

The Intercultural Critical Incident in Pixar's *Coco*

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Abstract

This paper examines Pixar's *Coco* (2017) to explore how cultural discourse can shape narrative causality in global animated films. To this end, rather than treating the "inciting incident" as a simple narrative trigger (Field, 2005), this study reframes it as an "intercultural critical incident" (Byram, 1997; Tripp, 1993), a moment where cultural worlds meet and clash, generating the moral and communicative tensions that propel the story forward. In *Coco*, this intercultural encounter takes the form of an intergenerational rupture with Miguel's defiance of his family's ban on music revealing deeper conflicts between ancestral memory, familial duty, and individual aspiration. Drawing on Carbaugh's (2007) Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA), the study relies on screenplay analysis to uncover and describe recurrent linguistic motifs. These motifs frame *Coco*'s narrative structure as family-driven, emphasizing relational and intergenerational ethics over conventional action- or character-driven paradigms. More specifically, screenplay analysis reveals that Miguel's conflict with his grandmother is more than a plot device; it acts as a communicative event that exposes tensions rooted in intergenerational memory, relational ethics, and self-expression. The film transforms narrative conflict into a process of cultural negotiation, in which reconciliation becomes possible through dialogue, song and shared remembrance. By reconceptualizing the inciting incident as both a narrative and cultural event, *Coco* reveals how intercultural discourse operates as the generative core of storytelling itself, signaling Disney's commitment to narratives that imagine global ethics, familial interconnectedness, and the moral possibilities of cultural encounter.

Keywords: *Coco*, narrative causality, Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA), intergenerational conflict, family discourse, screenplay analysis

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Introduction

This paper uses *Coco* as a case study to examine how cultural meaning is constructed in popular culture cinema. Screenplays are approached as cultural texts where values, identity, and morality are encoded to be circulated across interpretive contexts (Turner, 2006). Within this framework, narrative causality is understood as both a constructed and an interpretive process (Bordwell, 1985). It is constructed insofar as it organizes the progression of the story, and interpretive insofar as it allows culture-specific meanings to shape how events are understood, connected, and ultimately resolved. Consequently, narrative causality extends beyond a neutral sequence of actions to emerge through discourse as a social practice in which meanings are produced, negotiated, and embedded within culturally shared systems of value (Fairclough, 1995).

This perspective foregrounds the role of the inciting incident, conventionally defined in screenwriting theory as the structural event that initiates narrative progression through causal chains of action (Field, 2005). While effective in accounting for narrative structure, this view privileges form over meaning and overlooks the cultural embeddedness of narrative turning points. To address this limitation, the present study reconceptualizes the inciting incident as an intercultural critical incident (Byram, 1997; Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Tripp, 1993), approaching it as a communicative event in the sense proposed by Hymes (1974), where competing cultural worldviews generate the moral and communicative tensions through which narrative development unfolds.

It is important to emphasize that the inciting incident in *Coco* is more than a plot mechanism that initiates narrative action. Its function tends to be that of a communicative event in which intergenerational conflict becomes synonymous with cultural negotiation. Miguel's confrontation with his grandmother brings into tension competing understandings of family obligation, ancestral memory, and individual aspiration. These tensions are not external to narrative structure but constitutive of it, as they shape both the progression of the story and the protagonist's evolving sense of self.

Methodologically, the study draws on Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 2007) and screenplay analysis as complementary frameworks. The screenplay is examined through scene-based and discourse-oriented analysis, with particular focus on the inciting incident as a pivotal communicative event. Guided by Carbaugh's (2007) hubs of cultural meaning, i.e., "personhood" and "relationships," the analysis identifies recurring discourse patterns that reveal how culture-specific meanings organize the narrative through evolving understandings of selfhood, family, and moral obligation. The integration of these perspectives makes it possible to examine how narrative conflict may be both linguistically realized and culturally organized, when linking local interactional practices to the broader cultural premises that underpin narrative causality.

From this perspective, it is argued that narrative causality in *Coco* is not primarily action-driven, as classical screenwriting theory suggests, but family-driven, connected as it is to the negotiation of culture-specific meanings. Accordingly, the inciting incident functions as both a narrative and a cultural catalyst, transforming intergenerational conflict into a process of meaning-making through which dialogue, song, and shared remembrance become the means of reconciliation. In doing so, the study repositions cultural discourse not as a contextual backdrop to storytelling, but as the generative force through which narrative development unfolds.

The reconceptualization of the inciting incident as a communicative event advances a culture-based understanding of narrative causality, demonstrating that stories progress not simply through actions, but through the negotiation of meanings, identities, and moral relationships. This paper's originality lies in its proposal of an integrative framework that brings together narrative theory, intercultural communication, and Cultural Discourse Analysis for the study of popular culture screenplays.

Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the key theoretical concepts that underpin the present study, drawing on screenwriting theory, intercultural communication, and Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA). It clarifies how the inciting incident, intercultural critical incidents, communicative events, and CuDA contribute to a rethinking of narrative causality as grounded in cultural meaning-making practices and articulated through discourse, rather than viewing it as a purely structural phenomenon.

The Inciting Incident as an Intercultural Critical Incident

The inciting incident is traditionally understood within screenwriting theory as the structural event that initiates narrative progression (Field, 2005). In this study, however, it is reinterpreted through the concept of the intercultural critical incident (Byram, 1997; Tripp, 1993), which refers to moments where underlying cultural values and assumptions become visible through tension. This perspective sheds light on the inciting incident not only as a narrative trigger but also as a site of cultural negotiation, where conflict generates the meanings that propel narrative development.

The Intergenerational Conflict as a Communicative Event

Conflict in this study is approached as a communicative event in the sense proposed by Hymes (1974), where meaning, identity, and social relationships are actively constructed and negotiated through discourse. Intergenerational conflict is understood not as purely thematic or psychological opposition, but as the type of interaction that allows space for cultural values to be articulated and contested through the encounter of opposing generational worldviews. In the context of the film, intergenerational conflict becomes the discursive arena in which family authority, moral expectations, and individual aspiration are brought into tension and negotiated.

Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) and Screenplay Analysis

Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 2007), combined with screenplay analysis, provides the methodological framework for this study. On the one hand, CuDA focuses on how cultural meaning is enacted through discourse, particularly through recurring patterns of language use and interaction. More specifically, the analysis is guided by Carbaugh's "hubs of cultural meaning," namely "personhood" and "relationships," which provide the points of entry for examining how cultural meaning affects narrative development. On the other hand, screenplay analysis is used to examine dialogue, scene structure, and narrative turning points, enabling a systematic exploration of how cultural meaning is embedded in the film's narrative construction. These complementary approaches provide a rationale for relating micro-level discourse practices to the broader cultural premises that organize narrative conflict and narrative causality.

Research Questions

As can be evidenced from the conceptual framework developed above, the present study examines how narrative causality may be reinterpreted when the inciting incident is approached from an intercultural and discourse-oriented perspective. To this end, the analysis is guided by two complementary research questions, with the second extending the theoretical implications of the first.

RQ1. How can the inciting incident in *Coco* be reconceptualized as an intercultural critical incident and communicative event, and what does this reveal about the relationship between cultural discourse and narrative causality?

The first question establishes the study's conceptual point of departure by examining the extent to which the inciting incident can be understood beyond its conventional structural function as a culture-specific moment of communicative significance.

RQ2. If the inciting incident is understood as an intercultural communicative event, how does it shape intergenerational conflict as a process of cultural meaning negotiation, and how does this reconfigure narrative progression as family-driven rather than action-driven?

Building on this reconceptualization, the second question explores the implications for the narrative as a whole. Now the focus is on how culture-based meanings are negotiated through interaction and how these processes organize conflict, character development, and the progression of the story.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach that combines screenplay analysis with Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) to explore how narrative causality is organized through discourse. The screenplay of *Coco* serves as the primary data source, with the inciting incident constituting the main focus. The emphasis is on the interactional and structural features of the screenplay that reveal how the relationship between character development, conflict, and culture-based meaning-making contributes to the reconfiguration of narrative causality.

Data

The analysis involved:

- analyzing the screenplay of *Coco* as the primary corpus;
- extracting screenplay data through scene-based and dialogue-driven breakdowns;
- scanning Miguel's voice-overs, key interactions, and inciting incident cues;
- performing screenplay segmentation (character, conflict, and transformation) for systematic discourse analysis.

Character Study

The discourse analysis focused on character study, following Bang (2022), which entails:

- examining Miguel's character through backstory, objective, conflict, and transformation;
- establishing the backstory through voice-overs that reveal family trauma and Miguel's initial worldview;

- tracing the protagonist's objective as it emerges from the inciting incident and shapes subsequent narrative development;
- examining both external (family versus self) and internal (competing beliefs) conflicts as forces driving character and story development;
- interpreting transformation as a shift in perspective culminating in reconciliation with family values.

These analytical procedures provide a systematic framework for examining how discourse organizes character development and narrative progression. The integration of scene-based analysis, screenplay segmentation, and CuDA makes it possible to investigate how the negotiation of culture-based meanings shapes both the protagonist's transformation and the causal logic of the narrative.

The Hubs of Cultural Meaning

Building on the methodological framework outlined above, the analysis further draws on Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA), and, more specifically, on Carbaugh's (2007) hubs of cultural meaning, namely “personhood” and “relationships.” These hubs were selected because they provide a means of examining how cultural meanings are organized through discourse and how such meanings contribute to narrative development.

More specifically, these hubs make it possible to:

- examine how personhood is constructed through culture-based expectations, values, and forms of self-understanding, including orientations associated with individualism and collectivism;
- explore how family ties, hierarchy, obligation, and authority shape interaction and moral evaluation within collectivist systems of meaning;
- interpret the inciting incident as a cultural trigger that disrupts previously shared meanings and assumptions;
- trace how competing orientations toward individual aspiration and collective responsibility contribute to narrative progression;
- connect local interactional moments to broader cultural premises that inform the narrative;
- investigate how discourse mediates the relationship between family, identity, cultural continuity, and the negotiation of competing cultural orientations.

These categories support a culture-based understanding of narrative causality. Narrative progression is thereby understood as emerging through the negotiation, disruption, and reconfiguration of culture-based meanings, including the dynamic interplay between individualist and collectivist orientations (Hofstede, 2001), rather than being treated as the outcome of action alone.

From Scene Breakdown...

Having established the analytical framework, the study proceeds to a scene-based breakdown of the inciting incident in *Coco*. Examining the scene as a coherent interactional unit makes it possible to investigate the discursive mechanisms through which conflict emerges and the protagonist's trajectory is established.

More specifically, the scene-level analysis focuses on:

- identifying communicative rupture through the progressive escalation of dialogue;
- examining moral conflict through the opposition between the family's prohibition of music and Miguel's pursuit of self-expression;
- tracing the emergence of the protagonist's objective in response to familial resistance.

These elements confirm that the inciting incident functions as the narrative's primary communicative turning point. The scene breakdown further demonstrates how this turning point initiates a shift in narrative direction through the intensification of intergenerational conflict and the reconfiguration of values.

...to Screenplay Segmentation

Building on the scene-level analysis of the Miguel-Abuelita confrontation, the following section shifts the focus to screenplay segmentation in order to further specify how the inciting incident operates within the narrative structure of *Coco*. While the scene analysis outlined the dynamics of cultural conflict, this stage of analysis examines how these dynamics are distributed across key structural components of the screenplay. In doing so, it becomes possible to trace how discourse at the micro-level of interaction is translated into narrative functions that organize character development and causal progression at the macro level.

The same inciting incident is mapped onto screenplay structure following Bang (2022):

- Backstory activation → implicit family trauma revealed through the prohibition of music
- Objective formation → Miguel's commitment to becoming a musician
- Conflict initiation → intergenerational tension between family obligation and individual aspiration
- Structural role → initiating the narrative arc of transformation

Screenplay segmentation demonstrates how the inciting incident operates at both the structural and the cultural level, linking narrative form to discourse-based meaning-making. Building on the scene-level analysis, the inciting incident is further examined through screenplay segmentation following Bang (2022). Instead of fulfilling a singular narrative function, it operates across multiple dimensions of storytelling. First, it activates the backstory, where family history and implicit trauma position music as a culturally charged and restricted practice. It also crystallizes Miguel's objective, as he explicitly articulates his desire to become a musician in opposition to familial expectations. At the same time, it initiates the central conflict of the narrative, framed as intergenerational tension between collective obligation and individual aspiration. Finally, it establishes the protagonist's transformational trajectory, which structures the remainder of the film.

This segmentation shows that the inciting incident cannot be reduced to a structural trigger. Instead, it functions as a culturally embedded turning point where discourse, character formation, and narrative causality converge. In this sense, screenplay segmentation reveals how micro-level interactional conflict scales into macro-level narrative progression.

Results

The Inciting Incident as an Intercultural Communicative Event

To address the research questions, the analysis begins with the screenplay's inciting incident, reproduced verbatim below. As mentioned earlier, this scene marks the event that initiates narrative development. From the perspective adopted in the present study, however, it also constitutes the primary communicative event through which competing cultural perspectives become visible. As such, the extract serves as the principal unit of analysis for examining how discourse organizes conflict, identity, and narrative causality (Table 1).

Table 1

The Inciting Incident in Coco

INCITING INCIDENT
MIGUEL: I'm gonna be a musician!
CUT TO: EXT. COURTYARD - EARLY EVENING
Miguel's guitar is cast at his feet, along with his de la Cruz albums. The whole family encircles the boy.
ABUELITA: What is all this? You keep secrets from your own family ?
TÍO BERTO: It's all that time he spends in the plaza...
TÍA GLORIA: ...Fills his head with crazy fantasies!
MIGUEL: It's not a fantasy!
Miguel hands Papá the photo and points to the skull guitar.
MIGUEL (CONT'D): That man was Ernesto de la Cruz! The greatest musician of all time!
PAPÁ: We've never known anything about this man. But whoever he was, he still abandoned his family . This is no future for my son.
MIGUEL: But Papá, you said my family would guide me! Well, de la Cruz IS my family ! I'm supposed to play music!
ABUELITA: Never! That man's music was a curse! I will not allow it!
MIGUEL: If you would just let--
MAMÁ (warning): Miguel--
PAPÁ: You will listen to your family . No more music.
MIGUEL: Just listen to me play--
PAPÁ: End of argument.
Miguel lifts his guitar to play when Abuelita snatches the instrument away. She points to the man in the photo.
ABUELITA: You want to end up like that man? Forgotten? Left off your family's ofrenda?!
MIGUEL: I don't care if I'm on some stupid ofrenda!
Gasps from the family . Abuelita's brow hardens. She lifts the guitar in the air.
MIGUEL: No!
PAPÁ: Mamá...
Abuelita smashes it to bits!
ABUELITA: There. No guitar, no music. (softening)

(MORE)
ABUELITA (CONT'D): Come. You'll feel better after you eat with your family .
She reaches out to comfort Miguel, but he is hurt beyond repair.
MIGUEL: I don't wanna be in this family !
He snatches the photo from Papá and bolts out of the hacienda.

Note. From <https://imsdb.com/scripts/Coco.html>

The extract demonstrates that the inciting incident extends beyond its conventional structural function as the moment that sets the plot in motion. What it does is compile the principal cultural tensions that govern the narrative as a whole. The repeated lexical realization of “family” throughout the dialogue establishes the interactional framework within which the conflict unfolds. Throughout the exchange, “family” functions not merely as a social unit but as the central cultural framework through which identity, belonging, and moral obligation are negotiated.

Within this interaction, Miguel's declaration, “I'm gonna be a musician!” constructs music as a resource for selfhood and identity formation (DeNora, 2000). The family's responses, by contrast, consistently construct music as incompatible with family continuity, ancestral memory, and collective responsibility. The conflict therefore does not arise simply from opposing opinions but from fundamentally different cultural understandings of what it means to belong to a family.

This opposition becomes visible in the interaction between Miguel and Abuelita. The repeated use of prohibitive and authoritative language, i.e., “Never!”, “You will listen to your family,” “End of argument,” progressively reinforces family authority until it culminates in the destruction of Miguel's guitar. Within this interaction, the guitar functions as more than a musical instrument. Actually, its destruction symbolically reasserts the family's moral order while attempting to regulate Miguel's emerging identity.

Miguel's response, “I don't wanna be in this family!”, marks the communicative climax of the exchange. At this point, the interaction ceases to be a disagreement over music and becomes an explicit rupture in the family's shared system of meanings. The communicative event exposes competing interpretations of family, memory, authority, and selfhood, transforming interpersonal disagreement into a culture-based conflict.

Viewed through the concepts introduced in the previous section, the screenplay extract illustrates how the inciting incident assumes the role of an intercultural critical incident that communicates underlying cultural tensions. The story is founded not on action alone, but on the cultural premises from which subsequent narrative development proceeds. Narrative causality therefore emerges through the negotiation of meanings embedded in family relationships. Consequently, the progression of *Coco* depends less on the succession of events and more on the continual reconfiguration of culture-specific values.

Intergenerational Conflict as Cultural Meaning Negotiation

The communicative rupture identified in the inciting incident is embodied in the relationship between Miguel and Abuelita who are more than opposing characters within the narrative as they represent distinct generational orientations toward family, memory, and identity. Miguel articulates a forward-looking sense of self grounded in aspiration and personal vocation, while

Abuelita assumes the role of custodian of family continuity, ancestral memory, and moral authority. Their opposition reflects not merely individual disagreement but contrasting generational orientations toward cultural values and social continuity (Mannheim, 1952). As a result, the conflict between them extends beyond individual disagreement and becomes a confrontation between competing understandings of belonging and responsibility.

Importantly, this intergenerational tension is not constructed in isolation from the broader cultural context from which the film emerges. As Adrian Molina, co-writer and co-director of *Coco*, observes, “the most valuable thing that I took from this experience... was having the opportunity to discover my culture, reconnect with my history, and learn about my family” (Betancourt, 2018). Molina’s reflection foregrounds family as a lived cultural experience that informs the film’s representation of identity, memory, and interpersonal relationships.

In this light, the conflict between Miguel and Abuelita can be understood as an extension of the film’s broader engagement with family as a relational space where differing generational perspectives coexist in productive tension. Their interaction reveals how family functions both as a source of continuity and as a discursive space where values, aspirations, and identities are continuously negotiated. What initially appears as a disagreement about music ultimately unfolds as a conflict over the meanings attached to heritage, obligation, and selfhood.

The significance of the inciting incident therefore lies not only in its narrative function but also in its cultural resonance. Through the interaction between Miguel and Abuelita, the screenplay transforms intergenerational conflict into a communicative process through which questions of belonging, memory, and identity are brought into focus.

Cultural Hubs Restructuring Narrative Causality

In *Coco*, narrative causality is organized through culture-based meanings rather than action sequences. The inciting incident activates conflict by destabilizing both personhood and relationships. At the level of personhood, competing constructions of selfhood emerge between individual aspiration and family-defined identity. At the level of relationships, family hierarchy, authority, and obligation are disrupted through the public confrontation over Miguel’s musical aspiration and the subsequent destruction of his guitar. Narrative progression unfolds through the reconfiguration of personhood within shifting family dynamics, while cultural meanings such as memory, obligation, and moral order function as causal forces shaping both identity and interaction. In this sense, causality emerges through transformations in personhood and relationships.

Having moved from scene breakdown to screenplay segmentation, the analysis proceeds to the interpretive level, where Carbaugh’s hubs of cultural meaning are employed to account for how narrative causality is restructured in *Coco*. Narrative causality is not primarily organized through sequences of action, but through culturally grounded meanings that become visible through disruption. More specifically, the inciting incident activates conflict by destabilizing the two dimensions outlined above, i.e., personhood and relationships.

At the level of personhood, competing constructions of selfhood are brought into tension as Miguel openly declares his intention to become a musician, positioning himself against the family’s established rejection of music as a legitimate form of life. This is intensified when his aspiration is dismissed within the family gathering, culminating in a moment where his identity claim is rejected as incompatible with family continuity. At the level of relationships, the scene

unsettles family hierarchy, authority, and moral expectation through a collective family intervention in which multiple family members reinforce the prohibition of music, and Abuelita ultimately enforces this authority by physically removing and destroying the guitar. This produces a rupture in the shared social order that must be renegotiated for narrative development to proceed.

From this point onward, narrative progression unfolds through the reconfiguration of personhood within shifting family dynamics rather than through a linear sequence of events, while cultural meanings, particularly those related to memory, obligation, and moral order, operate as causal forces shaping both interaction and character trajectory.

In this sense, causality emerges through transformation in personhood and relationships, offering a culturally grounded account of narrative movement in the film. Rather than being driven by a linear chain of actions, the progression of *Coco* depends on shifts in how identity is understood and how relational obligations are negotiated within the family structure. Narrative development is sustained through ongoing processes of meaning renegotiation, where changes in cultural values reshape both character trajectories and interactional dynamics. The film's narrative logic is therefore revealed as fundamentally discursive and culturally embedded, with transformation arising from the reconfiguration of shared meanings rather than from action alone.

From Cultural Hubs to Family-Driven Causality

Building on the analysis of cultural hubs, this section expands the argument to a broader account of family-driven narrative causality. It shifts the focus from analytical categories of personhood and relationships to the overarching logic through which *Coco* constructs narrative progression as family-oriented.

In *Coco*, the narrative trajectory reflects a movement from individuated personhood toward a culturally constituted form of selfhood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), shaped and regulated by family values, memory, and inherited expectations, as seen in the family's collective intervention during Miguel's musical performance and the immediate enforcement of prohibition within the household space. Within this framework, conflict does not emerge as a simple opposition between characters, but as a misalignment between competing constructions of selfhood and the normative demands embedded in family structures, most visibly enacted when Miguel's pursuit of music is met with coordinated familial rejection and the removal of his instrument as a symbolic boundary marker. Accordingly, resolution is not achieved through the elimination of conflict or the resolution of external obstacles, but through a process of realignment. This involves, first, the reconfiguration of personhood in relation to family values, as Miguel's identity trajectory is gradually redirected through his encounters with family expectations, and second, the restoration of relational bonds and moral order within the family system, which becomes narratively necessary after the rupture produced in the inciting incident. Drawing on the combined insights of Bang and Carbaugh, narrative development can thus be understood as anchored in cultural premises that govern identity formation and social relationships. Rather than function as an action-driven sequence of events, the story is structured through shifts in meaning, where changes in identity and relational alignment generate narrative movement.

In this sense, *Coco* exemplifies a family-driven and culture-based model of narrative causality, in which storytelling progresses through the ongoing negotiation, adjustment, and stabilization

of personhood and relationships. The analysis thus demonstrates how narrative structure can be understood as emerging from discourse-mediated processes of cultural meaning-making.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study suggest that narrative causality in *Coco* is not primarily driven by action sequences, but is instead structured through culture-based meanings that emerge in moments of communicative tension. By reframing the inciting incident as an intercultural communicative event, the analysis demonstrates how narrative progression is initiated through disruptions in shared cultural understandings, particularly those relating to family, identity, and obligation. In this sense, the film's causal logic is shown to be discursive and relational, with meaning negotiation rather than event succession functioning as the primary mechanism of narrative development.

The study carries several theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical implications. First, in relation to narrative theory, it suggests that narrative causality can be reconceptualized as culture-based, where progression emerges through shifts in meanings, values, and social roles rather than sequences of action alone (Herman, 2009). Second, for intercultural communication research, the reframing of the inciting incident as an intercultural communicative event provides a useful analytical lens for examining how cultural tensions, misunderstandings, and value conflicts generate narrative movement. Third, the study extends Cultural Discourse Analysis by demonstrating the applicability of Carbaugh's hubs of cultural meaning, i.e., "personhood" and "relationships," to media narratives, showing how discourse structures both identity formation and storytelling. In addition, it challenges conventional approaches to character and conflict by shifting the focus from psychological or purely structural interpretations toward dynamic processes of culture-based identity negotiation. Furthermore, the findings highlight the role of family as a central narrative engine in culturally resonant storytelling, illustrating how films such as *Coco* organize progression through family-based moral frameworks that travel across cultural contexts. Finally, there are important pedagogical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and media literacy education, as film narratives can be used to foster intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) by exposing learners to culturally embedded meaning-making processes and encouraging reflection on how identities and values are constructed through discourse (Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2011).

Overall, this study underscores the value of integrating Cultural Discourse Analysis with screenplay analysis for rethinking narrative meaning production. It demonstrates that what appears as structural storytelling is deeply embedded in cultural processes of meaning-making, where narrative movement is sustained through the continuous negotiation of personhood and relationships.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the inciting incident in *Coco* functions as a structuring principle of meaning, organizing how conflict is generated, sustained, and developed throughout the narrative. Rather than follow a linear model of goal pursuit, narrative development is shown to rely on the progressive reorientation of the protagonist's objective, as shifts in cultural meanings and values reshape the direction of the story. Within this process, the character trajectory is constructed through a movement from assertion to recognition, culminating in alignment with a broader cultural and moral framework.

At the interactional level, the analysis reveals that narrative conflict is not grounded in simple opposition between characters, but in competing interpretations of legitimacy, authority, and obligation. Story resolution, therefore, is achieved not through the elimination of obstacles, but through the re-establishment of a coherent moral order that stabilizes relationships and meaning systems within the family context. In this sense, the study establishes a systematic link between micro-level discourse and macro-level narrative structure, showing how processes of meaning-making underpin storytelling and drive narrative progression.

Narrative progression, then, is not driven by what characters do, but by how meanings of self and family are disrupted and redefined. The story advances through shifts in how identity, obligation, and belonging are understood within interaction, rather than through a sequence of external actions. In *Coco*, narrative movement is produced when shared cultural meanings are unsettled and gradually realigned, allowing tensions between personal aspiration and family expectations to be renegotiated. This demonstrates that cultural discourse is not merely the backdrop of storytelling but a constitutive force that shapes narrative causality itself, with closure emerging through the restoration of coherence between personhood, relationships, and cultural values.

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