

*Pinter's Absurd Drama: when language is tweaked to mean*

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**Résumé:**

Literary critics classify Harold Pinter's drama under the heading of the absurd just because it deals with a drama where characters experience a dull meaningless life in which nothing happens. No action seems to take place. Boredom and futility top man's life. However, I take the view that the absurdity of Pinter's drama is of another type. It is a linguistic absurdity, where language- this essential characteristic of our being- is distorted, tweaked to make the text mean. The aim of this paper is to argue for the absurdity of Pinter's drama at the level of language by drawing on pragmatic theories namely, Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory (1962, 1969), Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986). Key pragmatic features that characterise interactions in Pinter's drama are not only highlighted but also discussed and described.

**1. Introduction**

The starting point of this article is a discrepancy in opinion between Pinter's critics and myself. Whereas the critics are unanimous in their opinion that the essence of Pinter's plays is an absurdity in terms of action, I argue contrary to these critics and take the view that absurdity lies not, essentially in action but in the way language is used to mean. For another view that I adopt in this paper, contrary to most of what has been said, Pinter's plays are not meaningless. His characters' conversational exchanges are meaningful. Their meaningfulness lies in the way language is deviated from its normal use, with words seeming to have lost their denotative meaning and referential function. The challenge for the reader is to account for how this meaningfulness is achieved. There is

no distrust of language as a means of communication. There is indeed, no language that fails to vehicle man's thought or social functions. In such a case, this would cease to be dubbed language. Exchanges, in Pinter's plays, are meaningful in the sense that they are not meant to communicate nor commune, but to discuss social positions. All, in Pinter's plays, is about the individual and his social status within the group he lives in. Negotiating social status is not to occur without damages, so to speak. Indeed, most of the talks are conflictual leading but to violence. What we need, as I have just said, is to see how this meaningfulness is achieved. In other words, what is needed is to account for how the breaking of normal communicative rules, done on purpose and meant to create an effect, can produce a coherent discourse. Pinter's characters', strange this might seem though, construe reality and enact on their experience by tweaking language. Pinter's plays are absurd not because the human condition they depict is futile and bare, but because the language through which this depiction is portrayed is unconventional, distorted and unusual. Pinter's characters convey meaning even through their numerous pauses and silence. Indeed, 'silence', as Pinter once said, 'speaks'. It is, in his plays, a meaning potential resource that is exploited to the utmost.

... uttering and speechlessness initiate extensive inferencing, they echo other utterances and non-utterances, and they interfere at all times.

(Gligor, 2011)

The failure in communication that critics talk about is but an expertise in communication, at least from the part of the playwright. One particular person rejects this idea of failure of communication, and it is no less than Pinter himself:

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: “failure of communication” ... and this has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is left unsaid and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard to keep ourselves to ourselves ... So often below the words spoken, there is the thing known and unspoken,

(Pinter, 2008)

When critics claim that Pinter’s plays have no action, they, in fact, mean that there is an inadequate relationship between saying and doing. The reader/spectator is left in between: to believe the characters’ verbal linguistic behaviour or their non-verbal one as the two diverge. Indeed, I would suggest that all actions are embodied/embedded in language. If Pinter’s characters are motionless, their language is not. Their long monologues, full of repetitions, non-sequiturs, pauses and taboo expressions end up by getting up the spectators tired as they take at their expense, the actualisation of the characters’ speech while sitting comfortably on their armchairs. In so doing, Pinter found a means of defying, I believe, the cornerstone of pragmatic theories: Austin and Searle’s Speech Act Theory, where saying is doing. In Pinter’s world the mantra is ‘my characters speak, and the audience does the actions’. This is how Pinter gets his audience involved, and this is where the real action occurs. In what follows I will probe how Pinter’s drama discourse is organised at the paradigmatic level of strategy. By this, I mean the options of choices that the speaker/playwright has at his disposal to make language mean. This goes along a vertical continuum from the most direct, covert way of language use to the most indirect overt one. All depends on who is speaking to whom.

## 2. Pinter's Discursive Strategies

### 2.1 Speech Act Theory

One of the major assertions in Speech Act Theory, henceforth SAT, is that saying is doing. When an individual speaks, s/he does not simply utter words but also reacts on his environment and changes it. Any utterance thus has three pragmatic aspects: a reference, a force and effect. Our daily exchanges while carrying a propositional content, they do complete a function and intend to have some effects. However, when one tries to apply this particular theory on Pinter's dramatic discourse, he finds himself in 'a no way out', so to speak. Pinter's characters content seems to be de-voided of any force; any communicative value, let alone effect on the interlocutor. The lips move but the speech is unheard. The impression that we are left with is such that we think that all their speech, though addressed to another character, is mere monologue meant to fill in the frequent silences that add to the feeling of insecurity and boredom, which they experience in their life. No one listens to no one and the outcome is the resort to violence.

□ Beth:

I would like to stand by the sea. It is there.

Pause

I have many times. It's something I cared for. I've done it.

Pause

I'll stand on the beach. On the beach. Well... it was very fresh. But it was hot, in the dunes. But it was so fresh, on the beach, on the shore. I loved it very much.

Pause

Lots of people...

Pause

People move so easily. Me, Men move.

Pause.

(Pinter, *Landscape*, 1967)

## 2.2 Grice's Maxims

Grice thesis referred to as the cooperative principle deals with the way speakers use indirectness as a ploy in conversations. It, in fact, rests on a fundamental premise about interaction. This principle that speakers normally share assumes that we intend to accomplish purposeful and effective communication. Hence, as speakers, we all expect each other to be true, brief, relevant and clear. However, though such is the case, we do not always follow these maxims (how boring life would then be!). We sometimes flout them on purpose to create an implicature, i.e. something meant but left unsaid. The listener is left to do some inferencing work to unravel the more covert meaning that our utterance conveys.

Pinter's drama exploits this aspect of our daily speech to the utmost. His characters fail to cooperate with each other, most of their exchanges are characterized by challenging moves where questions are answered by other questions and most is communicated to the audience through inferencing:

Controller: Is that 274?

Driver: That's me.

Controller: Where are you?

Driver: What?

Controller: I'm talking to 274? Right?

Driver: Yes, That's me. I'm 274. Who are you?

Pause

Controller: Who am I? (Pinter, *Victoria Station*, 1982)

Violation of Grice maxim is clearly made apparent in the *Birthday Party*:

Goldberg: Where was your wife? □

Stanley: In—□

Goldberg: Answer. □

Stanley (turning, crouched): What wife?

Goldberg: What have you done with your wife?

McCann: He's killed his wife!

Stanley: What wife? □

Goldberg: Why did you never get married?

□ There is a clear lack of desire/willingness to cooperate. Stanley challenges any utterance addressed to him. There is in this extract an intentional deviation from the normal conversational practices that adds to the boredom that we feel as spectators. We, in fact, end up by reacting: 'Why does the character keep asking him about his wife if he knows that he's never been married?'

Another example:

Stan: They're coming today.

Meg: Who? □

Stanley: They're coming in a van. □

Meg: who? They'll carry a wheel barrow in a van.

Stan: They're looking for someone.

Meg: No they're not.

(Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, 1957)

The use of the personal pronoun '**they**' in such instances loses all its significance. It is neither endophoric nor exophoric. It has, as such, no indexical utility that the interlocutor refers to so that to bestow on it a pragmatic relevance. '**They**' remains unknown and meaningless

adding but another gloomy aspect to the already melancholic context of the play.

Another type of violation of cooperation is McCann constant denial to establish any friendly ties with Stanley:

Stanley: I've got a feeling we've met before.

McCann: No we haven't.

Stanley: Ever been anywhere near Maidenhead?

McCann: No.

Stanley: There's a Fuller's teashop. I used to have my tea there.

McCann: I don't know it.

Stanley: And a Boots Library. I seem to connect you with the High Street.

McCann: Yes?

Stanley: A charming town, don't you think?

McCann: I don't know it.

In normal conversations, strangers as is the case of Stanley and McCann cooperate to establish a relationship, to socialise even though they do not know each other and not reject any type of socialising. No matter how hard Stanley tries, McCann makes sure that this attempt is doomed to failure. This refusal of dwelling with each reflects the anti- social nature of the Pinter's characters and their fear of each other. This is well echoed in Sartre's *Huit Clos*: 'L'enfer, c'est les autres'<sup>1</sup>

### **2.3 Relevance**

Relevance theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) advances a cognitive model that is interested not in the formal logical meaning, but in the types of non-literal inferences and assumptions

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<sup>1</sup> Hell is the others. (my own Translation)

that interlocutors draw in communication. Communication for the neo-Griceans is successful not when hearers recognise the encoded semantic meaning of an utterance but when they infer the right intended one (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p. 23). Two components constitute Sperber and Wilson's communicative model (ostensive inferential communication): ostension and inferencing. The more contextual effects, schematic construct-I would suggest- we have, the more overt the ostensive stimulus is and hence the less processing is needed to decode it. In such a case the relevance is said to be strong as opposed to a weak relevance when the situation is the opposite. 'One of the most significant benefits of relevance is the way it handles the concept of relevance in communication' (Simpson, 1997, p.153). The long monologues that are so frequent in Pinter's drama require a lot of cognitive contextual effects that the characters, because of their unwillingness to socialise with each other, lack. This renders their linguistic acts difficult to process ending up with a covert stimulus and a weak relevance. Both the character and the spectator fail to make the right inferencing and end up in a sort of a conflictual situation in the already intense violent atmosphere.

### **3. Conclusion**

Language remains at the hands of Pinter, the craftsman a tool, an artefact that the latter uses so skilfully by tweaking and distorting, so to speak, its rules of use to add another dimension to his socio and psychological fragile characters' state. The hidden message of the playwright is not to be detected ... only... in the characters discursive behaviour ... the actual/ current words, but well beyond that. One has to focus on the inadequacy between 'saying' and 'doing', between what the character says and what s/he indeed does. It is this discrepancy that adds yet another negative load, I would say, to the contemptuous relationship that exists between the characters.

In so doing, Pinter highlights the fact that language, that means of communication and communion can also be a means of 'de-communion' and that the absurdity of our life, as to Pinter, is mirrored mostly in the use of language that though it reflects our thoughts, it needs a paralinguistic action /no action at all to make mean. The futile bear life that Pinter's characters endure is totally

reflected in the way the playwright tweaks language by distorting its pragmatic rules of use and splitting, unexpectedly, speech from action.

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