt asks Krazy-8 for his real name: he is trying to separate him from the criminal world in an effort to make it easier to decide to let him go. By using language to connect with Krazy-8 on a personal level, Walt hopes to establish a relationship with him in which he won’t retaliate or exact revenge as soon as he is released.

Walt’s strategy is significant to the construction of his masculinity because this sort of talk—which Deborah Tannen refers to as “rapport-talk”—is often associated with women (77). In her book *You Just Don’t Understand*, Tannen argues that women use conversation primarily as “a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships,” while men use it to “preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order ... by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance” (which she calls “report-talk”) (77). In this conversation, Walt is entirely focused on using rapport-talk to negotiate his relationship with Krazy-8. Once again, Walt takes on a linguistic performance that is associated with femininity—just as he did with his teacherly language in the “Classic Coke” exchange and through his juxtaposition with the silently masculine Gus in the scene from “Box Cutter”—even as he finds himself in this ostensibly dominant and hegemonically masculine position of having taken a prisoner who he is about to kill.

Later in the conversation, Krazy-8 pushes Walt into a position of vulnerability by bringing up Walt's cancer (which Walt confided in him about several scenes earlier):

KRAZY-8: Yo, Jesse know you got cancer?

WALT: No one but you.

KRAZY-8: Not your family?

WALT: No.

KRAZY-8: Why not?

WALT: Not a conversation I'm even remotely ready to have.

KRAZY-8: That's why you're cooking meth? You wanna leave money for your family. Hell, I'll write you a check right now if you let me go. Like I said, Walter, this line of work doesn't suit you man. Get out before it's too late.

WALT: [near tears] I don't know what to do.

KRAZY-8: Yeah. You do.

WALT: I'll get the key.

(*BB*, S01E03, "...And the Bag's in the River": "Cancer")

In this highly emotional part of the scene, Krazy-8 takes control by bringing up a sensitive topic and questioning Walt about it. Just moments before this part of the interaction, Walt attempts to assert himself by making it clear that Krazy-8 will have to earn his freedom with a convincing argument: "You gotta convince me," he tells him, "And you're goin' nowhere until you do" (*BB*, S01E03, "...And the Bag's in the River"). As it turns out, though, Krazy-8 doesn't have to do much convincing at all; instead, he turns the tables by taking advantage of Walt's use of rapport-talk in telling him about his cancer. When he sees that Walt is getting emotional as he says, "I don't know what to do," he delivers his final persuasive punch by saying, "Yeah. You do," even though he still has not provided a convincing reason for why Walt should let him go.

In the end, though, Walt *does* go through with the murder. After realizing that Krazy-8 is concealing a shard of a broken plate and that he must be planning to use it as a weapon, Walt has no other choice but to kill him. The conversation that culminates in this climactic moment is an emotional roller-coaster for both parties; Pribram describes it as "an ongoing series of thrusts and

parries, all in terms of emotional, not physical action” (198). Walt’s rapport-talk and his honesty with his prisoner make him vulnerable, to the point where Krazy-8 almost manages to kill him.

Walt’s first murder, then—a physical action with an inherent connection to “Scarface” masculinity—takes place in concert with language that is decidedly *not* masculine, making this scene a case in which Walt’s physical and linguistic actions construct conflicting performances of masculinity. This scene is also important for Walt’s construction as an anti-hero: by committing a murder, Walt moves further away from “everyman” status than ever before, but his less hegemonically masculine linguistic performances keep him sympathetic.

Walt’s next complicated negotiation with an adversary comes a few episodes later, when he first adopts the name for his criminal persona. Here, in his first interaction with Tuco, a local dealer who Jesse describes as a “high-level ice man,” Walt uses language that is strikingly unemotional compared to his interaction with Krazy-8, highlighting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of his masculinity (*BB*, S01E06, “Crazy Handful of Nothin”). When Walt is dissatisfied with the amount of money he and Jesse are making with their meth, he convinces Jesse to set up a meeting with Tuco.<sup>10</sup> After this meeting goes sour—Tuco beats Jesse up and steals his meth—Walt takes matters into his own hands by meeting with the kingpin himself:

TUCO: What's your name?

WALT: Heisenberg.

TUCO: Heisenberg. Kay. Have a seat, Heisenberg.

WALT: I don't imagine I'll be here very long.

TUCO: No? [laughs] Alright. Be that way. It's your meeting. Why don't you start talking and tell me what you want?

WALT: Fifty thousand dollars.

TUCO: [laughs] Oh, man! 50 G's? How d'you figure that?

WALT: Thirty-five for the pound of meth you stole and another fifteen for my partner's pain and suffering.

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<sup>10</sup> The scene in which Walt and Jesse discuss Tuco for the first time is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

TUCO: Partner. [laughs] Oh, yeah. I remember that little bitch. So you must be daddy. Let me get this straight. I steal your dope, hm? I beat the piss out of your mule boy! And then you walk in here, and you bring me *more* meth? That's a brilliant plan, *ése*.

(*BB*, S01E06, "Crazy Handful of Nothin,'" "Heisenberg")

Walt's first utterance of the name "Heisenberg" is interesting as a speech act in its own right: the utterance carries out the illocutionary act of a redefinition of Walt's identity. He uses language to reinvent himself, to construct a persona for himself as a part of the criminal world of the meth business. In the rest of the interaction—which one might call his first performance as "Heisenberg"—Walt does not beat around the bush. Tuco asks Walt for his name, and Walt tells him; Tuco asks Walt what he wants, and Walt tells him; Tuco asks Walt how he came up with the dollar amount he is requesting, and Walt tells him. Through the directness of his answers in this part of the scene, coupled with the utterance, "I don't imagine I'll be here very long," Walt uses language to perform confidence. His locutionary acts in the utterances, "Heisenberg," "Fifty thousand dollars," and "Thirty-five for the pound of meth [...]" are direct answers to Tuco's questions, but they carry with them an illocutionary force through which Walt constructs himself as bold, confident, and assertive in this first interaction with Tuco.

As it turns out, the confidence that Walt plays up through his speech early on in this scene may also stem from the trick he has up his sleeve. Moments after the above passage, he uses chemistry to blow up Tuco's office:

WALT: You got one part of that wrong. This is not meth. [throws a chunk of the substance; it causes a huge explosion]

TUCO: Are you fuckin' nuts?

WALT: [holding up the rest of substance threateningly] You wanna find out?

TUCO: No-Doze, Gonzo, *calma!* *Calma.* *Calma.* You got balls. I'll give you that. Alright.

Alright. I'll give you your money. That crystal that your partner brought me, it sold faster than ten-dollar ass in TJ. What say you bring me another pound next week?

WALT: Money up front.

TUCO: Alright. Money up front. Sometimes you gotta rob to keep your riches. Just as long as we got an understanding.

WALT: One pound is not gonna cut it. You have to take two.

TUCO: [laughs] *Órale*. Hey, what is that shit?

WALT: Fulminate of mercury. A little tweak of chemistry.

(*BB*, S01E06, “Crazy Handful of Nothin,” “A little tweak of chemistry”)

Walt continues to do significant work here in terms of how he performs masculinity in this first meeting with Tuco. When he blows up the office and then threatens to cause an even more devastating explosion, Tuco acknowledges, “You got balls,” directly acknowledging Walt’s boldness and fearlessness using very masculine terminology. Furthermore, it appears as though Walt has gained his respect, considering that he does what Walt wants him to do. Walt’s dialogue continues to play an important role in how his masculinity is constructed here, even after the explosion takes place: he issues the imperatives, “Money up front” and “You have to take two” as a way of taking a dominant stance with Tuco. Then, Walt utters the most fascinating line of the scene: “Fulminate of mercury. A little tweak of chemistry.” It is no coincidence that Walt takes his new name, Heisenberg, from a famous scientist<sup>11</sup>: his masculinity and his entire style of criminality might be said to come along with “a little tweak of chemistry.” Furthermore, this utterance is, for lack of a better word, unabashedly nerdy. The new, almost hyper-masculine persona Walt creates for himself as he meets Tuco is thus juxtaposed with this marginalized, alternative form of masculinity, creating a compelling microcosm of how his multifarious masculinity is constructed in general.

While just about all of Walt’s adversaries in the world of the meth business are men, there is, as I mentioned, one significant exception: Lydia Rodarte-Quayle, a corporate executive with ties to Gus Fring. Lydia enters the series early in the fifth and final season, and she quickly

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<sup>11</sup> Many viewers have focused on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in analyzing Walt’s choice of pseudonym, but that is beyond the scope of my discussion here.

begins to have a tumultuous relationship with Walt and his operation. In their first interaction, Lydia hopes to offer Walt a new source of methylamine in exchange for her life after Jesse, Mike, and Walt come to suspect her of cooperating with the DEA:

WALT: Okay, so, let's hear it.

LYDIA: Not without a guarantee that once I tell you how to get what you want, I won't be killed anyway.

WALT: Fine. You have my word.

LYDIA: Not good enough.

WALT: [scoffs] Look, lady—

LYDIA: —Do you have children?

WALT: That has nothing to do with this.

LYDIA: It's not a trick question. Why don't you just answer it?

WALT: Yes, I have children, so what? You think that somehow because we're both parents that I won't let my partner do what's necessary?—

LYDIA: —Swear on their lives.

WALT: Oh, what?

LYDIA: Swear on your children's lives that I won't be harmed. Otherwise, how can I trust you?

WALT: [sigh] Look, you're a smart businesswoman, you understand the concept of leverage?

LYDIA: Please don't patronize me. I hate that—

WALT: —You have none.

(*BB*, S05E05, “Dead Freight”: “You're a smart businesswoman...”)

In some ways, Walt seems to take the opportunity to assert dominance over the first woman he encounters in the meth business. For one thing, he blatantly disrespects her by calling her “lady” to her face, a word that, according to Robin Lakoff, “subtly denigrates [women]” and suggests “that they are not to be taken seriously” (*Language and Woman's Place* 55). He also belittles her attempts to secure her own safety by scoffing and sighing at her in response to her protests. Then, as Lydia actually points out, he patronizes her by calling her a “smart businesswoman.” Though Walt is, in a sense, right when he tells Lydia that she has no leverage—she is bargaining for her life, after all—he seems to bully her throughout this passage simply because he *can*. On a

micro scale, he can because her life is in his hands. On a macro scale, though, he can because she is a woman in what is primarily a man's business.

In this way, Walt's masculinity as it is constructed in this scene is rather stereotypical in its reliance on the patriarchal assumptions of the inherent inferiority of women. As usual, though, things are actually more complicated than that. This time, the complexity arises not from Walt's language but from *Lydia's*, because, as he points out, she is strikingly assertive here for someone who is bargaining for her life. Even as Walt patronizes and belittles her, she pushes back with some powerful utterances: she interrupts him *twice*—once with the question, “Do you have children?” and then with the imperative, “Swear on their lives.” Lydia shows a similar assertiveness in her next interaction with Walt, too; when Walt asks her to give her a list of names that he needs in order to tie up some loose ends, she once again refuses to cooperate until her safety is guaranteed: “You’re tying up loose ends,” she says, “And I don’t wanna be one of them. Once I give you that list, I’ve served my purpose and then, maybe I’m just one more person who knows too much” (*BB*, S05E08, “Gliding Over All”). She gives him the list eventually, but only after he has agreed to formally go into business with her (clearly, she has an exceptional understanding of “the concept of leverage”). Ultimately, Walt is unable to simply dominate Lydia in conversation, as it seems he was trying to do in the “You’re a smart businesswoman...” scene. Her ability to resist and fight back against his often oppressive strategies evens the scales to some extent and adds a layer of complexity to the construction of Walt's masculinity in the process.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on Walt's masculinity in his interactions with his brother-in-law, Hank Schrader. In particular, I examine two key scenes between Walt and Hank: their first scene together, at Walt's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party in the pilot episode of the series, and one

of their very last scenes together, when Hank confronts Walt after he finally realizes the secret he has been hiding. Taken together, these scenes provide a helpful summation of the nuanced nature of Walt's masculinity, even as they simultaneously draw attention to the drastic transformation he undergoes over the course of the series.

In the scene at Walt's birthday party from the pilot episode, Hank is quickly established as a foil to Walt in terms of masculinity. In this passage, Hank shows off his firearm to the friends and family members at the party:

HANK: Glock-22. It's my daily carry, okay? I mean, unless you're talkin', what, plus, B-plus loads, you can forget the 9-mil, alright? Shit, I seen one of those, uh, bounce off a windshield one time.

GOMEZ: Yeah, with you shootin'.

HANK: If you're gonna bring a gun baby, you gotta bring enough gun. Forty caliber. [hands the gun to Walt Jr.]

WALT: Uhh.

WALT JR: This is awesome right here.

HANK: Nice, isn't it?

WALT JR: Dad, come check this out.

WALT: Yeah, I see it.

WALT JR: Come on take it.

HANK: Check it out, Walt.

WALT: No no, uh, it's just heavy.

HANK: That's why they hire men. [laughter] Jesus, it's not gonna bite ya, alright? [Walt holds the gun] Looks like Keith Richards with a glass of warm milk, doesn't he? Hey, Walt, come on everybody listen up, listen up, listen up! I'm gonna give a toast, a little toast to my brother-in-law. Come here. Walt, you got a brain the size of Wisconsin, but we're not gonna hold that against you. [laughter] But your heart's in the right place, man. Your heart's in the right place. We love you man, we love you.

(*BB*, S01E01, "Pilot": "Keith Richards with a glass of warm milk")

In contrast with Hank's stereotypically masculine enthusiasm for his firearm (which he carries around for his stereotypically masculine job in law enforcement), Walt's uneasiness around the gun is repeatedly reinforced in this interaction. First, he utters an expression of doubt ("Uhh") when Hank hands Walt Jr. the gun, and then he is sheepish and hesitant to handle it himself when

Walt Jr. asks him to check it out (“Yeah, I see it”). When he actually gets his hands on the gun and appears out of his element in doing so, Hank mocks him with a direct allusion to masculinity: “That’s why they hire men.” Finally, Hank continues to poke fun at Walt by referring to his “brain the size of Wisconsin,” as if to say, “Well, he isn’t man enough to handle a gun, but at least he’s smart.” Walt will, of course, continually disprove Hank’s intuitions about him as the series progresses: he handles and uses a gun many times, rises to the top of the heap in the meth business, and consistently carries out the extremely complex chemistry needed to cook methamphetamine with a near-perfect level of purity. For now, though, Walt’s cautious and unassertive approach to this situation works in conjunction with Hank’s mockery to construct Walt’s masculinity in this early scene as something very distant from hegemonic masculinity—something that might approximate what Gilligan and Faucette mean by “Mr. Chips” masculinity.

This initial construction is striking to consider in juxtaposition with the scene in the ninth episode of the fifth season that is arguably culmination of all of the events that come before it: the scene in which Hank finally confronts Walt after uncovering his secret. Hank’s suspicions are ignited at the end of the eighth episode, “Gliding Over All,” when he finds a damning piece of evidence in the bathroom of the White residence. After spending an episode looking through all of his files on the Heisenberg case, the pot finally boils over when Walt makes an unannounced visit to Hank’s house. Walt broaches the subject of a GPS tracking device he found on his car with a series of vaguely threatening questions (“You wouldn’t know anything about this, would ya Hank?”) (*BB*, S05E09, “Blood Money”), which leads to an explosion of tension when Hank closes the door of the garage they are standing in, attacks Walt, and finally accuses him of the crimes he has committed.

In response to Hank's accusations, Walt briefly tries to deny his guilt ("Now Hank, I don't, I don't know where this is coming from...") (*BB*, S05E09, "Blood Money") before instead attempting to convince Hank that it would ultimately be destructive to pursue an indictment:

WALT: Hank, my cancer is back.

HANK: Good. Rot you son of a bitch.

WALT: I'm sorry you feel that way. I wanna beat this thing, I do. I'm back on chemo and I am fighting like hell. But the truth is, in six months you won't have someone to prosecute. I've been... Even if, somehow, you were able to convince anyone that I was capable of doing these things, you and I both know, I would never see the inside of a jail cell. I'm a dying man who runs a car wash, my right hand to God that is all that I am. What's the point?

HANK: Have Skyler bring the kids here, and then we'll talk.

WALT: That is not going to happen.

(*BB*, S05E09, "Blood Money": "My right hand to God...")

When Walt says, "I'm a dying man who runs a car wash, my right hand to God that is all that I am," he previews for Hank the strategy he would use in court if charges were brought against him: he would capitalize on the recent return of his cancer and use language to construct for the court a fictional state of reality in which he is an innocent man—a victim, even. The way Walt raises his right hand as he says, "My right hand to God that is all that I am," even seems to draw attention to the nature of this performance of innocence *as a performance*. In this way, Walt asserts dominance over Hank by taunting him with the idea that even though they both know that it is nothing more than a performance, a judge and jury would not.

The exchange that ends this scene, and the episode, is perhaps one of the most interesting moments of the series with regard to Walt's transformation in that it openly acknowledges and addresses the changes he has gone through:

HANK: [very quietly] I don't know who you are. I don't even know who I'm talkin' to.

WALT: If that's true, if you don't know who I am, then, maybe your best course would be to tread lightly.

(*BB*, S05E09, "Blood Money": "Tread lightly")

When Hank tells Walt, “I don’t know who you are. I don’t even know who I’m talkin’ to,” it suggests that he sees his brother-in-law as an entirely different person from the man he was when he was first diagnosed with cancer. In terms of the “turning Mr. Chips into Scarface” paradigm, it seems to Hank as though Scarface has overtaken Mr. Chips entirely; Walter White is gone and only Heisenberg remains in his place. Walt capitalizes on this perception of Hank’s with the illocutionary act of a threat that he carries out with the utterance, “Tread lightly”; he warns Hank against trying to build a case by confirming that he has transformed into an entirely different person who is capable of things that “the old Walter White” never was.

As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, the construction of Walt’s masculinity over time actually looks quite a lot more complicated than the simple idea that he is now a more violent and aggressive person, but in this pivotal conversation, Walt uses language to accentuate the “Scarface” side of his masculinity as a way of performing a felicitous threat. Even so, Walt’s choice of words adds a little twist of complexity: “Tread lightly” is *not* something that you might expect this sort of hegemonically masculine criminal to say. In comparison to other phrases that might have been used here, such as, “Watch your back,” or, “Don’t mess with me,” the phrase Walt chooses sounds sophisticated and almost academic; it is no wonder, considering its connotations, that “Tread Lightly!” is also the name of a nonprofit organization founded in 1990 with the purpose of “[leading] a national initiative to protect and enhance recreation access and opportunities by promoting outdoor ethics to heighten individuals’ sense of good stewardship.”<sup>12</sup> So, even as Walt seems to consciously call upon his hegemonically masculine side in an effort to intimidate Hank, he does so using a rather aesthetically pleasing phrase that has been used in association with a good-natured passion for the preservation of the great outdoors. This passage

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<sup>12</sup> <http://treadlightly.org/about-us/what-we-do/>

is also a good summation of how Walt functions as an anti-hero: not only is there the tension created by the competing associations of the phrase “Tread lightly,” but there is also a sense in which the audience knows that Walt’s performance of a man who has fully transformed into “Heisenberg” *is a performance*. They likely remember what it was like when Walt was “Keith Richards with a glass of warm milk” in Hank’s eyes, and they may have the sense that that diffident high school chemistry teacher is still a part of the man on the screen.

Despite what lists on the internet such as “Walter White’s 5 Most Badass Moments”<sup>13</sup> and “Rise of Heisenberg: 10 Most Awesome Breaking Bad Moments”<sup>14</sup> might suggest, Walt’s transformation over the course of the series is not as simple as a process of gradually becoming “more badass” until he reaches some final stage of Heisenberg. Although Walt exemplifies several features of hegemonic masculinity in his interactions with his adversaries over the course of the series (and though his Heisenberg persona is certainly more hegemonically masculine than his persona as a high school chemistry teacher), he also uses language to construct his own idiosyncratic flavor of criminality that comes along with a unique form of masculinity. This picture becomes even more complicated in the chapters to come.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://whatculture.com/tv/breaking-bad-walter-whites-5-most-badass-moments.php>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Fhrqc4gARU>

## **CHAPTER TWO: WALT AND SKYLER**

### **“Life is good, Skyler.”**

As Chapter One demonstrated, Walt’s interactions with his business associates throughout the series construct his masculinity in a strikingly complicated way. But all of these foes come and go. In fact, every single one of them ends up dead before the series is over—and, in most cases, well before. With the possible exception of his primary business partner Jesse Pinkman (who will be the focus of Chapter Three), then, Walt’s most significant relationship is with his wife, Skyler, who is a part of his life from the first moment of the series until the very last. Additionally, everyone Walt works with in the meth business—with just one exception<sup>15</sup>—is male. While he does interact with women other than Skyler in the non-criminal part of his life, his relationship with her is his most significant male-female relationship and his only intimate relationship over the course of the series. Furthermore, this relationship provides a window into Walt’s more domestic roles as a husband and father in a way that his interactions with his associates from the meth business do not, and the ways in which he performs or does not perform these roles in a stereotypically dominant or patriarchal manner is crucial to how his masculinity is constructed on a larger scale and in terms of the “Mr. Chips to Scarface” paradigm.

As Pamela Fishman’s foundational study of private conversations between intimately involved men and women suggests, examining the language found in these types of relationships can reveal a lot about the power dynamics that underlie them.<sup>16</sup> Fishman found that in these conversations, it tends to be women who have to do the “shitwork” of keeping the conversation going, since men do not always do their share of the work (99). She writes:

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<sup>15</sup> Lydia Rodarte-Quayle, a corporate executive who becomes a business associate of Walt’s in the final season.

<sup>16</sup> Fishman analyzed tape-recorded conversations between men and women in intimate, heterosexual relationships; though the three couples involved placed the tape recorders themselves, she maintains that “there was no undue awareness of the recorder” and that the conversations were natural and representative (91-92). Though the study is now somewhat dated (it was originally published in 1978), it remains widely cited.

[Women] are almost always available to do the conversational work required by men and which is necessary for interactions... sometimes [they] are required to sit and ‘be a good listener’ because they are not otherwise needed. At other times [they] are required to fill silences and keep conversation moving, to talk a lot. Sometimes they are expected to develop others’ topics, and at other times they are required to present and develop topics of their own. (99)

Over time, this asymmetrical distribution of work becomes a part of what women are expected to endure as part of being a woman; Fishman writes, “[Women] must be available to do what needs to be done in conversation, to do the shitwork and not complain” (Fishman 99). One of the end results of this is the reinforcement of uneven power relations between men and women (100).

This chapter, then, examines Walt and Skyler’s dialogue through a lens that draws from Fishman’s approach—one which focuses on the ways in which hierarchical power relations emerge interactionally, especially through the distribution of conversational work. In analyzing these linguistic negotiations of power, I focus (fittingly) on a series of the couple’s “negotiation scenes,” most of which have to do with Walt’s status as a part of the White household; that is, they deal with issues such as divorce, Skyler’s desire for him to stay out of the house, and how often Walt should be able to see the kids. I also analyze one additional scene—the “I am the one who knocks” scene, from the season four episode “Cornered”—because it is one of the most well-known and frequently discussed scenes in the show’s run. With this chapter in particular, a linguistic approach is especially appropriate because there is no physical violence between Walt and Skyler outside of a single scene near the end of the series<sup>17</sup>; the power dynamics between

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<sup>17</sup> The couple has a physical altercation when Skyler attacks Walt with a knife in S05E14, “Ozymandias.” This is one of the last times they ever interact, however, and it takes place under extreme circumstances.

them are negotiated *entirely* through language (unlike Walt's relationships with his adversaries and with Jesse, in which power dynamics are partially negotiated through physical action).

The picture of Walt's masculinity that ultimately emerges here looks like a significantly more linear trend than the inconsistent patterns seen in Chapter One: there is a correlation (though not a perfect one) between Walt's rise to success in the meth business and the increasingly authoritative nature of his interactions with his wife, which suggests that he embraces patriarchal notions of masculinity in the private sphere of his life. While this might seem to legitimize attempts to track Walt's transformation in terms of "Mr. Chips" and "Scarface," the juxtaposition of this relatively linear trend with the more blurry construction seen elsewhere actually further complicates the overall construction of Walt's masculinity; it emerges not as singular and uniform but as multi-layered, inconsistent, and even self-contradictory. This piece of the intricate puzzle also has important ramifications for Walt's status as an anti-heroic character: he might wear the audience's sympathies thin through his more dominant interactional stances with Skyler as the series progresses, but there may remain the sense that the sort of husband Walt used to be is somehow still there, somewhere—a source of ambivalence that arises because the audience *sees* Walt's transformation over the course of the series.

The first few scenes I discuss in this chapter show Walt performing the role of a husband in a way that, linguistically speaking, does not align with the prototype of patriarchal masculinity. This begins in the first episode of the series, when a quick scene between Walt and Skyler provides an early impression of the dynamics of their marriage:

SKYLER: Hey.

WALT: Hey.

SKYLER: Um, did you use the MasterCard last month? Uh, \$15.88 at Staples.

WALT: Um. Oh, we, we needed printer paper.

SKYLER: Walt, the MasterCard's the one we don't use.

WALT: Okay.

SKYLER: So how was your day?

WALT: Oh, I don't know. I don't know. It was, um, fine.

(*Breaking Bad*, S01E01, "Pilot": "MasterCard")

In this first instance of negotiation between Walt and Skyler, Walt does not seem to be very powerful. Skyler's lines include several features not typically associated with powerful speech: she asks questions (which will be discussed shortly) and she uses several hedges ("um" and "uh"), which Robin Lakoff argues are used by women "out of a fear of seeming too masculine by being assertive and saying things directly" (*Language and Woman's Place*, 79). In other ways, though, she looks quite powerful; with the line "the MasterCard's the one we don't use," she issues an indirect imperative that comes off as rather patronizing, and Walt's own hedges make him look decidedly unauthoritative.<sup>18</sup>

The first *major* negotiation scene happens the first time the couple's relationship seems to be in serious danger: when Skyler reveals that she knows something is going on with Walt and asks him to leave the house. Walt is talking to Skyler about an old shirt when he sees that she is packing a suitcase, which begins the following exchange:

WALT: Think I may just keep this. Sky? What do you think? Doesn't look so bad, right?  
What are you doing?

SKYLER: I'm going to Hank and Marie's for the weekend.

WALT: Since when?

SKYLER: I'm taking the baby with me. Marie will pick up Walter Jr. from school. You'll have the house to yourself for two days. I want you to pack your things and leave.

WALT: Why would I do that?

SKYLER: Hank has offered to help, since you shouldn't be doing any heavy lifting.

WALT: Skyler.

SKYLER: I want you gone by Monday morning. I want—I want you gone.

WALT: Okay, can you at least tell me why?

SKYLER: Because you're a liar, Walt. Two cell phones, after all.

WALT: What?

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<sup>18</sup> To be fair, Walt's responses here are to some degree influenced by the fact that he has just received his cancer diagnosis, but at the very least the observations regarding Skyler's language are relevant.

SKYLER: Right before your surgery, I asked if you had packed your cell phone, and you said, "Which one?"

(*Breaking Bad*, S02E13, "ABQ": "Can you at least tell me why?")

The most important thing to notice here is that almost all of Walt's utterances are questions while almost all of Skyler's utterances are statements. In this part of the conversation, Skyler is in control; she has already decided to leave for the weekend and to ask Walt to move out, so she makes statements about what she wants to happen without leaving room for Walt to express his protests and opinions. Indeed, Skyler does not always directly answer Walt's questions in this scene. In several of her turns, she goes on delivering the message she needs to convey rather than directly answering Walt's line of inquiry. For example, when Walt asks, "Why would I do that?" in response to Skyler's expression of her desire for him to pack up and leave the house, she does not provide a direct answer. Instead, she continues her explanation of her plan for Walt's departure: "Hank has offered to help, since you shouldn't be doing any heavy lifting." While she does answer his question after he poses it again ("Okay, can you at least tell me why?"), she prioritizes telling Walt what is going to happen over explaining why it is going to happen. It is clear that Walt has to work quite hard to get Skyler to explain her reasoning—he has to ask not just once, but several times in order to get her to tell him why she is acting the way she is.

This conversation shows a reversal of gender roles with respect to Fishman's findings.<sup>19</sup> Skyler is the one who holds the power in this selection of dialogue. She is reporting information to Walt in the form of statements without leaving room for him to express what he has to say about it. Meanwhile, it is Walt who has to do the work of trying to move the conversation toward the reasons for her decision. In Fishman's terms, this means that Skyler is the one who is in control of the conversation, and Walt ends up looking relatively powerless. Fishman's

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<sup>19</sup> It bears noting that Fishman's data involves more mundane, day-to-day interactions than this potentially life-changing conversation between Walt and Skyler, but the patterns her study suggested are nonetheless useful for comparison here.

observation that questions are associated with women in heterosexual relationships while statements are associated with men further reinforces this inversion of roles. She proposes that women ask more questions because of how they specifically invite responses and thereby “strengthen the possibility of a response to what they have to say” (Fishman 94), while men make more statements because they are in the unique position of being able to assume that they will receive a response—“that the attempt [to interact] will be successful as is; it will be understood, the statement is of interest, there will be a response” (96). But here, it is *Skyler* who makes only statements while *Walt* asks questions almost exclusively.

Skyler becomes even more powerful when she has the last word in this conversation and ends it on her own terms. Shortly after the exchange above, Skyler explains how she uncovered Walt’s web of lies and then makes a series of moves to bring the conversation to an end:

SKYLER: Could you, just once, do me the courtesy of not denying it? [walks out of the house, toward her car]

WALT: Skyler. Skyler don’t do this please. I-I... Skyler please don’t go. [prevents Skyler from closing the car door] If I tell you the truth, will you stay? Stay and I will tell you everything.

SKYLER: Whatever it is, I’m afraid to know. [closes the door and drives away]

(*Breaking Bad*, S02E13, “ABQ”: “Please don’t go”)

Fishman defines control over a conversation as, “having control over the definition of the situation in general, which includes not only what will be talked about, but whether there will be a conversation at all and under what terms it will occur” (93). Since, as she argues, realities are created through interactions, controlling a conversation means controlling the realities of the relevant relationship (99). And since power can be defined as the “ability to impose one’s definition of what is possible, what is right, what is rational, what is real”—or, in other words, one’s definition of reality—having control over a conversation means having power. The fact that Skyler is able to end this conversation by getting in her car and driving away puts her in a

powerful position: by imposing her definition of when the conversation is over, she ultimately leaves him alone in the driveway without the ability to try to explain himself.

The next few negotiation scenes between Walt and Skyler play out in a similar manner. In a scene from the episode “No Más,” for instance—the scene in which Skyler tells Walt that she wants to get a divorce—it is once again Skyler who brings the conversation to an end, leaving Walt fruitlessly trying to get her to let him explain himself after he reveals once and for all that he is a meth cook:

WALT: It's methamphetamine. But I'm, I'm, I'm a manufacturer, I'm not a dealer [SKYLER: Oh] per se. I, it, it doesn't mean—No, Skyler, listen to me, Skyler, [SKYLER: No, no!] listen. There are a lot of angles to this, okay? It's complicated, all right? So please, let's, please, let's just sit back down and talk it through.

SKYLER: I'm gonna make you a deal, Walt. I won't tell Hank and I won't tell your children or anybody else, nobody will hear it from me. But only if you grant me this divorce and stay out of our lives.

WALT: No, Skyler—

SKYLER: I mean it. Now let me the hell out of here before I throw up.  
(*Breaking Bad*, S03E01, “No Más”: “Let me the hell out of here”)

Despite his pleas to “talk it through,” Skyler does not grant Walt the chance to tell his side of the story, in a move that further demonstrates her power over the interaction. Their next conversation ends even more quickly: when he brings pizza to the door in an attempt to eat dinner with the family and “hash things out like adults,” Skyler tells him, “We have discussed everything we need to discuss. I thought I made myself very clear” (*Breaking Bad*, S03E02, “Caballo Sin Nombre”). Even when Walt tells her that he brought dipping sticks, she is not moved to hear him out; she slams the door in his face, which leads him to throw the pizza onto the roof in frustration. Once again, Skyler ends the conversation on her own terms, which, in Fishman’s terms, gives her the ability to define the reality of their interactions and of their relationship.

In short, Walt's role as a husband as it is presented in these scenes does not align with the typical role taken by the husband in Fishman's analysis. In these negotiation scenes, he does not less but *more* active work in getting the conversation to progress than Skyler does. Furthermore, since Skyler holds the conversation-controlling and reality-defining power in these interactions, Walt is left essentially powerless in his own quickly disintegrating marriage. This state of affairs has critical implications for the construction of Walt's masculinity. The role of a husband might be described as quintessential in terms of its implications for a man's masculinity: in a society that is historically rife with patriarchal ideals, ideas about how husbands should act are intricately bound to ideas about how *men* should act. The notion that, in this first part of the series, Walt does not fit the stereotype is critical to how his masculinity is constructed. While he has, at this point in the series, become quite successful in the meth business (he has just received a tempting multi-million dollar offer to cook for Gus Fring), he is somewhat emasculated in the domestic arena of his life. This is also an important part of how he is constructed as an anti-hero character, since his problems at home make him sympathetic even as he performs less socially acceptable actions such as killing people and cooking meth.

Walt's less powerful stances in these early interactions with Skyler are also important in that they set the stage for the changes to come: in the negotiation scene from the episode "I.F.T.," he takes on some strategies that turn the tables and construct *him* as the one with much of the power. Skyler has just pulled up to the house to unexpectedly find Walt's car in the driveway. She calls him and discovers that he is inside of the house. The phone conversation that ensues takes place as the couple peer at each other through the living room window:

WALT: Hello?

SKYLER: Walt, are you in the house?

WALT: Oh, hey Skyler. Yeah, that's me.

SKYLER: What, what the hell are you doing in there?

WALT: I'm back.

SKYLER: No, no you're not back, Walt, you're not back, get-get-get out of there.

WALT: Well it's my house too, Skyler, and I'm staying, end of story.

SKYLER: —No, no.—

*(Breaking Bad, S03E03, "I.F.T.": "I'm back")*

The speech acts at the heart of this exchange construct alternate realities. As far as Skyler is concerned, Walt is not, should not, and cannot be “back”; she now knows that he is a drug manufacturer and she believes that it is in the family’s best interest for him to stay away from them. Nevertheless, Walt’s utterance of “I’m back,” in conjunction with the subsequent, “I’m staying, end of story,” are performative in their illocutionary force: Walt is using language to enact a state of being. Like a minister who marries a couple by saying, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Walt asserts that he’s “back” not just by physically entering the White household, but also by using language to bring this new state into being. Furthermore, the phrase “I’m back” implies that Walt had significant agency in leaving the household in the first place, that he *decided* to leave as opposed to being kicked out by his wife. In this way, Walt’s language also reflects an attempt to rewrite history and thereby erase the emasculating reality of having been banished from his own home.

Walt also ends the exchange on his own terms:

SKYLER: We had an agreement.

WALT: I-I didn't agree to anything. Now look, just come on inside and we'll talk this through, ok?

SKYLER: No-no, there's nothing to talk about! I am not coming in there until you get out!

WALT: Well, suit yourself.

[Walt hangs up]

SKYLER: Walt. Walt?

*(Breaking Bad, S03E03, "I.F.T.": "Suit yourself")*

By hanging up the phone when Skyler refuses to discuss the situation, Walt reverses the strategy that Skyler used by driving away in the “Please don’t go” interaction from “ABQ” or by closing

the door in “Caballo Sin Nombre.” By hanging up, he forces her to give in to his request to come inside the house. Furthermore, with regard to Fishman’s study, he “un-reverses” the reversed gender roles from “ABQ,” “No Más,” and “Caballo Sin Nombre”; it is now Skyler who is asking the questions and Walt who is making statements.

Once Skyler finally enters the house, Walt continues his strategy of using language to bring states into being that do not mesh with Skyler’s idea of reality:

SKYLER: What is wrong with you?

WALT: Skyler, I have every right to be here.

SKYLER: No, you don’t. You don’t live here anymore. We’re getting a divorce.

WALT: I don’t agree to a divorce.

SKYLER: Well it’s not up to you! If you don’t get out of here right now, I’m gonna call the police and I’m going to tell them everything. I mean it, Walt.

WALT: There’s the phone.

*(Breaking Bad, S03E03, “I.F.T.”: “I have every right to be here”)*

When Walt says, “I have every right to be here” and “I don’t agree to a divorce,” he commits speech acts that enact a state of reality that directly contradicts Skyler’s opinions on the matter, and he is able to carry out these acts because of the position of power that he has put himself in. In this way, he takes on a position that is more stereotypically masculine than it was in the preceding episodes.

After Skyler actually calls the police, Walt employs another powerful linguistic strategy—the use of silence:

SKYLER: [on the phone] Yes, my name is Skyler White. I need police assistance at my home right away. My—soon-to-be ex-husband broke into my house and I need an officer to come and remove him. It’s 308 Negra-Arroyo Lane. Okay. Okay. Thank you. [to Walt] They’re coming.

WALT: [silent as he continues doing paperwork]

*(Breaking Bad, S03E03, “I.F.T.”: Walt’s silence)*

Walt knows that Skyler won’t actually turn him in because doing so would have a number of negative consequences for her, like the potential loss of the house. Essentially, then, Walt uses

the powerful linguistic strategy of silence—which, to return to a quotation from Jane Tompkins that was discussed in Chapter One, “establishes dominance at the same time as it protects the silent one from inspection and possible criticism by offering nothing for the interlocutor to grab hold of”—in order to show Skyler that he is disregarding her threat and to maintain his upper hand in their interaction (60). Walt places the entire burden of conversational work on Skyler, who is frustrated by the fact that he will not leave, but cannot really do anything about it other than call the police, which clearly turns out to be an unsuccessful strategy. Furthermore, Walt’s silence is also a way in which he tries to silence *her*. As a study by Victoria Lito DeFrancisco suggests,<sup>20</sup> the frequent occurrence of “no-responses” in men’s interactions with women seem to be a factor in the women’s sense that their significant others are silencing them, since “getting a response at all” in their attempts to communicate becomes discouragingly difficult (155-156). Ultimately, Walt’s reality-defining speech acts work in conjunction with his silence to bring him closer to the typical masculine role that Fishman discusses; by shedding his share of the burden of interaction, he is able to take much of Skyler’s power for himself.

Walt’s embrace of this more assertive and powerful stance toward his wife is a pivotal moment for the construction of his masculinity. While it is true that some of this reversal comes about due to physical action—Walt’s entry into the house against her permission is a highly assertive move in and of itself—the way the interaction plays out linguistically takes that assertiveness to another level. Meanwhile, this turning point is also important to his status as an anti-hero. To some extent, this is a triumphant moment for Walt: he has been consistently shut down in his efforts to be a part of his own family over the course of the last few episodes, and here he does what he has to do to force his way back in. At the same time, though, the audience

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<sup>20</sup> DeFrancisco’s study, titled “The Sounds of Silence: How Men Silence Women in Marital Relations,” is in many ways an extension of Fishman’s study; she adopts many aspects of Fishman’s approach but also incorporates individual interviews she conducted with each participant.

may begin to have complicated feelings about Walt in terms of his treatment of Skyler here, since he is also blatantly disregarding her wishes and violating her comfort zone.

Another scene from later in this season shows Walt and Skyler in a state of negotiation that is in some ways more evenly balanced in terms of power dynamics:

WALT: Because I am at least gonna be a part of this household. Dinner with the family every night of the week.

SKYLER: Not every night, no.

WALT: Six nights a week, you get one night off.

SKYLER: Dinner two nights, not weekends, with twenty-four hours notice.

WALT: Five nights a week with no notice.

SKYLER: Three, six hours notice.

WALT: Five nights a week with two hours notice.

SKYLER: Four. Don't push it.

WALT: And I want my own key to the house.

SKYLER: No.

WALT: For emergencies and appearances, yes, I am going to babysit my own daughter, I am going to help my son with his homework, I am going to be a part of this family. And that is how we'll sell your little fiction.

*(Breaking Bad, S03E12, "Half Measure": "I am going to...")*

For one thing, it is Skyler who gets the last word in the discussion of how many nights per week Walt will be allowed to have dinner with the family. By saying "Don't push it," she warns him against trying to haggle any further because doing so may cause him to lose the ground he has gained. At the same time, though, Walt brings states of reality into being in the same way he does in the "I'm back" interaction from "I.F.T.": his declarative statements, "I am at least gonna be a part of this household," "I am going to babysit my own daughter," and "I am going to help my son with his homework" show him using language not only to assert himself, but to assert that these things are going to come true. He could say something like, "I want to be able to help my son with his homework," but he doesn't; instead, he uses a performative utterance to impose his definition of reality and to make it so.

The somewhat more balanced dynamics here are especially interesting considering the context in which this conversation takes place. Despite her thorough disapproval of his illicit activities, Skyler has just agreed to play a role in Walt's criminal life by helping him to launder his money. The couple decides to purchase a car wash and use it to slowly funnel Walt's meth profits through the business as revenue in order to make it look legitimate. The "little fiction" Walt mentions is their cover story, the image of themselves that they will need to project to the world in order to make this plan work—that everything is fine with their marriage and that they are taking on the car wash business cooperatively, as a joint venture.

Up until now, Walt's life as a meth manufacturer has been completely separate from his life as a husband, but this new partnership with his wife changes that. Now, their marriage is not *just* a marriage—it is also, in a sense, a business relationship. These overlapping facets of their relationship are evident in the exchange at hand: more than any other scene discussed in this chapter, the "I am going to..." scene involves a genuine, back-and-forth negotiation as Walt and Skyler try to agree upon the terms of their new agreement. The businesslike nature of this process adds a layer of complexity to how his masculinity is constructed within his marriage, since he is performing multiples identities at once (husband, businessman, meth cook) in a way that he hasn't before in his interactions with Skyler.

Another scene that makes significant use of direct speech acts like these is the "I am the one who knocks" scene—one of the most important interactions between Walt and Skyler as well as one of the most significant and frequently discussed scenes of the entire series. While this moment does not specifically involve Walt and Skyler negotiating their relationship and living arrangements, it provides an excellent sample of the interactional dynamics between them, and it contains some of the most memorable and important speech acts of the entire series.

Walt has just awoken after a night of drinking at a family dinner with Hank and Marie. During this dinner, Hank claims that he has finally tracked down Heisenberg. As far as he's concerned, the man he has been chasing is the recently deceased Gale Boetticher, who was killed by Jesse in the final moments of season three. Of course, Walt is the real Heisenberg, and Gale, while brilliant, never accomplished much more than briefly serving as Walt's lab partner and using a complex chemical process to make an extraordinary cup of coffee. Walt, too prideful to let Gale posthumously get the credit for his reputation as Heisenberg, and having had a few too many glasses of wine, suggests that Gale could not have been Heisenberg and that the real Heisenberg is still out there, which ultimately leads Hank to reopen the investigation. The conversation between Walt and Skyler the next morning deals with why Walt made this stupid decision as well as whether or not the family is in danger in the wake of Gale's murder.

Shortly after this conversation commences, Skyler begins asking Walt a series of questions, and she does not get a satisfying answer to any of them:

SKYLER: Did you know this Gale Boetticher person?

WALT: Skyler, I can't even focus.

SKYLER: Gale Boetticher. Did you know him?

WALT: Huh. Oh my god, what, what exactly did I say last night?

SKYLER: Just enough. Did you work together?

WALT: [sigh]

SKYLER: Who killed him? Was it the people you work for?

WALT: Definitely not.

SKYLER: Was it somebody who ... at some point... might wanna do the same to you?

WALT: I seriously doubt it. Oh. Oh god. Ohh god [grunts and groans as he gets up]

*(Breaking Bad, S04E06, "Cornered": Questions and non-answers)*

Each of Skyler's questions is met with a lack of cooperation from her husband. With the first three, he does not provide any answer at all: in addition to posing a question of his own, he provides only minimal responses, which Fishman defines as "when a speaker takes a turn by saying, 'yeah,' 'umm,' 'huh,' and only that," thereby suggesting that they are uninterested (95-

96). The sigh he lets out after she asks if he worked with Gale might not even be enough of a reply to constitute a minimal response; Walt is doing almost nothing to carry his share of the conversational work. After this first part of the exchange, he provides only short, unsatisfying answers. “Definitely not,” his response to, “Who killed him? Was it the people you work for?” makes perfect sense to the audience, because we know that Walt knows that Jesse was the one who killed Gale. To Skyler, though, this answer is about as cryptic as no answer at all. The same thing goes for Walt’s next answer: when he says, “I seriously doubt it,” he is expressing doubt that Jesse would want to kill him, but Skyler does not know that. She is just trying to figure out whether Gale was killed by Walt’s boss and whether Walt might be next, and Walt isn’t helping.

In some respects, this forces Skyler into the role of the female “shitworker” as defined by Fishman; she must take on the entire burden of interaction as she asks question after question in an attempt to get Walt to cooperate in the conversation by, at the very least, responding to her in a meaningful way. The scene is more complicated than that, however, in that Skyler is highly persistent in asking these questions, to the point where the interaction begins to look more like an interrogation than a conversation. While it is true that Walt is hardly doing anything to contribute, this does not deter Skyler; she asks Walt for the information she wants to get out of him in many different ways. This interrogator role is a relatively powerful one in that it reflects a great deal of perseverance on Skyler’s part, and while it doesn’t necessarily emasculate Walt, it mitigates the sense that he is completely dominating the conversation by stonewalling Skyler.

When Skyler reveals her theory about why Walt suggested that Heisenberg is still out there—she believes that he secretly *wants* to get caught in order to rid himself of the constant stress associated with being a part of the criminal world—Walt begins to perform his

uncooperativeness in a more aggressive way by mocking her with sarcasm and dismissing her theory completely:

SKYLER: I think last night was a cry for help.

WALT: Ohh, Jesus, cry for help.

SKYLER: I think some part of you wants Hank to catch you.

WALT: Wow. That is just, that is, that is it, exactly yes. You're like Dr. Joyce Brothers here, god.

SKYLER: If he caught you at least this would all be over—

WALT: —Yeah yeah, oh that's a-a tremendous weight just lifted off of me. Now, I understand myself. Thank you, thank you.

*(Breaking Bad, S04E06, "Cornered": Sarcasm)*

Instead of reassuring his wife—whose worries are completely valid—Walt shifts his conversational strategy from giving non-answers and vague, unhelpful responses to going on the offensive. He does not just give Skyler minimal responses in order to show his lack of faith in her theory; instead, he becomes brash and blatantly uncooperative by cutting her off and responding to her heartfelt analysis of his behavior with bitter sarcasm. In this way, Walt's reactions to Skyler's points here go far beyond the lack of interest that Fishman associates with minimal responses. He is not simply the stereotypical uninterested significant other; he goes out of his way to knock Skyler's ideas down with sarcasm and mockery and to express that his definition of reality is the right one and that hers is flat out wrong.

Once again, though, Skyler does not back down. She continues to push the idea of going to the police because Walt and the family are in danger. Walt's reaction to this brings about the memorable speech acts I mentioned earlier:

SKYLER: Walt, please, let's both of us stop trying to justify this whole thing and admit you're in danger.

WALT: Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year? I mean if I told you you wouldn't believe it. Do you know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going to work? A business big enough that it

could be listed on the NASDAQ goes belly up. Disappears. It ceases to exist without me. No, you clearly don't know who you're talking to so let me clue you in. I am not in danger Skyler, I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks.

(*Breaking Bad*, S04E06, "Cornered": "The one who knocks")

Walt's utterances of "I am the danger" and "I am the one who knocks" work in the same way as the phrases discussed above such as "I'm back" and "I am going to be a part of this family." In effect, however, they are different because instead of defining the reality of his and Skyler's relationship, Walt is directly bringing a new definition of his *own* reality and, more importantly, a development to *his own character* into being. At this point in the series, Walt actually *is* in quite a lot of danger: he is working for Gus, who has wanted him dead since season three, and who will soon threaten to kill Walt and his entire family. In this moment, though, Walt *overcomes* that context through the way he uses language to construct himself as "the danger" and as "the one who knocks"; the look of terrified astonishment on Skyler's face is enough to suggest that his speech acts in this exchange have been felicitous.

In terms of the construction Walt's masculinity in this scene, he is to some extent clearly embracing the ideals of aggressiveness and fearlessness associated with the "Scarface" brand of hegemonic masculinity when he declares himself to be "the one who knocks." Furthermore, he directly acknowledges the idea that he has transformed into an entirely different person when he asks Skyler, "Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see?" Again, though, this is all made subtly more complicated by the somewhat powerful position Skyler takes on by relentlessly interrogating Walt. This scene is also a critical moment for Walt's construction as an anti-hero: when he asks Skyler those questions, he simultaneously asks them of the audience, and a sense of tension arises between this Walt, who frightens his wife by arrogantly boasting about

his success in the meth business, and “the old Walt,” who sometimes forgets that he isn’t supposed to use the MasterCard.

By the fifth season, Walt’s embodiment of “the one who knocks” has come to define his relationship with Skyler. Whereas previous negotiations about the couple’s living situation generally involved some level of back-and-forth bargaining and argument, this interaction from the episode “Hazard Pay” involves almost none:

WALT: Oh hi, how was your day?

SKYLER: Um, are y—are you moving back in?

WALT: Yah. I’ll keep the condo for now, not selling it in this market I’d get killed, but yeah, I’m home. It’s time.

SKYLER: Do you, uh, really think that’s that’s a good idea?

WALT: Yes.

*(Breaking Bad, S05E03, “Hazard Pay”: “I’m home. It’s time”)*

The lines “I’m home. It’s time” recall the line “I’m back” from “I.F.T.” in that they show Walt using declarative statements in order to enact his definition of reality. The crucial difference here is that Skyler barely pushes back: her only two lines here are halting and hesitant questions.

Walt’s answer to her second question might be considered a “minimal response”: he answers the question, but he does it in a way that discourages further interaction and ends the conversation.

Indeed, the scene ends with that line, and Skyler finds herself trapped in her own home with a man she does not want to be there. In addition, even though his relationship with Skyler is at this point extremely tense and strained, Walt’s language here seems typical of an everyday husband-and-wife conversation: he asks Skyler how her day was and casually tries to chat with her about the housing market. By using language to act like everything is normal, he attempts to define the reality of the situation as such.

Walt reinforces his definition of reality in the very next episode, when he lies in bed with a visibly miserable Skyler, kisses her on the neck repeatedly even though she is clearly not

enjoying it, and asks her to throw him a birthday party and to bake him a cake, all before finally telling her, “Life is good, Skyler” (*Breaking Bad*, S05E04, “Fifty-One”). This scene demonstrates better than any other how the reality that Walt imposes on Skyler and their marriage is very different from the objective reality of their relationship. It also invites a comparison with an exchange that takes place right after Skyler first hands Walt the divorce papers in the scene from “No Más” that was discussed earlier:

WALT: Why-why are you doing this? Why are you even thinking this way? Is it to punish me?

SKYLER: I am not punishing you, Walt, I—

WALT: — This is punitive, is what this is. We are happily married—I am happily married. I am happy. We're just [pause] I love you, Skyler, and I would do anything for you. Would you even consider—I mean, Jesus! You come in here and you wave these papers in my face when there's a whole other entire side to this thing. There's your side and there's my side and you haven't heard my side yet. You haven't heard any of it at all.

(*Breaking Bad*, S03E01, “No Más”: “I am happily married”)

“We are happily married,” Walt says, before correcting himself and instead saying, “*I* am happily married.” At the beginning of season three, he recognizes that he cannot—or maybe even that he *should not*—impose his own definition of reality upon his relationship with his wife. As upset as he is about the divorce papers, he allows Skyler to constitute her own reality by shifting his language to show that he knows he can only speak to his own perspective. Yet, in season five, he has no problem with telling Skyler that “Life is good,” even though it is painfully clear that, for her, it is not. With this powerful contrast established, the audience is encouraged to ponder whether that “old Walt” might still be in there somewhere, which in turn prompts the feelings of ambivalence that ultimately construct him as an anti-hero.

In terms of what the couple's power dynamics mean for the construction of Walt's masculinity, the generalizations that might be made in terms of change over time are quite clear:

Walt's conversations with Skyler over the course of the series are characterized by his increasing tendency to take on powerful stances with her and to assert control over their conversations and over the reality they share as a married couple. This suggests something of a linear development in how Walt's masculinity is constructed in this one arena of his life—the one arena in which his primary interlocutor is a woman. The juxtaposition of this trend with the non-linear, multifarious portrait seen in Chapter One begins to illuminate the layers of complexity that characterize Walt's masculinity as it is constructed over the course of the entire series.

### **CHAPTER THREE: WALT AND JESSE**

#### **“Say the words. Say YOU want this.”**

In a scene from the eleventh episode of *Breaking Bad*'s fifth and final season, Jesse says to Walt, “Would you just, for once, stop workin’ me? ... Can you just, uh, stop workin’ me for, like, ten seconds straight? Y’know, stop jerkin’ me around?” (*BB*, S05E11, “Confessions”). The details of this exchange are analyzed in more detail later in this chapter, but this is the crucial moment that lies at the center of the scene: after spending well over a year as his partner in the meth business, Jesse finally calls Walt out for his manipulative tendencies.

Walt and Jesse have a complicated relationship, to say the least. Years before the timeline of the series begins, Walt was Jesse’s high school chemistry teacher, so in some ways Jesse is Walt’s student and mentee—in fact, Jesse calls Walt “Mr. White” throughout the entire series, a label that suggests that he feels some level of respect and deference toward his former teacher. At the same time, though, the two are partners in the meth business from the moment Walt tells him, in the first episode of the series, “You know the business. And I know the chemistry. I’m thinking maybe you and I could partner up” (*BB*, S01E01, “Pilot”). Of course, their business relationship is never quite as simple as a fifty-fifty enterprise, since their interests are frequently at odds. Finally, there is a familial aspect to their relationship: Walt is something of a father to Jesse, whose own parents have all but disowned him because of his drug abuse. Looking at Walt and Jesse’s relationship as a site of overlap where Walt’s life as a criminal, as a teacher, and as a father all intersect raises provocative questions about his character: how does Walt perform these different roles as he interacts with Jesse? How do these performances interact or compete with one another? And what might that mean for the construction of Walt’s masculinity and for his characterization as an anti-hero?

This chapter approaches these questions by engaging with a series of interactions in which Walt uses a complex blend of manipulation and persuasion to get Jesse to act according to his wishes; to adopt Jesse's term, these are scenes in which Walt is "workin'" him. More specifically, I examine the linguistic strategies that Walt's uses to "work" Jesse to get him to take one course of action or another, whether it's going to meet with a dangerous drug lord, killing another human being, or staying in the meth business.

The most prominent of these strategies is Walt's tendency to use language that capitalizes on different aspects of his identity with respect to Jesse at different times. As the two characters interact, Walt frequently brings to the forefront one stance he holds in relation to Jesse or another, whether it's that of a teacher, a father, a partner, a boss, or even a bully. The broad label for the linguistic phenomenon at issue here is *indexicality*. This concept, also mentioned in the Introduction, is based on the idea that linguistic features can index, or point to, social meanings in order to construct the identities of the interlocutors in an interaction (Bucholtz and Hall 594). As Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall write in their article on interactional identity construction:

The concept of indexicality involves the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings ... In identity formation, indexicality relies heavily on ideological structures, for associations between language and identity are rooted in cultural beliefs and values – that is, ideologies – about the sorts of speakers who (can or should) produce particular sorts of language. (594)

Within the context of fictional media products such as *Breaking Bad*, indexicality captures how content creators make use of those "semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings" in order to associate their characters with certain types of people (Queen 124-129). The linguistic features that characterize the speech of Tony Soprano, for instance, enable the

audience to quickly associate him with the Italian-American mafia (probably because of the stereotypes they may already have in mind thanks to films like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*).

In this chapter, indexicality is relevant whenever Walt's language draws upon those links between language and social meanings in ways that should be, in my estimation, easily recognizable to the audience. The intricate connection between indexicality and speech act theory is worth noting here: associating a character like Walt with a particular social meaning through the exploitation of indexicality can be the "action" or "force" carried out by any given speech act. Finally, in approaching indexicality, it is also important to remember that identity relations are largely *interactional* in that they continually emerge out of interactions between interlocutors; as Bucholtz and Hall write, "even in the most fleeting of interactional moves, speakers position themselves as particular kinds of people" (595).

Within this framework, then, the focus of this chapter is Walt's language as it indexes particular identities or stances in relation to Jesse during their interactions and how these competing identities further complicate the construction of Walt's masculinity. Though there was something of a linear trend in the development of Walt's performance of masculinity in his interactions with Skyler as discussed in Chapter Two, his interactions with Jesse present a pattern that more closely resembles the unstable and tumultuous construction seen in Chapter One. The construction found here, however, is somewhat more systematic in that it is motivated by the underlying pattern of Walt's use of indexical language (in conjunction with various other linguistic strategies) to "work" Jesse. As this chapter demonstrates, this complicated state of affairs is also very important to Walt's status as an anti-hero character because of the mixed audience responses that these strategies invite.

One scene from early in the series shows Walt trying to find his footing in his relationship with Jesse—is he still Jesse’s teacher, or are they now just partners-in-crime? After Jesse brings Walt a meager \$2,600 after selling almost an ounce of their product, Walt assumes a very “teacherly” stance with him in telling him that they need to increase their profit margin:

WALT: This is unacceptable. I am breaking the law here. This return is too little for the risk.

I thought you'd be ready for another pound today.

JESSE: You may know a lot about chemistry, but you don't know jack about slingin' dope.

WALT: Ah, well, I'll tell you, I know a lack of motivation when I see it.

JESSE: Oh my god.

WALT: Come on, you've got to be more imaginative, you know? Just think outside the box here.

(*BB*, S01E06, “Crazy Handful of Nothin’”: “Think outside the box”)

Walt’s language very clearly indexes his identity as a teacher in this scene; several of his utterances here could probably also be heard in his classroom. In fact, “This is unacceptable” and “I know a lack of motivation when I see it” both bring to mind what Walt actually wrote on one of Jesse’s assignments years ago, when Jesse was in his chemistry class: “Ridiculous! Apply yourself,” along with a big, red “F” at the top of the page (*BB*, S01E04, “Cancer Man”).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Walt sounds like a teacher urging his students to think critically and creatively when he asks Jesse to, “Just think outside the box here.”

The stance Walt assumes here is significant in terms of power dynamics because when he talks to Jesse like a teacher, he is drawing upon a well-established hierarchical relationship that the two instituted years ago when Jesse was in his class. However, while there is indeed a degree of authority associated with a teacher in a teacher-student relationship, it is not a particularly masculine sort of authority, let alone hegemonically masculine: as noted in Chapter One, teaching is often seen as a feminized profession, and academic men are frequently perceived as “effete” and as “analogous in some ways to women” (*Language and Woman’s Place* 47, 108).

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<sup>21</sup> The audience sees this assignment when Jesse digs up some old drawings and schoolwork in his room.

So, in this early instance of Walt “workin’” Jesse, his language indexes a powerful identity stance in relation to Jesse, but *not* in a particularly masculine way.

As the conversation continues, though, Walt takes a drastic turn away from this teacherly stance to adopt a position that is associated with a much different kind of authority—that of an emasculating bully. After Walt urges him to “think outside the box,” Jesse suggests seeking out a distributor for their product. When Jesse identifies Tuco as a potential distributor but refuses to set up a meeting with him, Walt quickly shifts his stance in relation to Jesse:

JESSE: Some guy named Tuco. Bad ass, from what I hear.

WALT: Tuco, okay. So then just go talk to Tuco.

JESSE: Right. Like, "Hello, sir. Hey, I know you don't know me, but would you be interested in a felony quantity of methamphetamine?"

WALT: Well, yes, but maybe with a little more salesmanship, perhaps?

JESSE: You just don't get it, man. This guy's O.G.

WALT: What does that mean?

JESSE: Jesus, look, he's upper level, man. He's not going to do business with some dude he doesn't know. Kay you just don't understand the way it works. You can't just bum rush some high-level ice man and start cutting deals. Kay, it's risky, you need an intro, you need someone to vouch.

WALT: Well, who introduced you to Krazy-8?

JESSE: Emilio, and that's only because I knew him from, like, third grade, and we can't talk to Emilio, either, because you know—

WALT: —Aight aight aight aight alright, alright.

JESSE: Look, I'm telling you, Mr. White, it's too risky. Okay? I mean, we're making money. Why can't you just be satisfied with the way it is?—

WALT: —Ah come on! Jesus! Just grow some fuckin' balls!

(*BB*, S01E06, “Crazy Handful of Nothin’”: “Just grow some fuckin’ balls”)

This exchange is the first of many times in which Walt pushes Jesse into a potentially dangerous situation, seemingly without any regard for his wellbeing—and, indeed, Jesse’s meeting with Tuco ends up with the meth stolen and Jesse in the hospital. More importantly for the discussion at hand, though, it shows Walt shifting gears as he tries to convince Jesse to go through with the meeting. “Jesus! Just grow some fuckin’ balls!” does not exactly fall into the same category of

classroom language as, “Just think outside the box here.” Instead, it draws upon one of Scott Kiesling’s four discourses of masculinity, dominance: “the identification of masculinity with dominance, authority, or power; to be a man is to be strong, authoritative, and in control, especially when compared to women, and also when compared to other men” (658). By using language that indexes a powerfully masculine stance—one that questions *Jesse’s* masculinity—Walt drastically shifts from a teacherly and (at least ostensibly) supportive stance toward Jesse to one that tries to bully him into action by suggesting that he isn’t “man enough” to face Tuco.

This shift in the indexicality of Walt’s language is thus also a shift between distinct authoritative positions relative to Jesse, both of which are powerful, but in different ways with regard to masculinity. To some extent, this shift seems to be motivated by the context of the conversation. Walt uses classroom-style imperatives in promoting the generation of ideas before changing to a more colloquial imperative when he wants to convince Jesse to meet with Tuco. At the same time, though, this scene illustrates the juxtaposition of a less masculine role in the teacherly stance with a more stereotypically hegemonically masculine role in the bullying stance. As such, this scene presents the overlap between Walt’s competing identities in his relationship with Jesse while simultaneously demonstrating, even at this early point in the series, how complicated the construction of Walt’s masculinity is in these interactions.

A scene from the very next episode shows Walt calling upon teacherly language once again in order to get Jesse to go out and purchase the ingredients they need for their next cook, a larger batch than they have ever produced before. In this case, though, it becomes a little bit clearer how Walt negotiates and shifts between his identities with regard to Jesse in order to “work” him. As he peruses the shopping list Walt wrote for him, Jesse quickly becomes frustrated, which leads to this exchange:

JESSE: Forty grams thorium nitrate—yo Mr. White I can't even pronounce half this shit. No, you know what, count me out, alright, I'm leaving town, I'm moving to like Oregon or something, this is just—

WALT: —Jesse Jesse Jesse listen to me. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. [grasps Jesse's shoulders]

JESSE: What are you doin'?

WALT: This is the first day of the rest of your life. But what kind of a life will it be, huh? Will it be a life of, of fear, of oh no no no I can't do this, of never once believing in yourself? Hm?

JESSE: I don't know.

WALT: Listen. These things? We need them. And only you can get them for us.

(*BB*, S01E07, "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal": "The first day of the rest of your life")

As soon as Jesse suggests that he wants to give up, Walt goes into teacher mode. "This is the first day of the rest of your life" is, like "Just think outside of the box," a phrase associated with the inspirational and encouraging language of a teacher. At the same time, Walt is also enacting a strategy that will become a common feature of his attempts to "work" Jesse throughout the series: his locutionary acts reflect attempts to make Jesse feel needed, like an indispensable part of their operation, in order to get him to do what he wants him to do. This is evident when Walt tells him, "Only you can get [these things] for us" in the final line of the conversation. This statement does not even seem to be true: there is no clear reason why Jesse has to go shopping for equipment and ingredients instead of Walt. This helps to illuminate the force of Walt's utterance as a speech act. The locutionary act is a declarative, but its illocutionary force as an imperative arises through Walt saying that "only [Jesse]" can get the materials they need. The illocutionary force of the statement is, in fact, two-fold. In the immediate context, he is trying to convince Jesse to agree to do what he is asking him to do; in Austin's terms, Walt is speaking "with the design, intention or purpose of producing" a particular course of action in Jesse, a course of action that can be referred to as a "perlocutionary act" (61). At the same time, Walt is

also attempting to develop a sense in Jesse that he is special and that he has something unique to contribute to their partnership.

Both here and in the “Think outside the box” passage discussed above, it is impossible to determine the extent to which Walt is being sincere in his attempts to motivate Jesse, and this ambiguity is what makes moments like these crucial to Walt’s construction as an anti-heroic character. Is he really interested in getting Jesse to believe in himself, or is he just saying things in hopes of getting him to act according to his wishes? Does he really think that Jesse is special and vital to their fledgling meth operation, or is he just trying to make him think that so that he can use him to his advantage? In the end, these questions are unanswerable because everything Walt says is a linguistic performance: who’s to say what his true feelings toward Jesse are when any given utterance could be sincere or insincere? The ambiguity that arises here is critical to the audience’s reception of Walt as an anti-heroic character; it establishes a sense of tension between sincerity and performance that pervades Walt’s relationship with Jesse throughout the entire series, and that ambiguity only gets more difficult to unravel as the show goes on.

In terms of the construction of Walt’s masculinity, his language in these scenes indexes different stances with respect to Jesse at different times, and these stances each come along with different implications in terms of power dynamics and masculinity. What results is, once again, complicated. While the teacherly language might seem like prototypical “Mr. Chips” linguistic acts, for instance, the ways in which Walt uses language elsewhere in these scenes to “work” Jesse makes the picture more muddled—it’s not exactly Mr. Chips, but it’s not Scarface, either.

As the power dynamics underlying Walt and Jesse’s relationship continue to be negotiated throughout the chain of events that leads up to the end of third season, when Jesse kills Gale, this picture becomes even more convoluted. Interestingly, when Walt first suggests

that they are going to need to kill Gale, Jesse immediately assumes that Walt wants *him* to carry out the murder. He says, “I-I can’t do it Mr. White. Like you said, I’m, I’m not a, I can’t do it” (*BB*, S03E13, “Full Measure”). However, in the exchange that follows, Walt actually commits himself to the task, though he makes it clear that Jesse will also need to play a role in the killing:

WALT: I'll do it. I'm gonna-I'm gonna need your help. I mean, they're watching me day and night. They never leave me alone with Gale, not for a moment. Hell, I don't even know where the man lives. He's not in the phone book, I can't find him on the Internet. I-I can't do it in the lab, Victor's always there. But if I could just shake Victor for even an hour one night, I think then that I may be able to make it look like an accident.

JESSE: There's got to be some other way.

WALT: I'm all ears. But when it comes down to you and me versus him—I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry, but it's gonna be him. Now you are the only edge that I've got, as long as they don't know that you're in town. But I-I need you to track him. Get me his address, and I'll do the rest. Look, I-I-I saved your life, Jesse. Are you gonna save mine?

(*BB*, S03E13, “Full Measure”: “Are you gonna save mine?”)

The way Walt sets up this situation reflects a greater sense of even-handed partnership than any other scene discussed in this chapter. He asks Jesse to track Gale, but he does so in a very direct manner. Walt really does need Jesse, but for once he chooses to express this need unambiguously and to enlist his help directly. While he does invoke the fact that Jesse owes him one, it does not seem unreasonable considering that he isn’t actually asking Jesse to commit murder.

The way the situation actually plays out, however, Jesse has to do much more than just track Gale—he *does* end up having to kill him. After Walt’s plan to kill Gale is foiled when he is kidnapped by Victor and Mike, he manages to call Jesse and give him the order to do the deed:

JESSE: Did you do it? Mr. White? Did you do it?

WALT: No, I didn't do it. I can't, now. It's gonna have to be you.

JESSE: What? No way, man.

WALT: Listen to me. You're closer than we are. You'll have about a 20-minute lead. They've got me at the laundry, and they're going to kill me. Jesse, do it now! Do it, do it fast! Do it! Do it Jesse! Do it! Do it!

(*BB*, S03E13, “Full Measure”: “Do it Jesse! Do it!”)

It should be noted that Walt is in great distress during this scene; Mike was about to kill him before he managed to convince him to let him call Jesse. Clearly, the repeated “Do it” is an imperative, and Walt’s life depends on Jesse’s decision to follow through with it. While it is hard to say whether it is the sense of mutually beneficial partnership discussed above or Walt’s tendency to take authoritative stances toward him that ultimately results in Jesse running to Gale’s apartment as quickly as possible and committing the murder, this whole scenario is worth considering simply because of the contrast it presents to the others that are discussed in this chapter. Walt’s language here is strikingly unambiguous, both in his explanation of what he needs Jesse to do in the “Are you gonna save mine?” scene, and in the imperatives he issues in the “Do it Jesse! Do it!” scene. The result is another layer of complexity for the construction of Walt’s masculinity and for his status as an anti-hero; while in both scenes he exercises authority over Jesse, Walt’s desperation forces him to make his intentions transparent in a way that is unusual among the scenes in which he “works” Jesse.

Even after Jesse’s extremely traumatizing experience of killing Gale, a similar situation arises in the fourth season when Walt needs Gus Fring dead for his own protection. In this case, Walt’s efforts to “work” Jesse hinge not only on indexicality, but also on some of the other strategies that have emerged from his interactions with other characters in the previous two chapters. While it is ultimately Walt who hatches the plan that leads to Gus’s assassination, he tries to get Jesse to do it after deciding that it will be impossible for him to do it himself. He has not seen Gus in person in quite some time, so he is eager to learn about Jesse’s interactions with him and to try to turn Jesse against him:

WALT: How close were you to him?

JESSE: Close. I mean closer than you and me right now.

WALT: Did he speak to you?

JESSE: It was, it was over in ten seconds.

WALT: Would you just answer?

JESSE: He said he sees things in people.

WALT: What things? What people?

JESSE: Me. He said he sees something in me.

WALT: [sighs] A month ago, Gus was trying to kill both of us, and now he pulls you out of the lab and employs you as, what, a, an assistant gunman? A tough guy? Does that make any sense to you? He says he sees something in you. What kind of game is he playing? Does he think you're that naïve? He can't truly think that you'd forget— Well, let alone Gale, let alone Victor, and all the horror that goes along with all of that. What about this girlfriend of yours, and her little brother? I mean the man looked you straight in the eye and told you "no more children," but that very night, that little boy, he just, he winds up... and Gus can't possibly think that you'd forget that.

JESSE: Okay.

WALT: I mean all I'm saying is that, is it possible that he would think that you're that weak-willed?

JESSE: Drop the sales pitch. I'll do it.

WALT: You'll do what?

JESSE: I'll kill him first chance I get.

(*BB*, S04E07, "Problem Dog": The "sales pitch")

Recognizing that Gus is trying to secure Jesse's allegiance, Walt acts fast in order to convince Jesse that things are not what they seem. In that regard, the primary point of interest in this interaction is Walt's attempts to define Jesse's reality through his speech acts, a very powerful strategy that echoes some of the interactions between Walt and Skyler that were discussed in Chapter Two. By saying, "Does [Gus] think you're that naïve?," "Gus can't possibly think that you'd forget that," and "Is it possible that he would think that you're that weak-willed?," Walt uses language to impose his own view of reality on Jesse. Jesse seems to believe that Gus really does see something in him, that he's not playing a game at all, but actually considering employing him as an "assistant gunman" or a "tough guy." Through these utterances, though, Walt tries to get Jesse to dismiss these notions entirely. The two that are delivered as rhetorical questions have a particularly strong effect in achieving this. These questions *presuppose* that Walt is right and that Gus is deceiving Jesse, and by asking them, Walt asserts that Jesse would

be “naïve” and “weak-willed” to fall for it. In this way, Walt uses language to supplant Jesse’s ideas about Gus, whatever they may be, with his own, which ultimately results in the “sales pitch” that Jesse refers to.<sup>22</sup>

Walt’s manipulation of Jesse becomes even more convoluted in this exchange:

WALT: Are we alone? So where do we stand?

JESSE: Where do we stand on what?

WALT: Where do we stand with the thing, the thing that you were supposed to do? I assume you haven't done it. You didn't lose it,<sup>23</sup> did you? You would tell me if you lost it, right?

JESSE: Oh, Jesus. [pulls out cigarette pack] Asshole. You creaming to get it done? Go do it yourself.

WALT: If he didn't see me coming like he's some kind of—this—alright, look. Our timetable has advanced.<sup>24</sup> You have got to make this meeting happen this week, tomorrow, tonight, if possible.

(*BB*, S04E07, “Problem Dog”: “The thing that you were supposed to do”)

Here, Walt acts as though he *ordered* Jesse to kill Gus, despite the fact that Jesse actually offered to do it of his own accord. The thing that Jesse volunteered to do suddenly becomes “the thing that [he was] supposed to do,” which is significant for several reasons. For one thing, Walt rewrites history by once again enacting the powerful strategy of using language to impose his own idea of reality on Jesse, which ultimately reinforces Walt’s position of authority over him. Additionally, his language indexes a teacherly stance toward Jesse or, perhaps more accurately, the dynamics of an employer-employee relationship: Walt has given Jesse a task to carry out and he is checking in on his progress. This dynamic endures later in the conversation, when Walt details how he thinks the murder should be carried out:

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Jesse’s reference to Walt’s lengthy appeal as a “sales pitch” seems to presage the dramatic moment that begins this chapter, in which Jesse finally calls Walt out for “workin’” him (S05E11, “Confessions”). This scene is discussed in more detail below.

<sup>23</sup> Walt is referring to the ricin cigarette here; essentially, Walt concocted a small amount of a poison called ricin, and he and Jesse have hidden it in a small vial that is concealed within a cigarette.

<sup>24</sup> The reason for the advancement of the timetable is that Hank, Walt’s DEA agent brother-in-law, is on Gus’s tail. So, if they are going to kill Gus, they need to do it fast before they get caught along with him.

WALT: Alright so you, you, you haven't even seen him since that time at the diner. Okay. Think. Alright. Uh, the-they've got to be figuring that we've talked, so, you need to tell Mike that you are worried about Hank's investigation, okay? Hank already knows who you are, by the way. And, besides you actually did kill Gale, so there's that. This is all good fodder for you to request a sit-down with Gus so you can discuss what you would say in case Hank brings you in for questioning, okay? Now you just, you just say that you want to be, no, that, that that you *need* to be able to be properly coached, and when you're near him [taps the cigarette pack] you put this to use.

JESSE: Mike's just going to tell me to shut my mouth if I get busted. He ain't gonna set up no meeting.

WALT: Well then insist on it, dammit! Act panicked. Gus's ass is on the line, and trust me, he will meet with you if he thinks that you're a liability.

JESSE: No, he will waste me if he thinks I'm a liability. You know what? Whatever, man. 'M'a take a piss. [leaves the room]

(*BB*, S04E07, "Problem Dog": "You need to...")

Walt's lengthy set of instructions is delivered without any sense that Jesse has a choice in performing these actions, at least as far as Walt is concerned. Instead of using verbs like "should" or "could," for instance, Walt tells Jesse that he *needs* to follow this course of action, as in, "you need to tell Mike that you are worried about Hank's investigation." While Walt's repeated use of the question, "okay?" might seem to invite feedback from Jesse, he is actually asking something like, "Do you understand?" rather than "Do you agree to this?" Furthermore, when Jesse refutes Walt's plan, Walt angrily switches to more direct imperatives like, "Well then insist on it, dammit!" and "Act panicked." This is all to say that Walt explains his plan to Jesse not as a suggested course of action, but as a set of instructions, which indexes for Walt the role of Jesse's boss. These direct speech acts suggest that Walt feels that he is in a dominant position over Jesse such that he can assert authority in this way.

In terms of masculinity, this role involves an even greater level of authority than that of a teacher over a student, and it does not come along with the feminization that the teacher role does. However, it is perhaps less associated with hegemonic masculinity than the bully role that

Walt takes on in the “Just grow some fuckin’ balls” exchange, even though it comes with a higher level of authority. Clearly, the roles that Walt indexes in these interactions are widely varied in the types of masculinity with which they are associated.

Later in the series, during the episode “Say My Name,” Walt runs the gamut of strategies he uses to “work” Jesse in one single conversation, presenting a microcosm of this complicated construction in a single scene. The illocutionary force, or, perhaps more precisely, the perlocutionary act that Walt is interested in here remains essentially the same throughout this entire conversation: he is “workin’” Jesse in order to get him to stay in the meth business. However, he uses a wide array of different *locutionary* acts in order to convey that desire, which often coincide with shifts in how his language indexes his social position with respect to Jesse. I have reproduced the exchange in its entirety here in order to allow for an in-depth analysis of the scene, though it is broken up into sections for the sake of my discussion. The scene takes place after Jesse and Mike have told Walt that they both want out of the business, after Walt elects to secure Declan as a distributor instead of selling him their methylamine:<sup>25</sup>

WALT: Hey, perfect timing, just about to get started. Uh, you know, if you could get started on that settling tank that would be a huge help. We left that stuff in there too long after the last cook.

JESSE: Mr. White.

WALT: I mean way too long, now we have a tremendous amount of residue. You know, what we need to invest in is a power washer.

JESSE: Mr. White. Can we just take a second and talk about all this?

WALT: Yeah yeah sure, yeah. [hands Jesse gloves]

JESSE: Uh—

WALT: —Uh you know what I think we need to talk about, is doubling down.

JESSE: Doubling down.

WALT: Mhm, cooking 100 pounds a week, not 50, as in starting a new lab, a lab that you’ll run, a cook all of your own. Why not, you deserve it, you’re every bit as good as me. What do you think?

(*BB*, S05E07, “Say My Name”: “If you could get started on that settling tank...”)

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<sup>25</sup> This situation is discussed in more detail in Chapter One.

Walt's strategy in this first passage is to control the conversation in order to keep Jesse from being able to raise his topic of choice—his decision to get out of the business—at all. As has already been established with my discussion of Pamela Fishman's study of power dynamics in heterosexual couples in Chapter Two, controlling the topic of conversation is a significant part of power dynamics in conversation. Although Jesse is soon able to raise the topic that he would like to raise, Walt attempts to impose his own reality, in which everything is business as usual, by using the language that he and Jesse have always used when they are at work in the lab. When he says, "You know, what we need to invest in is a power washer," he is not *really* concerned with purchasing a power washer—he is using language to keep Jesse from making his point.

At the same time, though, Walt is attempting to disguise this powerful linguistic strategy by incorporating some less powerful elements into his utterances and thereby indexing a less authoritative stance toward Jesse. For one thing, he uses several hedges in these lines: for instance, "uh," "you know," and "if you could..." Hedges like these are often used, as they ostensibly are here, to establish politeness. However, as Robin Lakoff argues, they appear particularly frequently in women's language and tend to suggest "that the speaker lacks authority or doesn't know what he's talking about" (*Language and Woman's Place*, 79). Lakoff further claims that women use them "out of a fear of seeming too masculine by being assertive and saying things directly," and Walt's use of them here takes advantage of this tendency by allowing him to mitigate the extent to which he seems to have authority over Jesse (79). The indirect nature of the requests he makes of Jesse in this part of the scene, like when he says "If you could get started on that settling tank, that would be a huge help," has a similar effect; by issuing an indirect request rather than an authoritative imperative, he tries to make himself seem less powerful than usual with respect to Jesse. This strategy has a twofold effect. It allows Walt

to foster a sense of equal partnership between him and Jesse, which is important to his effort to convince Jesse to stay in the business. At the same time, it also allows him to draw Jesse in by making him feel like he is on equal footing with Walt, which, in theory, will make him more vulnerable and easier to convince.

In the next passage, Jesse finally raises his intended topic of conversation:

WALT: Mhm, cooking one-hundred pounds a week, not fifty, as in starting a new lab, a lab that you'll run, a cook all of your own. Why not, you deserve it, you're every bit as good as me. What do you think?

JESSE: Mr. White, uh, I think that nothing has changed for me. I just wanna get my money and get out.

WALT: Jesse, this, what we do, being the best at something is a very rare thing, you don't just toss something like that away. And what, you wanna, squander that potential, your potential? Why? To do what?

JESSE: I don't know.

(*BB*, S05E07, "Say My Name": "You're every bit as good as me")

In this section of the scene, Walt compliments Jesse, saying "You're every bit as good as me," while also calling upon some of his classroom language when he addresses Jesse's "potential" and how it would be a shame for him to "squander" it, which allows him to index the stance of a teacher who wants to see his student achieve everything that he is capable of. Instead of sincerely complimenting Jesse, though, Walt is carrying out the now-familiar strategy of attempting to make Jesse feel special and indispensable. In other words, while Walt's locutionary acts here are complimentary, there is a distinct illocutionary force behind them—he is trying to get Jesse to change his mind, to make him feel valuable so that he does not leave the business, the same "two-fold" illocutionary act discussed above in the "The first day of the rest of your life" interaction. Another layer of complexity arises at the end of this passage, as Walt relentlessly pushes Jesse to give justifications for his decision to quit the business. When he says, "Why? To do what?" he tries to give Jesse the impression that if he doesn't have answers to these questions

*right at this moment*, he will never be successful; his potential will be irreversibly “squandered.” In this way, he is also trying to *bully* Jesse into making the decision that he wants him to make, and so the stances he indexes begin to look like more than simple, discrete performances that arise one at a time. On the contrary, they seem to overlap and intermingle to some extent.

This bullying strategy is taken further in following passage, when Walt begins to actively insult, mock, and belittle Jesse:

WALT: Well think. To do... what, Jesse?

JESSE: Well, I'll figure it out, alright?

WALT: Look at you, what have you got in your life, huh? Nothing, nobody. Oh wait, yes, video games and go-karts. And when you get tired of that, what then, huh? And how soon will you start using again? Look, look, I know how upset you are about what happened to this boy.<sup>26</sup> I am just upset as you are.

JESSE: Are you? Really?

WALT: How can you say that to me, Jesus! I mean I'm the one who's the father here. What do I have to curl up in a ball in tears in front of you, do I have to lock myself away and get high to prove it to you?

(*BB*, S05E07, “Say My Name”: “Video games and go-karts”)

Moments ago, Walt was telling Jesse how much potential he has and how great of a cook he is, and now he is mocking him for his preferred pastimes of playing video games, driving go-karts, and using drugs, going so far as to say that Jesse has “nothing” and “nobody” else of any worth in his life. The illocutionary force behind Walt's words remains the same here, but, again, he uses a different type of locutionary act to achieve it, this time by trying to make Jesse think that he has no other good options.<sup>27</sup> Walt also bullies Jesse by mocking his emotional reaction to Drew Sharp's death when he says, “What do I have to curl up in a ball in tears in front of you, do I have to lock myself away and get high to prove it to you?,” drawing upon a stereotype of masculinity in which such emotional displays are stigmatized when performed by men. The

<sup>26</sup> Walt is referring to the death of Drew Sharp, a young boy who was killed by Todd at the end of the methylamine train heist in the episode “Dead Freight.”

<sup>27</sup> A technique that Walt uses the *exact opposite* of in the scene from “Confessions” discussed below.

stance he indexes here is in some ways that of a bully, but it is also that of a highly judgmental and disapproving father, a stance that arises from the disapproval of video games and go-karts as well as from Walt's explicit mention of fatherhood when he says, "I'm the one who's the father here." Walt knows that taking on this stance will hit close to home for Jesse, who has a disapproving father of his own.

Next, Walt emphasizes the crimes that he and Jesse have committed as a way of convincing him that there would be no point in stopping now ("We're already pretty much going there"), and then he makes another shift toward bitter sarcasm ("Filthy blood money"):

WALT: What happened to that boy is a tragedy, and it tears me up inside. But because it happened, what am I supposed to lie down and die with him? It's done. It makes me sick that it happened along with everyone else who has died in our wake. What Todd did, you and I have done things that are just as bad.

JESSE: Yeah.

WALT: All the people that we've killed. Gale and the rest. If you believe there's a hell – I don't know if you're into that, but we're already pretty much going there, right? But I'm not gonna lie down until I get there.

JESSE: What, just because I don't wanna cook meth anymore I'm lyin' down? How many more people are gonna die 'cause of us?

WALT: No one, none. Now that we're in control no one else gets hurt.

JESSE: You keep saying that and it's bullshit every time, always. You know what, I'm done, okay, you just give me my money and you and I are done.

(*BB*, S05E07, "Say My Name": "We're already pretty much going there")

WALT: Mm. Okay. Why, why do you want this money?

JESSE: Because it's mine, it's my cut.

WALT: But isn't it filthy blood money? I mean you're so pure, you have such emotional depth. No no no you shouldn't touch that dirty money, I'll save you from that, Jesse.

(*BB*, S05E07, "Say My Name": "Filthy blood money")

Walt uses each of these strategies for just a couple of turns in this conversation, underscoring the complicated and relentless nature of his efforts to persuade Jesse in this scene. First, he tells Jesse that they're both going to hell and promises that no one else is going to get hurt, and then

he bullies Jesse with sarcastic remarks on the basis of something Jesse has said in the past: that the money they have made is “blood money” because of the people who have died in their wake.

Finally, in the last part of the exchange, Walt returns to his attempts to define Jesse’s reality through speech acts:

WALT: Come on. You want it, you want it just as much as I want it and it’s not wrong to want it. Okay, so stay, and work with me and you can make ten times, twenty times as much.

JESSE: Whatever man, you don’t wanna pay me, I don’t care.

WALT: Yes you do.

JESSE: It’s on you, alright, I’m done.

WALT: No you’re not. You’re not done. You’re not leaving because if you leave you get nothing! You understand me, nothing! Jesse!

(*BB*, S05E07, “Say My Name”: “Yes you do”)

The phrases, “You want it, you want it as much as I want it,” “Yes you do,” “No you’re not,” “You’re not done,” and “You’re not leaving” are Walt’s attempts to use language to bring his own state of reality into being. By uttering these statements, Walt makes assertions about Jesse—that he wants the money, that he isn’t done cooking, and that he isn’t leaving—that he wants to come true by virtue of the fact that he says them. Essentially, Walt is trying to impose on Jesse the same state of reality that he tried to impose at the beginning of the conversation: *his* reality. This time, however, Walt’s efforts ultimately fail because Jesse ends the conversation, leaving Walt alone and suggesting to him that he does not actually have the power he thinks he has.

This long series of passages is fascinating because of the sheer variety of locutionary acts that Walt uses as vehicles for the same basic illocutionary force of trying to get Jesse to stay in the business. This is perhaps the best example in the series of Walt “workin’” Jesse, and it suggests the insincerity of many of his locutionary acts simply because he uses so many different forms of them in such a short period of time. Furthermore, this scene shows how Walt’s language uses indexicality to emphasize different identities in relation to Jesse at different times

in order to dominate him. In the “You’re every bit as good as me” exchange, for instance, he capitalizes on his role as a partner and teacher, while in the “Video games and go-karts” passage he sounds like a concerned and disappointed father.

This scene complicates the construction of Walt’s masculinity because the various social stances he indexes have different associations in terms of power and masculinity. A teacherly role, for instance, is not typically associated with hegemonic masculinity in the way that the stance of a bully might be, and the masculinity associated with the performance of a fatherly role seems like something entirely different from both of them. In this way, Walt’s masculinity is not any one thing at any one time in his interactions with Jesse; his performances of different social roles throughout this scene and throughout the series make things too complicated for that to be the case. At the same time, though, Walt resembles Scarface in the relentlessness with which he uses language to convince Jesse to keep working; one might call Walt’s dialogue in this scene a full-blown assault on Jesse. This assault is, however, a *verbal* one. He may be using language in a way that evokes Scarface’s use of weaponry in the final scene of the 1983 *Scarface* film, but the fact that language is his weapon makes him a very different sort of Scarface—an idiosyncratic, Walter White sort of Scarface.

Finally, this scene very clearly illustrates the tension between sincerity and performance that helps to construct Walt as an anti-hero character. With Walt taking on so many different strategies and relational stances in the span of a single scene, it is more difficult than ever to tell which are “sincere” and which are nothing but performances (though, of course, *all* of his utterances are performances) used to “work” Jesse. In other words, the ambiguity surrounding Walt’s true feelings toward Jesse becomes particularly powerful here in its ability to provoke the sort of audience ambivalence that makes Walt an anti-hero in the first place.

Now, to revisit in a new light the scene that began this chapter. Walt is trying to get Jesse to leave town for good and to seek a new identity, which would be convenient for Walt because Jesse has just let him know that Hank has asked him to inform on him. Here is the relevant part of the conversation:

WALT: Jesse, will you let me help you? I don't like to see you hurting like this. Maybe it's time for a change.

JESSE: What kinda change?

WALT: I don't know. I don't know. Maybe, maybe it's time for you to just leave all of this behind. Just get out of town. Don't look back. Saul knows a man. He specializes in giving people new identities. He would move you someplace far away, and set you up with a whole new life. Yeah, I know. Sounds a little extreme. But maybe it's exactly what you need. You know, I really think that would be good for you. A clean slate. Aye, just think about it. You get a job. Something legitimate. Something you like. Meet a girl. Start a family, even, hell, you're still so damn young. Huh. And what's here for you now anyway? I tell ya, if I could, I'd trade places. A whole lifetime ahead of you, with a chance to hit the reset button. In a few years, this might all feel like nothing more than a bad dream.

JESSE: Would you just, for once, stop workin' me?

WALT: What are you talking about?

JESSE: Can you just, uh, stop workin' me for, like, ten seconds straight? Y'know, stop jerkin' me around?

WALT: Jesse, I am not working you.

JESSE: Yes. Yes, you are. Alright, just drop the whole concerned dad thing and tell me the truth? I mean, you're-you're acting like me leaving town is-is all about me and turning over a new leaf, but it's really-it's really about you. I mean, you need me gone, 'cause your dickhead brother-in-law is never gonna let up. Just say so. Just ask me for a favor. Just tell me you don't give a shit about me, and it's either this-it's either this or you'll kill me the same way you killed Mike. I mean, isn't that what this is all about? Huh, us meeting way the hell out here? In case I say no? Come on. Just tell me you need this.

[Walt hugs Jesse]

(*BB*, S05E11, "Confessions": "Stop workin' me")

Whereas just several episodes earlier Walt emphasized to Jesse how he has nothing in his life apart from his meth-cooking skills, he takes quite the opposite approach here by saying that Jesse has "a whole lifetime ahead of [him]" and plenty of opportunities to follow different avenues toward success. Obviously, this contrast says something about the sincerity of Walt's words to

Jesse—all he *really* cares about is that Jesse fulfills whatever course of action he is trying to get him to follow through the illocutionary force of his speech acts. At the same time, Walt is using indexicality to manipulate Jesse. Here, instead of baldly asserting authority over him, he speaks to him as a close friend or even, as Jesse says, a “concerned dad” would; through his locutionary acts, he tries to make it appear as though all he is doing is giving Jesse advice, but, as Jesse acknowledges here, he is actually speaking with additional intentions in mind.

One of the most interesting things about this scene, though, and the observation with which I will conclude this chapter, is the fact that Jesse confronts Walt about his manipulative insincerity and indirectness. First, he explicitly calls Walt out on his exploitation of indexicality when he tells him to “drop the whole concerned dad thing.” Then, he says, “Just say so. Just ask me for a favor. Just tell me you don't give a shit about me ... Just tell me you need this.” With the verbs “say,” “ask,” and “tell,” Jesse is turning the tables and issuing imperatives to Walt, but he is also making an interesting move by specifically addressing Walt’s language. He wants Walt to say what he means, to stop using language to act like something he is not, and to stop hiding his carefully crafted illocutionary intentions behind seemingly innocuous locutionary acts.

This refusal to continue putting up with Walt’s indirectness and insincerity returns in their very last interaction of the series. Walt has just carried out his plan to rescue Jesse, who has been enslaved by a gang of white supremacists. The entire gang lies dead in the wake of the remote-activated machine gun Walt used to kill them, and now he and Jesse are the only ones left in the room. Walt slides Jesse a gun, which Jesse hastily picks up and points at Walt. Then, this brief, final exchange between the show’s two most important characters takes place:

JESSE: [grabs the gun after Walt slides it to him; he points it at Walt]

WALT: Do it. You want this.

JESSE: Say the words. Say YOU want this! Nothing happens until I hear you say it.

WALT: I want this.

JESSE: [tosses the gun aside] Then do it yourself.

(*BB*, S05E16, “Felina”)

In this scene, several of the linguistic phenomena that characterize Walt and Jesse’s interactions return one last time. Walt issues Jesse an imperative, and then he attempts to define Jesse’s reality through the speech act, “You want this.” Just as he did in the “Stop workin’ me” scene, however, Jesse asks Walt to be direct, to just say what he really means—that he wants Jesse to kill him. Ultimately, Jesse leaves him unsatisfied in that regard, but what is really important here is how this scene once again draws attention to Walt’s language. In many ways, this exchange is the final deconstruction of Walt and Jesse’s relationship; it serves as a reminder that their long, unstable partnership, always characterized by a sense of ambiguity surrounding the extent to which Walt really cares about Jesse and always shifting in terms of Walt’s social stance relative to Jesse, is largely built by the language they use in their interactions over the course of the series. And all the while, these interactions consistently complicate the construction of Walt’s masculinity as the show progresses, making a simple, linear transformation from “Mr. Chips” to “Scarface” or from “Walter White” to “Heisenberg” seem less and less plausible at every turn.

## CONCLUSION

### **Beyond *Breaking Bad***

By the episode “Ozymandias” (the critically acclaimed fourteenth episode of the final season, or the antepenultimate episode of the series), Walter White has, by many viewers’ standards, long since “completed” his transformation from Mr. Chips into Scarface. As I mentioned in the introduction, Brian Faucette asserts this explicitly: “In season five Walt’s transformation from ‘Mr. Chips to Scarface’ is completed when Walt sanctions the killing of a young kid who witnesses them rob a train ... and when he kills Mike Ehrmantraut” (these events take place in the fifth and seventh episodes of the final season, respectively) (84). The heart-wrenching phone conversation between Walt and Skyler that ends the episode, however, suggests that this is not the case while encapsulating many of the complexities of Walt’s masculinity that have been discussed throughout this thesis.

Walt, who is wanted by the police after escaping arrest and kidnapping his infant daughter, calls Skyler at the White family home. Early in the conversation, he asks Skyler to confirm that there are no police listening in on the conversation. She is lying, of course: the room she’s in is scattered with officers of the law who have already begun tracing the source of Walt’s phone call. But Walt *knows* that she is lying; he is deliberately setting the stage for a *performance*. The purpose of his phone call, as it turns out, is to clear Skyler’s name with regard to any complicity in his meth empire by performing the “Scarface” brand of violent, hegemonic masculinity and suggesting to the police that he has coerced her into remaining silent.

The phone call lasts almost four minutes; here are several of the highlights:

WALT: This is your fault. This is what comes of your disrespect. I told you, Skyler. I warned you for a solid year. You cross me, there will be consequences. What part of that didn't you understand?

WALT: You're always whining and complaining about how I make my money, just dragging me down, while I do everything. And now—now you tell my son what I do after I've told you and told you to keep your damn mouth shut. You stupid bitch. How dare you?

WALT: You're never gonna see Hank again. He crossed me. You think about that. Family or no. You let that sink in.

(*BB*, S05E14, “Ozymandias”)

Despite Walt’s notoriety at this point in the series, much of what he says here seems out of character. To be sure, he has frightened Skyler with his words in the past—recall the “I am the one who knocks scene” discussed in Chapter Two—but never before has he talked about what happens when you “cross him” as he does twice in these passages, and he has certainly never called Skyler anything like a “stupid bitch.” And despite what he implies about Hank’s murder, he was *not* the perpetrator; he tried to prevent it, and he was devastated when it happened. Add to all of this the fact that Walt is shown crying throughout much of this conversation—the tears begin to flow soon after he says, “How dare you?,” and he begins flat-out sobbing after he says, “You let that sink in”—and the scene becomes one of Walt’s most self-contradictory, complex, and densely layered linguistic performances of the entire series.

One of the most important aspects of this complexity is the attention that the show draws to the fact that Walt’s performance here *is a performance*. The ways in which what he says over the phone conflicts with some of the contextual facts discussed above suggests that Walt has not *become* Scarface, as Faucette claims, but that he is *performing* certain aspects of the sort of hegemonic masculinity associated with that character. This moment of performance is especially striking because Walt is clearly *conscious* of the fact that he is performing. However, as is true of the way identity construction works in the real world, Walt is in fact *always* using language to perform throughout the entire series, whether it is done consciously or unconsciously. His masculinity is not, to return to my discussion of Butler’s theory of gender performativity, “a

stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed,” but “an identity tenuously constituted in time,” in large part by these linguistic performances (Butler 900). It doesn’t seem quite right, then, to say that Walt ever “becomes” Scarface; he is always performing, and these performances construct that sort of hegemonic masculinity only sometimes, and always in a complicated and multidimensional way.

As this thesis has demonstrated, it is a focus on *language* that renders visible this complicated nature of Walt’s masculinity. While physical action is important in a series like *Breaking Bad*, language does a large amount of the work of building the plot and the characters that participate in it, as the existing body of research on language in the media would suggest. By primarily focusing on the ways in which Walt’s masculinity is constructed through his verbal interactions with other characters—an approach that is, again, especially useful because of Bucholtz and Hall’s claim that “identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and social actors”—I have attempted to present a more complete and accurate portrait of his transformation that transcends the limitations of the “turning Mr. Chips into Scarface” framework (598). Despite what the title of the show might suggest, Walter White doesn’t just “break bad”: his transformation is a complicated, inconsistent, and largely non-linear phenomenon.

With each chapter of this thesis, I have also drawn connections between the densely complex construction of Walt’s masculinity and the elements of his character that seem to make him anti-heroic—from the juxtaposition of hegemonically masculine performances with more identifiable and sympathetic ones in his interactions with his adversaries, to the audience’s memories of “the old Walt” that keep their sympathies alive even as he takes increasingly patriarchal and dominant stances toward his wife, to the ambiguity that surrounds the sincerity of

his performances with Jesse. All of these elements of Walt's interactions with other characters play a role in making him a part of the anti-hero trend that Tony Soprano (the psychiatrist-visiting Mafioso) started in 1999, and each one hinges on the idea that his masculinity is more complicated than what the labels "Mr. Chips" and "Scarface" can describe.

In the end, *Breaking Bad* is just one show in what has been called the "Third Golden Age" of television that has been in full effect since *The Sopranos* hit the small screen (Martin 10). As discussed in the Introduction, there are a dizzying number of drama series with male anti-heroes that could be analyzed as I have analyzed *Breaking Bad*, including but not limited to *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Dexter*, *Mad Men*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and *True Detective*. Furthermore, series with non-male anti-heroes have also emerged, including the critically acclaimed *The Americans* (featuring the husband and wife duo of Philip and Elizabeth Jennings as its anti-heroic protagonists), which would be fascinating to investigate as a way of testing the connection I have observed between anti-heroic characters and complicated masculinities. And, of course, the possibilities for exploring language in *Breaking Bad* have not been exhausted here by any stretch of the imagination; though I have examined a significant selection of scenes that are in many ways representative of the interactions between the characters I have discussed, these scenes take up only a fraction of the show's total runtime of almost fifty hours.

As Walt tells his class in the first episode of the series, chemistry is "the study of change" (*BB*, S01E01, "Pilot"). In this way, *Breaking Bad* is a lot like chemistry. But the change involved here is not a matter of a simple, linear change that can be boiled down to a description like "growth, then decay, then transformation" (which is how Walt summarizes chemistry) or "turning Mr. Chips into Scarface." When Hank tells Walt, in their climactic confrontation discussed in Chapter One, "I don't know who you are. I don't even know who I'm talkin' to," the

answer is not “Scarface,” and it isn’t “Heisenberg,” either (*BB*, S05E09, “Blood Money”). The answer is “Walter White,” along with the intricate tapestry of performances of masculinity that comes to be associated with that name by the time he meets his bittersweet end.

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