

Tacit Significance, Explicit Irrelevance: The Use of Language and Silence in *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter*

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Abstract

Readers who approach the Theater of the Absurd face complex interpretive problems. The style of Harold Pinter, the laureate British playwright, adds an additional difficulty due to his particular use of language. His plays *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* show how speech is overshadowed by silence, which provides a more direct access to the tortured psyche of characters.

Key Words: Theater of the Absurd, Harold Pinter, silence, dialog, plays, interpretation, *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter*.

Resumen

El Teatro del absurdo presenta complejos problemas de interpretación a los lectores que se aproximan este movimiento dramático. El estilo del reconocido dramaturgo inglés Harold Pinter, representado en las obras *El guardián* y *El Montaplato*, añade una dificultad adicional por su uso particular del lenguaje, donde la prominencia del discurso oral se ve opacada por el silencio. Es este último recurso dramático el que provee un acceso más directo a la torturada mente de los personajes.

Palabras claves: Teatro del absurdo, Harold Pinter, silencio, diálogo, obras, interpretación, *El Guardián*, *El Montaplato*.

Theater, as a dramatic genre, has always posited an ontological problem for readers: since plays are intended to be staged, and not merely read, the capacity of the reader to envision stage elements and their interaction with characters might affect the interpretive experience of a dramatic work. Under the light of the former assertion, the Theater of the Absurd strains those capacities until interpretation itself becomes an exercise of guessing for a reader who lacks previous exposure to this type of production. The Theater of the Absurd was a movement in drama that started during the 40's and continued until the 60's; it is recognized because plays share an existentialist world view and an apparent absence of meaning spawned from the rejection of the idea of a single truth. Thus, the resulting fragmented truths are embodied by characters, who generally cannot transcend their limited criterion and are consequently rendered unable to communicate effectively with one another. Failure to communicate is another significant characteristic of absurdist plays; therefore, attempts made by a character to reach

out linguistically to another one fail notoriously because rarely is it that characters speak their minds and, when they do, they are either ignored or their individual truths collide with those of the characters that listen, igniting violence. The Theater of the Absurd, hence, shapes an incomprehensible world where dramatic actions turn into centrifugal forces that push characters apart and alienate them physically, psychologically, and linguistically.

Harold Pinter is doubtless one of the most prominent representatives of the Theater of the Absurd. He received the Nobel Prize of Literature in 2005 and wrote well-known plays, like *The Birthday Party*, *The Lover*, *The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Dumb Waiter*. The last two plays will be discussed in this article because the language in both works illustrates how spoken discourse creates a build up of linguistic oppression that increases until characters cannot tolerate it and they release their frustrations as acts of violence. Silence, on the other hand, produces the opposite effect in Pinter's works because it is the only way in which characters can reduce aggression in a threatening world.

Although Pinter's dramatic works have frequently been labeled as unintelligible, the playwright once declared that his works “are about what the titles are about” (in Dukore 499). The above assertion presupposes that anyone who can understand the title is able to follow the dramatic action of the play. However, understanding a play that is not a representation of a reality, but that stands as the only perceivable reality (Dukore 500) might become a problem for a reader who is not acquainted with Pinter's particular style and who believes that, as in other types of drama, the play mimics an external world. One must, therefore, become familiar with a series of stylistic principles to be able to grasp meaning in both *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter*, for Pinter's style implies a constant disruption and a lack of accountability of characters. Another stumbling stone that readers encounter has to do with the paradoxical nature of characters who, despite remaining unchanged in the entire play, function based on a seemingly inaccessible mindset, which frustrates readers who approach them for the first time. Are they simple or complex characters? Traditional criticism classifies characters that evolve as

complex ones. However, not all critics share this clear-cut criterion. When addressing non-absurdist drama, Hodge argues that complex characters, contrary to common perception, do not change, but unfold:

Certainly before a rehearsal period has ended, an actor must be fully aware of the complete body of the character he is acting, just as a playwright must be aware of his whole play; but if he tries to play the full character at the beginning, or even in the middle of a playscript, he will find himself confused and lost. *A character takes shape and is revealed in the course of action.* Thus, characters do not change; they *unfold*. The stuff a character is made of has always been lying dormant, and only under the impact of conflict—of the forcing of both himself and others—will the buried qualities come to the surface and stand revealed. (44)

Thus, although Hodge does not endorse the notion of change of dramatic characters, “unfolding” is consistent with the perception of progress. Contrary to Hodge's assertion, the three characters in *The Caretaker* and the odd pair in *The Dumb Waiter* never unfold; they remain the same since the beginning because they are introduced to the play in a state of conflict; they somehow coexist to exasperate each other. Consequently, Pinter's characters are perpetually forcing themselves upon others and participating of a conflict that, although at times missed by the audience, remains a staple in the play. Moreover, their memory is seriously impaired, so the reader cannot trust their accounts of the past. Pinter's characters simply live the moment and this additional interpretive dead end also complicates their analysis because both plays provide little reliable information to access previous actions.

Language and unreliable narration in Pinter

A guiding principle to read *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* effectively is that language does not clarify, but obscures meaning. Basically, Pinter undermines the notion that language is transparent and, hence, one cannot simply rely on spoken words to access the intricate psyche of

characters and discover a justification for their actions. In both plays, language is at best confusing because the verbal skills of characters are deplorable, which renders their narrations as unreliable. The playwright creates the sense of a questionable narration by resorting to nonverbal and verbal techniques. Among the former, Pinter plays with lights; blackouts undermine the continuity of the plot because they interrupt the visual experience of the audience, who reacts with bewilderment every time lights go out. However, it is through verbal techniques that Pinter manages to seriously disrupt the continuum of the play and so he hacks at the roots of communication, which, in turn, brings the concept of human interaction to a collapse. Socially speaking, linguistic competence implies power. Even Shakespeare assigned different verse types to establish the social position of his characters. In *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter*, weak characters who feel threatened by highly effective rhetoric and who show a poor command of language protect themselves behind the shield of silence. This dramatic behavior mimics reality perfectly: they are not willing to reveal more information about themselves than one would be willing to when interacting with strangers, which produces discursive gaps. In addition, one must remember that plays regularly begin *in medias res* and this has the potential to be confusing. Non-absurdist works, however, are intelligible because the reader can hold onto contextualizing bits of information. These useful clues are known in play analysis as given circumstances, a term used by Stanislavski. Hodge defines given circumstances as a dramatic concept that “concerns all material in a playscript that delineates the environment—the special ‘world’ of the play—in which the action takes place. This material includes: (1) environmental facts; (2) previous action; and (3) polar attitudes” (24). Non-absurdist characters introduce given circumstances as they speak, which elucidates the context of the play. Such disclosure of information, despite being extremely convenient for the purpose of helping the reader follow the dramatic action, does not recreate the way in which language is used in reality. Because dialog introduces given circumstances, the use of discourse becomes artificial. For example, let us consider how Marullus describes the conflict between Julius Caesar and Pompey when the former returns to Rome in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*:

Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
What tributaries follow him to Rome,
To grace in captive bonds his chariot-wheels?
You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!
O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome,
Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft
Have you climb'd up to walls and battlements,
To towers and windows, yea, to chimney-tops,
Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
The livelong day, with patient expectation,
To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome:
And when you saw his chariot but appear,
Have you not made an universal shout,
That Tiber trembled underneath her banks,
To hear the replication of your sounds
Made in her concave shores?
And do you now put on your best attire?
And do you now cull out a holiday?
And do you now strew flowers in his way
That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood? Be gone!
Run to your houses, fall upon your knees,
Pray to the gods to intermit the plague
That needs must light on this ingratitude (1.1.33-55).

This particular use of language is inconsistent with reality because the events narrated are already known by both the speaker and the listeners. In reality, this kind of information regularly remains tacit;

why would anyone verbalize past events that are fresh in the minds of the participants of the conversation? In addition, no person would dare to badmouth Julius Caesar in front of a crowd that admires him. Consequently, this unnatural use of discourse merely satisfies the need of the audience to understand the context because one is given access to historic data that antecede the actions of the play. Pinter's use of language, on the other hand, mimics reality more accurately because characters never share facts that are not usually divulged in real-life conversations. In *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter*, they choose to share partial information, to remain silent, or they become inarticulate. Even though that problematic use of dialog makes the reader question the veracity of their discourse or to distrust their accounts of the past, Pinter's characters must resort to those tactics to safeguard their positions in the menacing world that human interaction represents for them.

A closer look to the verbal language in the two plays reveals the presence of non-sequiturs, malapropisms and tautologies, which disrupt narration and make it unreliable. The playwright combines those samples of linguistic incompetence with dramatic techniques like undercutting, disconnected monologues and reversals to further disassemble speech and undermine interaction. Non-sequiturs, illegitimate inferences derived from a premise, become notorious during moments in which characters engage into either a confessional or inquisitive mood and the interlocutor is supposed to listen more carefully. In *The Caretaker*, for example, Mick points out to Davies that the bed he slept on was his mother's. When Davies, attempting to justify himself, declares that "she wasn't in it last night," Mick wrongfully concludes that Davies was sexually involved with his mother (2.35) and the already tense atmosphere of the play reaches a dangerous peak. Nevertheless, the most memorable non-sequitur is found in the scene in which Mick infers that Davies is an interior decorator. Mick arrives to this irrational conclusion because, after sharing his expectations concerning the transformation of the place, the homeless man states that he can help in the process (3.63). *The Dumb Waiter* also displays these invalid inferences; when Gus asks Ben about how many times he had read the same newspaper, in a non-sequitur, the latter concludes that Gus is questioning his authority and reacts aggressively:

BEN grabs the paper, which he reads.

GUS (*rising, looking down at BEN*). How many times have you read that paper?

BEN slams the paper down and rises.

BEN (*angrily*). What do you mean?

GUS. I was just wondering how many times you'd—

BEN. What are you doing, criticising me?

GUS. No, I was just—

BEN. You'll get a swipe round your earhole if you don't watch your step.

(Dumb Waiter 102).

Non-sequiturs are generally connected to the dramatic technique of undercutting: the character that is listening interrupts the one that is speaking before he can finish his idea and, thus, meaning is lost, especially when the interrupting sentence includes material that is disconnected from the conversation. As the interchange becomes obscure, Pinter's characters constantly act based on speculation, which complicates their universe even more. The reader, hence, must be aware of this flawed cause-consequence relationship to avoid bewilderment when actions or reactions occur apparently without a justification.

Not only does discourse receive the blow of non-sequiturs, but it is also chopped by tautology, or unnecessary repetition. This constant restating contributes to further undermine language as a means of communication in *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Repetition has a legitimate function in speech and is normally used to stress ideas or to clarify meaning when circumstances might distort the reception of a given message, as when there is a marked acoustic interference, for example. Characters in *The Dumb Waiter*, however, employ repetition even when the message is perfectly clear, as in the instance in which Gus complains about the dirtiness of the sheets:

GUS. ...I told you things were going down the drain. I mean, we've always had clean sheets laid up till now. I've noticed it.

BEN. How do you know those sheets weren't clean?

GUS. What do you mean?

BEN. How do you know they weren't clean? (92).

Later, Gus asks the same question (“what do you mean?”) after Ben told him to pick up the envelope that was mysteriously slid under the door. Although there is nothing obscure in Ben's question or in his command, the less experienced hitman asks for a clarification. Both characters use the verb “to mean” twenty-two times in the play and, generally, the preceding utterance is repeated unnecessarily after a demand for an explanation.

In *The Caretaker*, Davies is the character that repeats his words and ideas the most. For instance, as he complains about the shoes that Aston gave him, the homeless man uses the word “foot” more times than necessary: “The only way to keep a pair of shoes on, if you haven't got no laces, is to tighten the foot, see? Walk about with a tight foot, see? Well, that's no good for the foot. Puts a bad strain on the foot” (3.65). In addition, Davies keeps retelling his need to go to Sidcup to fetch his papers despite the fact that he never does, a fact that makes both brothers turn against him. Aston's apparently generous act of bringing shoes constitutes an expulsion of the intruder: he wants Davies to go away and giving him shoes is an attempt to accelerate the process. Likewise, at the end of the play, Mick attacks Davies' integrity precisely because the tramp has constantly reiterated his need to go to Sidcup.

An additional vice of oral discourse that undermines communication in both plays is the inappropriate use of certain words, or malapropisms. For obvious reasons, a word out of context disrupts the delivery of a message. Pinter's characters do not seem to be concerned about such fact; as they talk, the listener has to juggle possible meanings to make sense out of the assertions. Davies, because of his position as a poorly-educated man, frequently misuses words; he mixes up verb tenses and even threatened Aston with the word “stink” instead of “kill”: “I'LL STINK YOU!” (*Caretaker* 3.69). *The Dumb Waiter*, on the other hand, presents a more elaborate use of a malapropism because it

becomes part of a dramatic reversal and triggers a physical conflict in the play. Gus and Ben were arguing about whether or not it is correct to say “light the kettle” or “put on the kettle”. While Gus defends the latter expression, Ben champions the former, and their argument ends up violently when Gus states that the appropriate way to say it is “light the gas”:

BEN (*vehemently*): Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?

GUS. What does the gas—?

BEN (*grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length*)
THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!

Gus takes the hands from his throat.

GUS. All right, all right (98).

Preceding the fight, Gus claimed that he had never heard the expression “light the kettle” in his life even when he himself used it twenty lines before: “GUS. I can light the kettle now” (97). Similarly, Ben, who vehemently assured that he had never heard a person say “put on the kettle”, uses his opponent's expression after having choked him in anger: “BEN (*wearily*). Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake (99). One can see that despite their poor use of language, characters have a desire to appear accountable to others and, more importantly, to themselves. However, their flawed use of language propitiates outbursts of violence in both plays because characters who listen take oral communication as a way of aggression. Characters do not want to listen because they are afraid to talk, as Stanciu observed:

Language is no more a means of interpersonal communication, but a weapon in the characters' struggle for dominance, pointing out their conflicting aims and fears:

“Pinter's characters do not wish to communicate: to do so would be to compromise their individuality, for communication is a fearful matter.”[3, 41] Communication is to be avoided, since information imparted to another character may be subsequently turned against its initial transmitter, that is why direct communication is to be evaded and the

past is to be deliberately constructed... repetitions, contradictory and rambling structures become a means of defending one's territory, of keeping the others at a distance and of avoiding any threatening or intrusive factor (67).

Reversals, like physical aggression, are well-known elements of slapstick comedy and they are not rare in Pinter's plays. In *The Caretaker*, the most notorious reversal involves Mick's assertion that Davis stinks the place out (3.35). The homeless man is logically offended. However, when Davies feels he is in the position of power, he calls Aston's project "a stinking shed"(3.68). Aston, for the first time, stops being cordial to him and makes exactly the same remark that his powerful brother had made to Davies: "You stink... You've been stinking the place out"(3.69). The old man burns with rage and threatens his former benefactor with a knife. Later, when Davies complains to Mick about Aston's insulting comment, Mick disapproves of his brother's behavior and claims: "You don't stink... If you stank I'd be the first one to tell you"(3.70).

In addition to switching actions and words from one character to another in reversals, Pinter also resorts to two additional dramatic techniques to establish the futility of language to draw characters together: undercutting and disconnected monologues. The first one plays a determinant role in questioning the validity of language to bond characters that feel isolated in an incomprehensible universe. For example, Aston, who could not sleep well the second night in a row because Davies was sleep-talking, tries to reach out to Davies and verbalize a complaint, but the old man cuts him short:

ASTON. I... I didn't have a very good night again.

DAVIES. I slept terrible.

Pause

ASTON. You were making...

DAVIES. Terrible. Had a bit of rain in the night, didn't it?

ASTON. Just a bit (*Caretaker* 2.52).

While the above interchange suggests Aston's hesitation to openly discuss the subject of Davies'

nocturnal jabbering, it also shows how the homeless man, being more talkative, imposes his power on his quiet benefactor who, despite having every right to complain, yields and drops the subject. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus, who is the least powerful character, takes advantage of Ben's brief emotional vulnerability to undercut his smalltalk:

BEN. I think you're right.

Pause.

(Slamming down the paper.) What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight! It's enough to—

(He breaks off in disgust and seizes the paper. GUS rises.)

GUS. What time is he getting in touch?

BEN reads.

What time is he getting in touch?

BEN. What's the matter with you? It could be anytime. Any time (88).

Gus, like Aston, fails to communicate with his interlocutor. The difference is, however, that he is not in the position of power, so he is linguistically repelled; Ben first ignores him because he finds his questions bothersome, but when Gus insists, his senior partner appropriates language to rebuff his attempts to establish contact.

Undercutting is, nevertheless, a mild manifestation of what damaged communication can be when compared to another dramatic resource that the playwright uses to destroy the functionality of language, disconnected monologues. As it is well-known in literary criticism, a monologue provides meaningful resources for charting the inner desires of characters. Although the dramatic terms “monologue” and “soliloquy” tend to be used indistinctly, some critics have pointed out a significant difference: in a monologue, a character speaks by himself while being surrounded by others (and thus expecting them to listen), whereas, in a soliloquy, the character speaks to himself regardless of the presence or the attention of others (Dukore 499, 500). In Pinter's plays, a character begins a

monologue that, in the end, becomes a soliloquy. Characters participate of a dialog until one of them eventually skids away from the conversation and ends up talking in isolation. Due to the way in which Pinter handles language, these monologues detach themselves from the rational flow of the conversation and, when there is a character listening, he becomes perplexed. In *The Caretaker*, this reaction is clearly perceivable when Mick inquires what Davies is doing in the room; the powerful brother, after repeating some short questions, engages into a comparison between the terrified old man and a random person that Mick claims to remember. The many details, arranged in a stream-of-consciousness pattern, disconcert Davies:

MICK. Jen...kins.

A drip sounds in the bucket. DAVIES looks up.

You remind me of my uncle's brother. He was always on the move, that man. Never without his passport. Had an eye for the girls. Very much your build. Bit of an athlete. Long-jump specialist. He had a habit for demonstrating different run-ups in the drawing room round about Christmas time. Had a penchant for nuts. That's what it was. Nothing else but a penchant. Couldn't eat enough of them. Peanuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, monkey nuts, wouldn't touch a piece of fruit cake. Had a marvelous stop-watch. Picked it up in Hong Kong. The day after they chucked him out of the Salvation Army. Used to go in number four for Beckenham Reseves. That was before he got his Gold Medal. Had a funny habit of carrying his fiddle on his back. Like a papoose. I think there was a bit of Red Indian in him. To be honest, I've never made out how he came to be my uncle's brother. I've often thought that maybe it was the other way round. I mean that my uncle was his brother and he was my uncle. But I never called him uncle. As a matter of fact I called him Sid. My mother called him Sid too. It was a funny business. Your spitting image he was. Married a Chinaman and went to Jamaica.

Pause.

I hope you slept well last night.

DAVIES. Listen! I don't know who you are! (2.31).

This desultory way of talking causes a threatening effect on characters who listen because they are deleted from the physical space. Their presence turns irrelevant, as Aston's remarkably long disconnected monologue shows (*Caretaker* 2.54-57). He starts talking and, as he progresses, he gains fluency until Davies, like all the objects in the room, disappears with an effect of light. Aston, the only visible figure in the room, becomes central and his long soliloquy closes the act precisely because nothing else matters.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, however, Ben does not feel as threatened by Gus' disconnected monologue as he feels bothered. Gus is powerless, so Ben simply ignores the words of his mate, something that he has been doing consistently in the course of the play. When Gus, frustrated by their lack of food and the tyrannical requests constantly coming down on the serving elevator, finally starts his most significant monologue (113, 114), he is only noticed after he walks to his senior partner. Ben, in turn, wearily says to him: "Be quiet a minute. Let me give you your instructions" (114). Gus is asked not to talk so that he can receive information that he already knows by heart. When he complains about it, Ben ignores him once again and proceeds, which proves that Gus' deepest concerns are valueless and he gained nothing by verbalizing them. Spoken language is oppressive and ultimately nullifies him.

Characters in both *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker* are cast into a world where language helps little to create bonds because their internal drives keep them apart. These dramatic forces create an intolerable psychological pressure that surfaces in language disruptions. As it is well-known, stress affects expression. Harold Pinter himself thought that "the more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression" (in Smith 2). Current research on communication under stress ratifies Pinter's observation. For instance, Rafael Wainer, an anthropologist who recorded the use of discourse in units of palliative care centers, agrees with the idea of the limitations of language before the certainty of a life-threatening experience:

Los miedos, fantasías y terrores -a veces- intentan ser sacados a la luz, sopesados, tomados cuidadosamente entre los pliegues profundos del cuerpo. No siempre funciona esto. Las palabras y silencios de los paliativistas no son garantías ni para los pacientes ni para los paliativistas [..] Fuerzas opuestas centrífugas y centrípetas empujan hacia “dentro” y “fuera” nuevos sentidos/acciones en lo que convencionalmente llamamos “lengua”(423, 424).

Fears, fantasies and terrors –sometimes– are tried to be exposed to light, weighted, extracted carefully from deep body tissues. This not always works. The words and silences of palliative-care staff provide no guarantee neither for patients nor for the staff [..] Opposing centrifugal and centripetal forces push new senses/actions “into” and “out from” that which we conventionally call “language”(my translation).

These conditions produce the transitory speech impairment that characters in both plays show. In *The Caretaker*, while Aston speaks very little and in short sentences, Davies shows more choppiness when attempting to verbalize his ideas:

ASTON. Welsh, are you?

DAVIES. Eh?

ASTON. You Welsh?

Pause.

DAVIES. Well, I been around, you know... what I mean...I been about...

ASTON. Where were you born then?

DAVIES (*darkly*). What do you mean?

ASTON. Where were you born?

DAVIES. I was...uh...oh, it's a bit hard, like, to set your mind back...see what I mean...going back...a good way...lose a bit of track, like...you know (1.25).

The constant interruptions in the interaction with Aston show that the tramp is intimidated,

which is curious because Aston is befriending him since the beginning, whereas Mick has attacked Davis both verbally and physically. Davies' choppiness is justified because, despite Aston's kind gesture of taking him to the room, he was introduced to a foreign environment and, being a homeless person who has been "on the street" for a long time, he has legitimate reasons not to trust others. However, Davies' inarticulateness is also visible when he is in the position of power, as the lines when he is picky about the shoes show:

DAVIES. ... Don't know as these shoes'll be much good. It's a hard road, I been down there before. Coming the other way, like. Last time I left there, it was...last time ... getting on a while back ... the road was bad, the rain was coming down, lucky I didn't die there on the road, but I got here, I kept going, all along... yes... I kept going all along. But all the same, I can't go on like this, what I got to do, I got to get back there, find this man—(*Caretaker* 3.66).

In *The Dumb Waiter*, communication fails not because of inarticulateness, but because there cannot be dialog when one character feels compelled to talk and the other one does not want to listen. This one-way conversation manifests that Ben cannot stand talking to Gus, a conflict that has lingered in the atmosphere since the beginning of the play. Ben first suggests that Gus says nothing significant and that his words interrupt his activity, a never-ending reading of the same newspaper: "When are you going to stop jabbering?" (*Dumb Waiter* 91). Ben later commands Gus to "shut up" several times until his final explosion of anger, when the latter yells into the tube. Ben calls his partner a "maniac" and, in a warning that looks more like a threat, he reveals that he cannot tolerate the sound of Gus' voice any longer (118). Similarly, the problem that Aston has with his roommate in *The Caretaker* is that the old man makes "too much noise" (3.77), meaning that he is fed up with Davies' continuous talking, even in his sleep. Mick also attacks Davies' use of verbal language: "I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations" (3.73). This character pointed out Pinter's greatest achievement in the play: the playwright reduced oral communication to

absolute vagueness, its most useless expression. While monologues are detached from any rational flow of thought, dialog becomes inarticulate at best, plagued by pauses and unfinished sentences. Spoken words are, consequently, misleading. To summarize, verbal communication in both *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* is little more than gibberish and the reader cannot hold onto incoherent language for analyzing the true motivations of characters.

Pinter and silence

When language is not to be trusted because of the questionable information that it provides or because of the incomplete psychological portrait one can create with it, one must resort to other sources to explore the psyche of characters. In this sense, Pinter's particular use of dialog is overshadowed by the playwright's most powerful technique to convey significance and, at the same time, dethrone language as a means of communication: silence. As Stanciu argues, "Even when there is no exchange of words, characters are still active, looking for a method of escape from an interaction which threatens to become stifling, terrifying and self-effacing. Individuals are trapped in a hostile world of unverifiable, shifting information, of uncertainties that disrupt their protective temporal and spatial stillness. They react as territorial animals"(68). In the world of the two plays, therefore, silence becomes more significant than utterance to reveal the utmost social desolation that characters endure.

Ellipsis is the first type of silence that Pinter employs; this is a hybrid of spoken language and its absence. Differently from undercutting, characters themselves choose not to finish their sentences and, consequently, their thoughts are left open for interpretation. This resource is a mechanism of psychological self-defense: whereas the verbalized idea establishes an attempt to shake the world of the interlocutor, because the thought is unfinished, the possibility to trigger an outburst of violence is dramatically reduced. The interlocutor must rely on intuition to fill the gaps in the message, which seldom occurs because characters take the opportunity to drift away from the subject being discussed. In *The Caretaker*, for instance, one can notice that Davies, despite being blabber mouthed, resorts to

ellipsis in situations in which he feels threatened, as in the scene in which Aston offers him the care taking job:

DAVIES. ...I mean, what sort of jobs...

Pause

ASTON. Well, there's things like the stairs...and the... the bells...

DAVIES. But it'd be a matter...wouldn't it...it'd be a matter of a broom...isn't it?

ASTON. Yes, and of course, you'd need a few brushes.

DAVIES. You'd need implements... you see... you'd need a good few implements...

ASTON takes a white overall from a nail over his bed, and shows it to DAVIES.

ASTON. You could wear this, if you liked.

DAVIES. Well...that's nice, en't? (*Caretaker* 2.43)

Davies, who feels intimidated by the proposal and actually wants to find excuses to turn it down, cannot escape from the subject because Aston's intuitively understands the concerns of his picky new roommate. Also, the old man was on the verge of calling Aston crazy in front of his brother several times (2.48,49, 3.61), but uses ellipsis not to jeopardize his recently acquired position of comfort with Mick. On the other hand, Mick, the most articulate character in *The Caretaker*, seldom uses ellipsis, which is consistent with the premise that linguistic command implies power in the play. In his position, he can afford to express his ideas without repressing himself. However, there is an instance in the play in which his use of ellipsis transcends the border of ruminative thought: when Davies explicitly calls Aston crazy. In that moment, the reader can perceive that Mick's power flickers for a split second. The alien has made an act of transgression; he has uttered a personal opinion that Mick regards as a threat for the stability of his world. In that moment, the powerful brother uses ellipsis:

MICK. Nutty? Who's nutty?

Pause.

Did you call my brother nutty? My brother. That's a bit of... that's a bit of an

impertinent thing to say, isn't it?

DAVIES. But he says so himself!(3.73).

Mick, however, recovers from his brief emotional breakdown and finishes his sentence and, in so doing, he reclaims his power. Davies is then forced to find a justification for his offense and places the responsibility of his utterance in Aston, which further deteriorates his poorly-gained position of power. Pinter's *The Caretaker* finishes with Davies' pledge and his last use of ellipsis: "Listen...if I...got down...if I was to...get my papers...would you...would you let...would you...if I got down...and got my..."(3.78). The patent inarticulateness of the character manifests that he is at the limit of his psychological resistance and that he understands that absolutely nothing that he says will cause a change that will benefit him. Davies, now stripped of all power, knows that his words are unwanted and his silence is received better than his utterances.

Along with ellipsis, another type of silence that the reader encounters constantly is pause. Differently from ellipsis, pauses create a larger vacuum by making a complete interchange inaudible and letting characters reformulate their interaction, as Rosca states: "...pauses, rather than just interrupting the flow of communication, strongly suggest the power of this latent non-presence: the character is looking for a method of escape, is trying to find a fresh approach to the interaction and this leads to his temporary impossibility of speaking" (96). In *The Caretaker*, for instance, characters regularly pause when interacting with others, but their pausing is minimized within monologues. In fact, in Aston's second monologue, there is no pause as he talks about his experience in the psychiatric hospital. However, in his first monologue, when he reveals his desire to build a shed, he changes the subject after a pause:

...I can work with my hands, you see. That's one thing I can do. I never knew I could.
But I can do all sorts of things now, with my hands. You know, manual things. When I
get that shed up out there...I'll have a workshop, you see. I...could do a bit of woodwork.
Simple woodwork, to start. Working with ... good wood.

Pause.

Of course, there's a lot to be done to this place. What I think, though, I think I'll put in a partition...(2.40).

Aston's switching of topic is consistent with the the idea that he feels uncomfortable giving so much personal information, so he tries to channel the conversation to a different subject.

Although Ben, in *The Dumb Waiter*, uses pauses for the same purpose that characters in *The Caretaker* do, one can notice an important difference between the usage of pauses in both plays. Gus, differently from his mate and the three characters in *The Caretaker*, does not pause as an evasion mechanism, but as a way to approach the subject that he actually wants to discuss:

BEN. Scrub round it, will you?

Pause.

GUS. There are a number of things I want to ask him. But I can never get round to it, when I see him.

Pause.

I've been thinking about the last one.

BEN. What last one?

GUS. That girl (102).

Gus cannot approach topics directly because he knows that the senior hitman becomes upset when he talks. He then pauses to probe at Ben for information: the vacillating hitman introduces a peripheral topic and pauses, which gives him time to assess his interlocutor's reaction and to later verbalize his real concern in utterances that resemble concentric rings. Because of his lack of power, Gus approximates his idea like a timid spider that caught a stronger prey; he expects and fears failure.

Pauses, however, merely constitute the threshold to Pinter's utmost silence, the most perplexing resource that the playwright appropriates to stage the convulsive psyche of his characters, as Stanciu notes: "Faced with threats, characters refuse to communicate or to leave the security of their territory,

resisting any attempt to be drawn back into the social, oppressive world. In this context, the fear of intrusion, of domination and the desire for territorial security and autonomy become almost grotesque, because we do not know exactly the source of their terror and the nature of their terrified attitude” (68). Absolute silence, paradoxically, constitutes the most eloquent expression in the play precisely because it not only reformulates conversation, but also triggers actions. In other words, silence breaks through the carefully assumed defensive stances of characters, which forces them to look for a more balanced position in their confinement. While they do so, the reader can crack the façade that they created through language to uncover their motivations. For example, in *The Caretaker*, Davies wants to reposition himself as a respectable person, so he uses language to reject the shoes and to demand Aston to close the window. However, after silences, one can see a glimpse of his true nature; he is a self-conceited opportunist, as Stanciu observes:

From the very beginning Davies is caught in a subservient position in relation to the two brothers. He is the tramp invited in by Aston and subsequently offered the position of caretaker by Mick, the entitled owner of the house and Aston’s protecting brother. In manifesting his excessive pride, his petulance and fastidious demands, Davies frequently attempts to gain rank over the two brothers and to reposition himself [...] Davies’ inflexibility reflects his own insecurities and anxieties, furthermore emphasizing his incapacity to admit his errors and to adapt himself to the others. He critically greets and rejects almost all the things Aston offers him: the draughty bed, the pair of shoes and the shirt which leads to Davies’s larger rejection in the end (69, 70).

In *The Dumb Waiter*, silence creates such a powerful disruption that, when characters speak again, language has become absolutely superfluous. Characters then talk mechanically and without meaning:

Silence.

The hatch falls back into place.

They turn quickly, their eyes meet. BEN turns back to his paper.

Silence.

BEN throws his paper down.

BEN. Kaw!

He picks up the paper and looks at it.

Listen to this!

Pause.

What about that, eh?

Pause.

Kaw!

Pause.

Have you heard such a thing?

GUS (*dully*). Go on!

BEN. It's true (119).

Language has finally reached its maximum degeneration and, in so doing, communication has lost its purpose; language is unnecessary; it has become an interruption of experience, as if it were simply noise. Smith explains this phenomenon as follows:

There are some silences within our culture which defy even description, and some spaces of which we do not – or cannot – speak. The fact that we cannot name these moments of experience, these silences, does not mean that they do not exist (for our lived experience tells us otherwise). It means that there are areas of human experience where the Symbolic falls short. It means that there are spaces outside of the text, where words fail, spaces which are beyond meaningful articulation (79).

Conclusion

Human interaction causes friction, as Foucault confirmed when he was asked who the subjects of the societal conflicts that he wrote about were: “It is just a hypothesis, but I would say: all against

all. There are no immediately given subjects, of which one would be the proletariat and the other the bourgeoisie. Who fights against whom? We fight all against all. And there is always something inside us that fights against some other thing inside us" (in Petrović 117). These tensions are perfectly exemplified by language in *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* because it becomes a double-edged sword; while characters engage in conversations, they do so reluctantly and what they do not say justifies their apparently erratic actions. Despite dialog is one of the key elements of play analysis, a reader must understand that the particular world of Pinter's works requires a greater ability to read the absence of spoken words. Both *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* privilege silence over utterance precisely because the plays deconstruct the significance of communication. When one analyzes the unsaid, one sees the psyche of tormented characters who interact in a threatening world and, to protect themselves, they masquerade their true selves with language, as Rosca points out:

Pinter's characters are reticent to reveal their identity, language being a way of disguising one's motives and aspirations, an instrument of dominance and evasion. Because characters avoid discussing about their real problems, the frustrations and sensations they are experiencing, when confronted with menacing and uncomfortable situations, they respond by masking their fears and by disguised aggression. Since characters are elusive, unwilling to bring into discussion the facts and situations that matter, they involve in continual cross-talk, they chat about trivial things, they joke, just to kill the time, hoping that their feelings will not rise to the surface, that they will not be exposed. They want to preserve their security and their invulnerability (95).

Spoken language is for characters a leak of sensible information instead of a means for social bonding; they are wary of interaction because verbal communication implies a manifestation of violence in their world. In the two plays, the most articulate characters use language as a weapon to fence off potential threats or to exert their dominance over the less articulate ones in an ongoing dynamics of power.

Pinter created characters who, paradoxically, live in constant fear of isolation, but who cannot

afford to create social bonds and thus expose themselves to further aggression. While silence provides psychological solace, language use, be it in a monologue or a dialog, establishes the conditions for the ignition of physical aggression precisely because verbal communication is an output of violence in *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter*. In the world of Pinter's plays, each character exists in isolation, as a Medieval feud under the constant fear of exterior attacks. Listeners take every utterance they hear as an undesirable intromission that will lead the self-contained world of each character to a calamitous collapse. As Aston puts it in *The Caretaker*, "I thought ...they understood what I said. I mean I used to talk to them. I talked too much. That was my mistake" (Pinter 2.54). Not only does silence become the policy of choice, but characters know that their safety lies in it. Therefore, when attempting to access the psyche of Pinter's alienated characters, one must become a reader of the unsaid, for its tacit significance prevails over the explicit irrelevance of language.

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