

# "A STUDY OF LANGUAGE IN HAROLD PINTER'S PLAY"

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## **ABSTRACT**

Pinter introduced new style of dramatic language, providing prominence to the element of authenticity. He liberated drama from many past shackles and opened new horizons to the twentieth century English Drama. "Pinterish" dialogue contains falsehood, half-truth, contradiction, innuendos, gibberishes and whispers with intended courses and phrases with a given insinuation. For Pinter, purity of language refers to the irrationality of everyday conversation plastered all over with scattered heterogeneous mixture a bad syntax, tautologies, pleonasms, repetitions and self contradictions. Observing Pinter's style Arthur Ganz remarks, "Pinter is neither a theatrical trickster nor an abstruse meta physician; he is an artist whose special style expresses his meaning, whose subject is significant of human experience". Henceforth Pinter's bold usage of disintegrated, defiled and incongruous language sets him apart from the conventional and monotonous literary artists.

The theme of dominance sub subservience is central to those Pinter plays where language is used as a game. The one who can talk fluently imposes his authority over the one who is reticent or less articulate. Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, Lamb in *The Hothouse* are psychologically overbome and dominated by persons with markedly superior language competence.



## **“A study of Language in Harold Pinter’s play”**

The invaders are always more facile in speech. They are introduced from outside with hints of menace. They overpower their victim more by the violent impact of their language than by any physical action as is seen in the case of Goldberg and Mc Cann. Questions which are mostly unanswerable are put to Stanley to unnerve him; his silence renders him an easy victim, robbing of his very identity. In *The Hothouse*, Lamb experiences a similar thing in the hands of Miss Cutts and Gibbs who go about it in a more sophisticated manner. Lamb is kept in a sound-proof chamber with his ears attached to earphones; he is in a perpetual state of perplexity and fear, hearing the off stage voices of Miss Cutts and Gibbs, and experiencing a threat of the dissolution of self.

Language, instead of being used as a medium of expression, becomes a means of distortion and confusion here. What are contained in the questions are not really genuine points of enquiry. Rather the quick-fire succession of questions and command is meant to bewilder and overwhelm the listener. Though the words are simple in fact, largely because they are simple—they affect the victim in a sense of mysterious dread and incertitude. Pinter’s selection of simple words and situations to frame these subversive questions shows his psychological insight and dramatic sense.

The *Dumb Waiter* follows the pattern of suggestive violence until the climactic moment. It begins with Ben reading out certain news-items relating to some physical violence suffered by Gus. He is very sensitive to violence and “the material which is read out adds to the flavor of irrational violence which permeates the play”. Ben and Gus are two hired killers waiting to carry out the orders of the ‘nebulous agency’ communicated to them by a dumbwaiter.

The Birthday Party presents different patterns of language stylized for a world of violence. Like the blind negro in *The Room* and the mysterious chief in *The Dumb Waiter*, Goldberg and McCann are agents of violence, emerging to Rob Stanley wordless and thus defenceless.

The interesting interlocking of words and gestures, and the controlling design in *The Birthday Party* anticipate Peter Handke who engaged in extensive word-plays. In his "Sprechstucke" (word-plays), the speaker does not represent any specific character by his use of language.

In some of his plays Pinter uses such verbal patterns that identity is burbled round and concealed by language. *A Night Out* owes its success to its realistic dialogue. The character's talk on football and coffee-stall is entirely realistic in character. The prostitute speaks with her expected sophistry, but in her feigned referenced to the little daughter the intention to impress the young (mother dominated) Albert is clear. Albert, in turn, hides his feeling of inferiority in the presence of the female sex by adopting an assumed vanity. The simulation has been created with the utmost economy. Pinter accepts; 'A play I wrote called *A Night Out* did, I think, successfully integrate the picture and the words....'

In *The Caretaker* Pinter offers a vast range of language-use in the art of deception. Davies tries to project himself as a confidant to each of his brothers though he likes neither. Mick is also good at deception. Aston does not have the virtuosity to prepare a mask of words, his mental derangement earlier, and the consequent shock-therapy has robbed him of that agility. It is interesting to notice that he uses language for honest self-revelation when he talks about the

shock-treatment. For instance, when Davies is offered the job of a caretaker, he finds it hard to express himself clearly.

Pinter admits that people are not always ready or willing to reveal their mental state or to allow others easily to peer into it. His ambiguous language pattern also shows that people are not always capable or willing for the accurate revelation of their thought processes. Henceforth, hesitation and lack of appropriate words is just an attempt to express deep and intense human problems.

To keep the illusion viable, the characters use different techniques of linguistic pretension and deception. The language here not only indicates Davies's efforts at putting Aston off, but also pictures him as suffering from a mental block, unable to come to grip with him on identity. He has neither ready answer nor a persuasive air. But the way he introduces long stretches of hesitation inside an unending sentence, the listener would naturally feel too disgusted to pursue his curiosity and the conversation would go beyond the level of rational communication.

In *The Caretaker* each of the three characters is distinctively a model in the art of lying. All are incorrigible liars. Mick is a clever, consummate liar. Aston is an inveterate liar, pretending and lying as a matter of habit, but his lies are not sharp enough to effectively distort truth. Davies similarly, is a chronic liar, but he appears to be more psychopathic than artful in his distortion of truth. He often blurs truth and falsehood, and sometimes in his linguistic helplessness appears to be senile, involving an inability to distinguish fact from fancy. Language in Pinter's plays thus serves as a medium of characterization not only at the superficial, social level, but also at deeper levels of psychology.

In *Night School*, Annie and Milly pretend motherly love towards Walter. They also compare with each other to win his favor. Both of them are adept at the language of deception. On the other hand, Walter who is a petty criminal is altogether deficient in this art. His language falters whenever he is serious, and he fails miserably when he attempts to project a false image of himself before others. Annie's competence in using regressive patterns of language suggests that she exerts a greater influence over Walter.

In *The Dwarfs*, Pete and Mark pass their time in inconsequential conversation. Len talks about himself while the other two characters remain engrossed with each other. In his illusion about the dwarfs, Len remains alone and remote. The glimpses of the objective perception are vague and the motives of subjective perception are left obscure but being juxtaposed through words in the play the two give the impression of a poetic where we do not emphasize the narrative logic.

The next four plays namely, *The Collection*, *The Lover*, *Tea Party* and *The Homecoming*, attract greater critical attention on the linguistic level, for a subterranean interaction of speech and emotion is more significantly evident here, the spoken word being mostly used as a cover or a hint.

*The Collection*, deals with the fear of inadequacy that inspires the characters to wear various linguistic masks. Stella tries to maintain her dominance over James by adopting a pattern of reversals relating to her affirmation of an affair with Bill. The unending and unresolved truth, the trickery surrounding this affair, builds a cumulative body of impressions connected with a feeling of boredom and distrust of people. All the characters are equally interested to gain some stimulus from the ambiguities of the story

to fight their boredom and frustration. They keep going round the unresolved ambiguity of the affair by offering affirmations and negations of the facts from their individual points of view. Since the real motives are concealed we do not know whether they are reacting to each other in disgust or they are trying to overcome disgust. Rather we find the integration of both kinds of approach in the language thereby discovering a pattern of heightening the dramatic effect of the play.

The Lover enacts play within a play with the language of pretence. The husband and the wife mutually pretend to be lovers and derive an excitement to fight the monotony of life by adopting a sexual rite, and the language they speak is a part of this contrived love-game.

Pinter has purposefully carried the sense of non-communication in his plays. His themes reveal the difficulty of communication between human beings. Repetition and multiplication create an effective linguistic vacuum, which manifests the plight of modern and civilized man. Pinter purposefully selects such an absurd language pattern which replaces any kind of plot. His language pattern converts into a verbal rhythm that becomes dramatic action itself in a play. The deliberate use of disconnected words gradually attains power through their implied, connotation meaning to become dramatic action so as to mould the audience perception and response.

There are layers of meaning in *The Homecoming* which are organized not merely with realistic day-to-day speech of the characters, but through the violation of naturalism at critical moments where words suddenly flatten out into the absurd. The verbal interaction is stylized and poignantly controlled.

In blending entirely opposite viewpoints together, Pinter uses language to evoke a complex body of implied suggestions. In *The Homecoming* the man behind the web of language is unknowable. As the plot is not designed to appeal to common logic and the mendacity of the characters invites innumerable interpretations.

In the plays like *The Basement*, *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Night*, *Old Times*, *Monologue*, *No Man's Land* and *Betrayal*, there is no doubt, some amount of violence and pretence in these plays, but we notice them in a quintessential form set against a vast silence. Time goes backward and forward, and the linear sequence is disturbed. People talk past each other without any attempt at interpersonal communication. Characters are stuck and still, and movement is reduced to the minimum in *Silence* and *Landscape*. Most of the stage-time is spent only in talking about the past. As there is no true listener, communication does not take place. sometime the character seems to be talking to himself or recollecting aloud his own memories in the presence of other speakers around.

In *Night* the characters are not given any names. The play presents a conversation between a man and a woman in their forties talking wishfully about their sex life in the past. In producing different versions of the past they resemble the couple in *Landscape*. The language is evocative and there is a rhythmic pattern of affirmation and negation regarding the episode that might have, or really has, happened in the past. The play also hints at the ambiguous connotative implications with an undertone of sexual territorial struggle.



In *Silence*, Rumsey, Bates and Ellen reminisce on past events. But there is no consistency underlying the change of subjects and there is no participation.

The play is suggestive of the trait of silence that nothing can be spoken by anyone until the dramatic tension dissipates or mounts up in such a way that something quite new happens. As the listener is just a physical presence or an illusion of it, the speaker by talking to himself about his own self does not escape from the world of his thoughts. Nobody disturbs him in his silent reminiscence. We rather get a verbal reproduction of silences which are 'still points of storm' in a man's life.

The language in Pinterian plays has often been reduced to meaningless utterance at the extreme point of its use. It becomes a sort of game when its other functional properties are exhausted. If the game can console or offer pleasure, the characters would play it to hide and forget their sufferings. In some cases they are totally unaware of the nature of the self, and clash violently with each other because of the ignorance. The existential fear of non-existence is available in different proportions in each of his plays. The characters who are aware of it drift nearer to silence. Those who are struck by awe and fear because of their intellectual and intuitive incapacity are forced closer to violence. The language of pretence is used by people who are at a mid-point between these two phases, and therefore more human and instinctual in their behavior.

He realized that a change from the state phraseology and techniques of traditional theatre had become inevitable. Writing dramatic verse of an appreciable intensity while incorporating realistic details of modern life, was difficult. To the English theatre-

goer verse drama had by that time became a body of "fragments from a classical education, all declined into mannerism". Pinter recognized the poetic quality of ordinary words when used in emotive situations. He chose to shape common urban language in a poetic way. This ordinary language was hospitable to the realities of life; but the way he handled it, it could also function in a poetic way to project the modern sense of being. He worked hard to invest ordinary, colloquial dialogue with a new kind of intensity, and punctuated speech with silence, pauses and other non-verbal actions to heighten the sense of drama.

Words in his plays change their meanings in different situations, as they do in poetry, operating at different levels of eloquence in different characters. Pinter has a kind of mixed feeling about language. He takes delight in the poetic potential of words. He seems to experience both a sense of joy and feeling of nausea in his contact with words. The meaning of a Pinter-play is often located in this tension between delight and revulsion with reference to the words which bring forth dramatic emotion.

Language has always been an effective medium of expressing one's thought. Similarly a literary artist converses with his readers through powerful arrangement of words. Language can create stage illusions or realistic delineations. In all the decades and centuries language is received by every artist with great vigilance and in accordance with the then concerning age, social, political, economical and religious phenomenon.

The language in Pinter seems to be a convincing proof that he belongs essentially to the English tradition, though he has assimilated and used the 'absurd' techniques for his own purposes. Unlike the constantly deviant movement of gestures and speech

through which the absurd is stylized, Pinter's theatre is full of life-like movement and realistic dialogue.

Pinter was deeply influenced by Beckett and Kafka. He admits: "I admire Beckett's work so much that something of its texture might appear in my own". Observing the Beckettian style of using cross-talk, music-hall comedy, and mime and circus techniques in Pinter's plays one is tempted to call him an absurdist. While Martin Esslin includes him in the Theatre of the Absurd, Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson believed that this categorization is 'monumentally ill-directed'. For them Esslin may be the most perceptive of Pinter's critics but he is also the playwright's worst enemy. We know that Pinter does not like labels or placards, and that no cap has been found to fit him properly. But whether Pinter is writing to present the absurd as an English representative or he is dramatizing English life by the rules of the absurd theatre is certainly a pertinent question. This is both difficult and important to answer. There are critics favoring either of these positions. A study of the language of his plays assists to gain a proper perspective in this context.

Pinter's language as depicted in his plays focuses on the difficulties of communication. Language emerges as an important technique for the articulation of one's constant failure of understanding each other, one's frustrations, irritations and suppressed anger. Conflict between contrasted wills, between different points of views, between opposite temperaments is registered and manifested through various language patterns. Pinter with his acute sense realized and provided plasticity to the fumbings and syntactical confusions in an amazingly theatrical manner.

Besides evoking serious and grave implications, Pinter also hints upon a unique method of arousing light and comic element. His language adopts the eliciting comic overtones from discontinuity, muddling, confused states of mind causing the words to be blurted out. He leaves no chance left in his confusing language pattern to misunderstand each other by not providing other with likely answers. He does not intend to draw audience attention towards individual characters or to any logic, rather the playwright expects us to concentrate on how, in what way, words are being exchanged. Since Pinter is not a comic playwright or humorist therefore his plays do not aim at arousing laughter. Rather, his large galaxy of plays is the true mirror of the modern ailments, tortures, disillusionment from the illusion of fulfillment as received from the modern materialism and advancements.

Language in Pinterian plays provide the audience an access to an ultimate reality. His dramatic language is not restricted to mere words, rather it includes every means of controllable expression at the disposal of the theatre as an art form. Drama is one of the various literary forms which communicate visually as well as verbally. In order to receive better comprehension of the play, it is equally evident to hear along with visualizing on the stage. The diversified lingual ingredients of Pinterian drama reveal various dimensions of meaning and move unfailingly to the perception of the readers.

The twentieth century had become dark-shadowed since its early years by two cataclysmic world wars, people perceived ever increasing concern of literary artists for seeking a meaning in their fractionized, distorted, fragile and uncertain world without any definite dimension. In Pinterian drama, "that search leads to a struggle for security through the control of territory and of people".

In his plays Pinter targets at depicting ambiguities and meaninglessness through the meaningful choice of words. In majority of his plays words have become the focal point, affirming that language has a tremendous potentiality, yet unexplored. Pinter's characters inhabit separate linguistic universe of their own and there often occurs a territorial struggle over linguistic stratagems. The words are deliberately left loose by Pinter from their context and then allowed to collapse as their meaning disintegrates.

The dramatic dialogues of Pinter proceed deliberately through a scattered pattern of disturbing, menacing questions—without—answers, repetitions, gaps, long silences, pleonasm and diversification of words. The Macmillan Encyclopedia deliberates: "Pinter uses elliptical dialogue to evoke tension and ambiguity".

Pinter is credited with the potential to depict the turbulent and chaotic human condition. Through his unusual usage of language, he has changed or rather uplifted the scenario of World Drama. Pinter with his artistic caliber fused realism with the absurd and his unique economy provided powerful dramatic language loaded with multiple dramatic meanings. He skillfully blends the word and situation perfectly into one another leaving the meaning to delve deep down in the subconscious of the audience. Therefore, language in Pinter gives the audience an access to an ultimate reality.

## **Conclusion**

Pinter's main aim is to explore and exploit the artistic potential of the non-literary language of sub-culture. The naturalistic language settles for him a surface on which twists of meanings can be pegged

and jerked in different direction. Language of common people operates at the level of facts. Through those levels as the surface one can measure Pinter's dive into the subtexts beneath it. With him an apparently simple, naturalistic language seems to be an effective medium of complex communication in Pinter. Many of his characters fail to communicate just as people do in real life. But each point of non-communication is not an instance of genuine failure; more often than not, it is an evasion of the responsibility of communication. There is a conscious pattern in which these points are integrated by Pinter. Language becomes a smoke-screen under which the vital meaning of the play is kept, tantalizingly concealed. The moments of non-communication in Pinter's plays build up the inner theme where we confront the mystery and menace of life.

In Pinter, on the other hand, the communication lies between, above or under the words uttered by the characters. A conventional play is prone to dispense with sub-text, a Pinter play is carefully built on sub-text. Sub-text refers to the situation that remains behind the conduct and behavior of the on-stage characters of a play. However, there is no explicit reference to it, and which may never be fully explained. Pinterian drama evolved around this kind of situation. The playwright requires his audience to work out the purpose and intention of the characters from oblique hints or nuances.

Failure of communication which is a common theme in modern plays has thus a special quality in Pinter. In absurd plays dialogue is designed to reveal the inadequacy of language; language is used to show its failure to express the absurd condition of man, and hence it is caricatured, and its normal order is violently disturbed. In Pinter, too, incommunicability of thought and feeling is powerfully projected, as in *Silence* and *Landscape*, but language

here becomes a coherently organized system to convey the condition of non-communication. If there is non-communication, it is not always because of the inadequacies of language. The unwillingness of man due to various psychological and cultural reasons to express himself is also an important factor. Thus non-communication is dramatized to effectively convey these deeper compulsions.

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