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The Scissors and the Power : A Look at Harold Pinter's the Homecoming Through Pragmatic Lenses

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THE SCISSORS AND THE POWER

*A Look at Harold Pinter's The Homecoming Through Pragmatic Lenses*¹

Harold Pinter's plays constitute an amalgam of realism (noticeable especially in dialogues) and absurd (noticeable primarily on the situational level of the plays); the playwright is known as a representative of the "Theatre of the Absurd", yet still one of the characteristics of his oeuvre remains an excellent, realistic "ear for dialogue" (Short 1996:181). This mixture serves as a sub-textual framework for his plays and encourages the reader to "plumb into the depths of the subtext and expose the hidden secrets of motive, continuity, and intended meaning" (Carpenter 1982:488). This article is an attempt to look at the opening scene of Pinter's *The Homecoming* adopting a socio-pragmatic approach to the analysis of dramatic dialogue, and to describe the conflict between Lenny and Max, the two characters who appear in the scene, as a typically "Pinteresque" struggle for dominance and power.

The analysis draws on Austin's speech act theory and his concept of a performative, a verb that is "not used to *say* things i.e. describe the states of affairs, but rather actively *do* things" (Levinson 1984:228). By uttering it in specific circumstances, called felicity conditions, the speaker does not only comment on the extralinguistic reality, but actually influences it. According to Austin every speech act has its illocutionary, locutionary and perlocutionary force. The first being connected with the speaker's intention, the second with the actual utterance of a given speech act and the third with bringing out of the effects of what has been said (Austin 1970:251). It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an exhaustive overview of all the research into speech act theory in the context of literature, however, it ought to be emphasized that speech act theory has been frequently applied to the study of literature, and to the study of dramatic text. Understanding the phenomenon of speech acts is "dramatically important at the beginning of plays when new characters are introduced as it allows us immediately to grasp important social relations" (Short 1981: 184).

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The communication between the characters provides the audience with essential contextual information and constructs a framework for further action; a socio-pragmatic approach offers a fruitful theoretical background to investigate not only single utterances but whole dialogues of a given dramatic text. For the purpose of the analysis of the dialogues between the characters it also seems fruitful to see how Grice's Cooperative Principle and the Maxims of Conversation: The Maxims of Quantity (i.e. one should not say too much), Quality (i.e. one should tell only truth), Relevance (i.e. one should talk to the point) and Manner (i.e. while talking one should be orderly and clear) (Grice: 1989: 26–7) are flouted in the conversation to communicate a number of sub-textual messages and shape the relationship between the characters.

The notion of dialogue in the context of drama is a most complex issue because of the embedded structure of dramatic discourse. In a prototypical drama there are two layers of discourse: "The overarching level of discourse is that between the playwright and the audience. Characters' talk is embedded in the higher discourse, allowing the audience to 'listen in' to what the characters say" (Short 1996: 196). In theatrical communication on the Addresser 2 (a character of the play) - Addressee 2 (a character of the play) level dialogue performs its prototypical conversational function, but on the Addresser 1 (the author) - Addressee 1 (the ideal reader) level it serves as a means of e.g. characterization, as the audience read between the characters' lines to construct the characters' image and the image of the world they inhabit.

The text of a play belongs to a written code, yet as it enters the stage it undergoes a profound change. The words are blended with theatre space and connected with many other, non-verbal signs. A theater performance is an amalgam of different messages that are coded in a number of systems, this semiotic complexity makes the performance the most complex of all modes of artistic expression². The text of a play offers a certain potential to its director and actors. They interpret the text in what they do on the stage and imprint sense on the "raw" material that is given by the playwright. This article offers an interpretation of the play as one of a number of possible readings of the text produced by Pinter. The analysis is by no means final, for the actors who perform the characters of Lenny and Max may interpret the text in their own, fully legitimate way, by changing the intonation of their voices or the mimic of their faces and consequently, presenting a different reading of the first scene of *The Homecoming*.

Words and dialogues are only one of the numerous media of the performance, as Ezra Pound said "the medium of drama³ is not words, but persons moving about on stage using words" (Honigmann 1989: 60). The pragmatic

² cf. Limon 2003: 113–134.

³ *Drama* understood as the performance.

analysis cannot account for the immense complexity and multimedia abundance of a dramatic text performed on stage⁴, yet it may help to reconstruct in realistic psychological terms the speech act structure of a dramatic conversation and its implicature as written in the text of the play. It seems fruitful to treat the text of a drama as “a series of communicative acts, not just as a configurations of phonetic, syntactic and lexical patterns” (Short 1981: 183), to see the words uttered by characters on the stage as a live dialogue, which does not have to be treated as an artificial verbal construct. By adopting such an approach one may exercise a wide array of socio-pragmatic devices, to arrive at a literary interpretation.

According to Hammond, “Pinter’s dialogue preserves the surface of realism though this in itself is ultimately subversive because the conversation encourages a penumbra of accompanying expectations appropriate to realistic theatre that the plays often frustrate. In plays like *The Homecoming*, an uncannily accurate mimesis of ordinary conversation is formed to conceal and to belie the extreme structure of feeling that supports it” (Hammond 1979). The play is among most controversial and widely discussed works of the dramatist. It is concerned with the return of Teddy, a professor of philosophy at one of American universities, to a London house in which lives his father, Max and his brothers, Lenny and Joey. The members of family seem to function on the fringes of working-class society and stand in marked contrast with well-educated and respectable Teddy. In the course of the play Ruth, Teddy’s wife, decides not to return home with her husband, but to stay in London with Teddy’s family and work as a prostitute. This decision is the dramatic climax of the play in which the stable and gradual deconstruction of the ordinary reaches its climax. This tension of the play is constructed through a strategic use of dialogue in which verbal skirmishes push the action further, and detach it from the reality and the ordinary.

One of such skirmishes is to be found at the very opening of the play. *The Homecoming* starts with a question “What have you done with the scissors?”, a most significant one for Pinter’s construction of the world presented in the play and for establishing the relationship between the characters. The question is asked by elderly Max, who enters a room where Lenny is sitting in an armchair and reading a newspaper. Lenny does not answer his father although the latter keeps on enquiring him, until finally the son, obviously impatient with his father’s questions, attacks Max and mocks him. Pinter commented on the opening scene of the play in the following way:

Someone was obviously looking for a pair of scissors and was demanding their whereabouts of someone else he suspected had probably stolen them. But I somehow knew that the per-

⁴ For more elaborate analysis of drama as a multimedia sign see the diagram in Elam 1980: 39 or Limon 2003.

son addressed didn't give a damn about the scissors or about the questioner either, for that matter... I saw a man enter a stark room and ask his question of a younger man sitting on an ugly sofa reading a racing paper. I somehow suspected that A was a father and that B was his son, but I had no proof. This was however confirmed a short time later when B (later to become Lenny) says to A (later to become Max), 'Dad, do you mind if I change the subject? I want to ask you something. The dinner we had before, what was the name of it? What do you call it? Why don't you buy a dog? You're a dog cook. Honest. You think you're cooking for a lot of dogs.' So since B calls A 'Dad' it seemed to me reasonable to assume that they were father and son. A was also clearly the cook and his cooking did not seem to be held in high regard. Did this mean that there was no mother? I didn't know. But, as I told myself at the time, our beginnings never know our ends⁵.

Pinter's comment reveals a part of his workshop: the first lines of *The Homecoming* are real-life and "dialogic", in the respect that Pinter did not devise them word by word, but rather produced them as concrete chunks of a conversation. This observation makes the socio-pragmatic study of the play even more legitimate.

With the first sentence of the play Pinter characterizes Lenny and Max, simultaneously constructing the framework for further action. The sentence "What have you done with the scissors?" is, from the grammatical point of view, an interrogative, but it has the illocutionary force of an accusation. The implicature of the utterance is clear: by uttering this sentence Max presupposes that Lenny has taken his scissors and hidden them somewhere. By identifying this presupposition it is possible to interpret the question as an accusation. The question: "What have you done with the scissors?" is obviously an enquiry about the scissors' whereabouts, yet the means selected by Max i.e. an indirect accusation, renders it a direct attack on Lenny. Max's utterance does not contain any phrases or linguistic means which could be considered, in sociolinguistic terms, politeness strategies. The question is direct and short, it may be viewed as an invitation to strife, rather than an invitation to discussion.

It is possible to interpret the sentence as a kind of a challenge Max poses to himself, the old man wants to test his power in the household and confirm his, as he thinks, dominant position. The facts that he makes such an accusation may suggest that his position in the household is that of power, it seems logical to presuppose, on the basis of pragmatic presupposition, that Max is legitimate to command others (or, at least, that he thinks he is). This impression is verified a few moments later by the way his son reacts to his questions. It is interesting to take into account the way the characters are situated on the stage here. Max tries to exercise his power, yet, it is he who is standing while his son is sitting. On the one hand, this arrangement may be seen as Max's attempt to dominate Lenny, by virtue of being "higher" than he is, yet, on the other hand, it also reminds one of a casual superior-subordinate relationship, with Max

⁵ http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html

standing as a “subordinate”, and Lenny sitting as a “superior”. A similar technique is employed by Pinter in his sketch *Trouble in the Works* where the playwright turns upside down the employer-employee relationship by playing with the superior-subordinate arrangement of characters⁶. The struggle for superiority and dominance is particularly important in the light of the lines in which Max, in order to get his son’s attention, threatens him with violence.

In the second utterance Max makes his point clear: “I said I’m looking for the scissors”. His clarification is intended to make his son answer him. He repeats the question: “What have you done with them?”, but Lenny still does not bother to react to his father’s words and keeps on reading the newspaper. When Lenny does not want to answer his father, he is obviously violating the Cooperative Principle: he refuses to take part in conversational turn-taking, the necessary condition for every conversational exchange. However, his refusal to communicate becomes a message in itself: he expresses his disregard for Max and proves his superior position in the household. The old man, in turn, is caught in a vicious circle: paradoxically, the more power he would like to exercise over his son the more undermined his position becomes. The pauses between Max’s utterances, in which he anticipates Lenny’s response, gradually build the tension between the two characters, which may lead to an open conflict.

The young man’s reluctance to answer his father’s remarks does not necessarily have to be governed by the intention of avoiding this conflict. It is possible to interpret Lenny’s silence as a provocative encouragement for the old man to go further; Lenny seems to understand his father’s situation and to know that by not answering his enquiries and accusations he can turn them against him – his silence becomes a means of showing disrespect and manifesting superiority. In this way Pinter gradually constructs the image of a malicious manipulator, whom Lenny turns out to be in the course of the play.

In his third attempt to attract Lenny’s attention Max gives reasons why he needs the scissors: “Did you hear me? I want to cut something out of the paper”. By providing explanation for his demands he tries to legitimize his request and attract his son’s attention. Also, the fact that he says too much, breaking the Maxim of Quantity, might be viewed as a sign of weakness, of giving in to his son.

At this point, for the first time Lenny answers his father: “I am reading the newspaper”. His utterance has the illocutionary force of a denial, Lenny flouts the Maxim of Relevance (Lenny’s utterance does not contain the information about the scissors whereabouts) thus emphasizing that he is not concerned about his father and focuses only on himself. On the one hand he makes it clear that he does not want to be bothered as he is busy reading the newspaper, on the other hand he states clearly that the newspaper belongs to him and he has no

⁶ For an extensive pragmatic analysis of Pinter’s *Trouble in the Works* see (Short 1981: 194–199).

intention of giving it to his father. Lenny's answer might be viewed as a manifestation of strength: he does not respond to Max's initial question, but focuses on his independence and superiority to his father. The utterance is short and decisive, its straight, affirmative form contributes to its message and helps Lenny to control the situation.

In his next utterance Max uses the word "paper" three times: "Not that paper. I haven't even read that paper. I'm talking about last Sunday's paper. I was just having a look at it in the kitchen." His usage of the word "paper" is emphatic and it could be acted out as a mockery, provided the actor adopts a proper intonation. Max flouts the Maxim of Quantity: he provides more information that is needed, but here, unlike in the previous case he does not give in to Lenny. The old man has finally made his son answer him and, it is possible to interpret his utterance as an attempt to recover his alleged superior position.

His triumph, however, does not last long. Lenny keeps ignoring him; after a pause Max goes on: "Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you!" The exclamations are aimed at attracting Lenny's attention and make him answer the question that follows: "Where's the scissors?" The question is repeated for the third time, this time, however, it is not in the form of an accusation – it is a direct enquiry about the scissors' whereabouts. Yet, even now Max is disregarded by Lenny who answers "What don't you shut up, you daft prat?" - this line ought to be uttered, as the stage direction indicates, quietly. Lenny is not concerned about his father's question; his words are the ultimate denial to take part in the conversation: the utterance carries the illocutionary force of an insult, and it is recognized by Max as an abuse. The utterance is also a clear breaking of the Cooperative Principle and flouting of the Maxim of Manner. The fact that the answer is uttered calmly, rules out the possibility that Lenny may be governed by passion; the insult is another, calculated blow in the struggle for power, which Lenny makes use of in order to control the situation.

The conversation becomes more violent as Max answers the insult with a threat, he says "Don't you talk to me like that. I'm warning you" while, as the stage direction says, lifting his stick and pointing at Lenny. His attempt to manifest his power by a threat, "I am warning you", is rather feeble in contrast with Lenny's calculated insult and the superiority he has shown so far in the conversation. Max's utterance "I'm warning you" contains a performative verb (when we utter the word "warn" we perform the action of warning somebody), which is, in Austin's terminology, a misfire. Max does not fulfill one of the basic felicity conditions necessary to perform the act of warning, i.e. when warning one does have to have power to exercise his or her threat. When Max utters this sentence he is in a subordinate position and has no means to threaten his son, the stick he raises becomes therefore more a confirmation of his weakness than a serious means of exercising violence. The fact that Max resorts to *argu-*

mentum ad baculum, a threat, could be interpreted as a proof for his hopelessness. Lenny is well aware of that as he does not answer his father's utterance and keeps reading the racing magazine.

The conversation turns out to be nothing else but a struggle for dominance. Max uses the scissors as a pretext to begin a duel for power, which in the end he loses. His final utterance: "I'm getting old, my word of honour" which flouts the Maxims of Quantity and Relevance (no one expected such a comment from him), should not be read as a comment addressed to Lenny, these are the words the old man directs at himself; it could be interpreted as a reflexive conclusion he draws from the exchange in which his son exposed him his contempt and malice. The offensive nature of the conversation, which constructs the framework of the play allows one to assume that it is usual for the members of the family to address one another in such a way. The characters are not capable of conducting a casual, polite conversation and showing respect to each other. The initial conversation helps to build an image of a corrupted home, which one actually would not like to return to; this adds to the complexity of the theme of the homecoming, which functions as basis for the structure of the play. In terms of dramatic exposition the conversation also serves as a means of implicit characterization of Max and Lenny, efficiently constructing the images of the main characters and their mutual relationship.

Critics agree that Pinter's works (especially his earliest "comedies of menace" among which *The Homecoming* is ranked) are notable for the strategic use of dialogue as well as the combination of verbal skirmishes and banal, yet "strangely threatening atmosphere" (Almansi and Henderson 1983: 18). The playwright's mastery of dramatic dialogue resulted in coining a new term – "Pinteresque" – to describe his style: "full of dark hints, pregnant suggestions, with the audience left uncertain as what to conclude"⁷. Pinter's dramas abound in situations of conflict and menace, in which the characters are lost in the complex maze of the commonplace and the unusual. In the exchange between Lenny and Max common speech and everyday language camouflage the struggle for dominance and power, which is the essence of human relations in *The Homecoming*. In this play the "Pinteresque" is not only about the situational arrangement of characters and subversive combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary, but primarily about the complexity of the language of characters and their conversations.

Such density of meanings wrought into the dramatic exchanges is manageable only by the dramatist's sensitivity to language and his ability to maneuver meanings. According to Martin Esslin "Pinter's dialogue is as tightly – perhaps more tightly – controlled than verse. Every syllable, every inflection, the suc-

⁷ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1295/is_3_65/ai_71704790 3.03.2008.

cession of long and short sounds, words and sentences, is calculated to nicety. And precisely the repetitiousness, the discontinuity, the circularity of ordinary vernacular speech are here used as formal elements with which the poet can compose his linguistic ballet" (1970: 43). In *The Homecoming*, just as in a number of Pinter's plays, language is not used as a means of communication, but as a means of creating truly "Pinteresque" world of uncanny contrasts.

Abstrakt

Artykuł jest próbą opisu funkcjonowania języka w dialogach w sztukach Harolda Pintera. Autor artykułu stosuje socjopragmatykę jako narzędzie analityczne, które pozwala na omówienie dialogów z pierwszej sceny sztuki Powrót do domu w kategoriach aktów mowy. Dwie postacie występujące w omawianej scenie, Lenny i Max, prowadzą pozornie trywialną konwersację, która okazuje się kluczowa dla przedstawienia ich wzajemnej relacji, jak również zawiązania akcji dramatu. Szczegółowa analiza implikatury konwersacyjnej wypowiedzi Lenniego i Maxa pozwala doszukać się w omawianej scenie typowych elementów Pinterowskiej sztuki prowadzenia dialogu w dramacie, jak, na przykład, zmiennej dynamiki konwersacji, narastającego emocjonalnego napięcia pomiędzy bohaterami oraz bogactwa podtekstowych znaczeń obecnych w dialogach bohaterów

Abstract

The article is an attempt at describing the functioning of language in dialogues of Harold Pinter's plays. The author uses the concepts of sociopragmatics to analyze the utterances of the opening scene of *the Homecoming* as speech acts. The two characters of the scene, Lenny and Max, hold a seemingly trivial conversation, which turns out to be crucial for establishing the relationship between them and for constructing the framework of the action of the play. Detailed analysis of the conversational implicature of the utterances allows the author to highlight typical elements of "Pinteresque" manner of designing the dramatic dialogue, e.g., the changing dynamics of the conversational exchange, gradually increasing emotional tension between the characters, as well as the abundance of subtextual meanings of the dialogic utterances.

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