

The Analysis of Conversational Maxims in Pinter's Play the Birthday Party

تحليل معايير المحادثة في مسرحية " حفلة عيد الميلاد " للكاتب المسرحي

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Abstract

Among Pinter's other plays, The Birthday Party might be read as a drama of conversational rules. At least, it contains examples of speech acts such as whatever the characters do by means of words. The purpose of this study is to perform an analysis of the conversational maxims in a wider context, mainly dramatic work of art. The work of art is Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party. Another aim of this study is to argue that conversational rules as floor allocation, shared knowledge and phatic communication are cyclic rules which need to be applied at every new contribution made by a speaker in an ongoing conversation. The analysis demonstrates that the failure to apply these rules cynically or indeed their violation creates a pattern of domination of one speaker over the other amounting to an extended speech act of aggression by—as it were verbal blows. Finally, the methodology used illustrates how linguistic resources can be conducive to a new and exhaustive approach to literary texts.

Keywords: *Speech acts, conversational maxims, rules, floor allocation, phatic communication, verbal blows.*

الملخص

من بين مسرحيات الكاتب البريطاني هارولد بنتر الأخرى، يمكن قراءة " حفلة عيد ميلاد" على أنها دراما لقواعد المحادثة. على الأقل، فهي تحتوي على أمثلة لأفعال الكلام مثل ما تفعله الشخصيات عن طريق الكلمات. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو إجراء تحليل لمبادئ المحادثة في سياق أوسع، وخاصة العمل الفني الدرامي. العمل الدرامي هو حفلة عيد ميلاد الهدف الآخر من هذه الدراسة هو القول بأن قواعد المحادثة مثل اعطاء فرصة لكل مشارك والأرضية المشتركة والتواصل الحركي هي قواعد يجب تطبيقها في كل مشاركة جديدة يقدمها المتحدث في محادثة مستمرة بين أفراد. يوضح التحليل أن الفشل في تطبيق هذه القواعد بشكل ساخر أو في الواقع انتهاكها يخلق نمطاً من هيمنة أحد المتحدثين على الآخر يصل إلى حد الفعل العدوانى المطول من قبل أحد الأشخاص على الآخر - كما انها تعد توجيه ضربات لفظية. أخيراً، توضح المنهجية المستخدمة كيف يمكن أن تكون المصادر اللغوية يمكن أن تؤدي الي نهج جديد وشامل لتحليل النصوص الأدبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أفعال الكلام -معايير المحادثة -الادوار- اعطاء الكلمة -التواصل الاجتماعى – ضربات لفظية.

Introduction

The notion of a conversation may vary in its temporal stretch. Those with whom I share a language are those with whose words what I say may be connected: connected in a way analogous to that in which the remarks in a conversation are connected.

Grice suggested that conversation is based on a shared principle of cooperation, something like:

“Make your conversational contribution what is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

This principle was fleshed out in a series of maxims:

The maxim of quantity, where one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more.

The maxim of quality, where one tries to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.

The maxim of relation, where one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.

The maxim of manner, when one tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as one can in what one says, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity.

As the maxims stand, there may be an overlap, as regards the length of what one says, between the maxims of quantity and manner; this overlap can be explained (partially if not entirely) by thinking of the maxim of quantity (artificial though this approach may be) in terms of units of information. In other words, if the listener needs, let us say, five units of information from the speaker, but gets less, or more than the expected number, then the speaker is breaking the maxim of quantity.

However, if the speaker gives the five required units of information, but is either too curt or long-winded in conveying them to the listener, then the maxim of manner is broken. The dividing line however, may be rather thin or unclear, and there are times when we may say that both the maxims of quantity and quality are broken by the same factors.

While much of the research in conversational principles has encountered on language use in actual communication, its scope has been somewhat confined to limited social contexts as Labov (1972), Sacks et al. (1974) & Laver (1978). It is equally important however, to extend conversational rules to interactions in a wider context mainly dramatic works of art. The main purpose of this study is to perform such an analysis on Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*. Another aim of this paper is to argue that conversational rules are floor allocation, shared knowledge and phatic communion are cyclic rules which need to be applied at every new contribution made by a speaker in an ongoing interaction. The analysis demonstrates that the failure to apply these rules cyclically or indeed their violation creates a pattern of domination of one speaker over the other amounting to an extended speech act of aggression by—as it were—verbal blows. Finally, the methodology used illustrates how linguistic resources can be conductive to a new and exhaustive approach to literary texts.

Theoretical Background

Grice (1975) describes the general rules of conversation in terms of maxims and principles. ‘Be relevant’ and ‘be cooperative’ in the exchange of communicative tokens and cognitive messages are the conventions that must govern speaker and hearer in a speech event. Labov (1972) formulates a crucial rule for the felicitous condition of discourse mainly the concept of ‘shared knowledge’. He classified all events as A-events, B-events and A-B events.

Given any two-part conversation, there exists an understanding that there are events that A knows about but B does not and events that B knows about but A does not and A-B events that are known to both. If A makes a statement about a B-event, it is heard as a request for confirmation.

Sacks et al. (1974) provide ‘systematics’ for the organization of interaction in terms of floor allocation or turn taking. They give two basic rules that (1) at least, and no more than one party speaks at a time in a single conversation. (2) that speaker change recurs. This means that –in a two -part conversation the sequence is necessarily ABABAB where turns and roles are mutually negotiated for an orderly basis of interaction.

Lyons (1972) redefines Malinowski’s use of the term ‘phatic communion’ as a phenomenon serving to establish and maintain feeling of social solidarity and well-being.

Laver (1974) stresses the importance of phatic communion during the ‘psychologically crucial margin of interaction’ and like Goffman (1967) and Sacks et al, he concentrates on the margins or ‘openings’ and ‘closings’ of interaction as a ritualized function.

However, it is not only the ‘margin of interaction’ which is ‘psychologically crucial’ but every move in an exchange is equally crucial to the development of an interaction. The giving away of oneself in the act of an utterance and the realization of the self in the assumption of a role are psychologically crucial moments during an ongoing conversation. That is, the principle of phatic communion ought to operate in a recurrent manner at every turn exchanged between speaker and hearer in the course of a speech event.

Therefore, making ‘relevant contributions’ to a topic, showing understanding of turn-taking and referring to shared knowledge all demonstrate phatic communion or ties of solidarity. These ties must be reinforced beyond the openings of an interaction as their violation sets in a pattern of dominance or even of violence.

The Data of the Study

The text is taken from Act II of *The Birthday Party*. It has been selected for several reasons. It consists of a long sequence of 135 consecutive speaking turns of a medial or ongoing interaction. It functions as a communicative unit central to the drama where, prior to the passage, Stanley (the main character) was talkative and authoritative but after this passage becomes speechless. Soon after (Act III) Goldberg and McCann celebrate his birthday and he is dragged out of the stage in the reduced state of a scream. Obviously, that battered state has a great deal to do with the crucial passage under investigation.

The speed of the 135 speaking turns is as follows:

Goldberg 65 times, McCann 32 times, Stanley 38 times. However, almost half the data is questions and their distribution is as follows:

Goldberg 54 questions +McCann 7 questions = 61 questions.

A common convention in asking a question is that one interlocuter transfers the speaker role to the other. This, according to Widdowson (1977), both imposes an obligation to reply and gives the right to take the initiative. Conventionally then, Stanley has 61 opportunities to speak up for himself in the manner of a normal conversation. However, Golberg and McCann are dominant, and Stanley is reduced to a frustrated incoherence.

According to Leech (1975) wh-interrogative are considered ‘unlimited’ because any number of answers can be given. In normal conversation questions function as starters of interactions and the why and the what type of questions maximum scope of initiative. The following table shows their distribution:

| | | | | | | |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| W h y | W h a t | W h e r e | W h e n | W h i c h | W h o | T o t a l |
| 2 0 | 1 4 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 5 4 |

Again the figures lead us to believe that the possibility of initiative is enormous and yet Stanley is rendered speechless. How is this done?

The Data Analysis

There are two matters to discuss:

- (1) **The type of questions**
- (2) **The structure of the interaction.**

The type of questions:

In order to understand why the scope of initiative is constantly minimized despite the frequency of openers, we must analyse the type of questions. There is a series of underlying conditions which have to be fulfilled if the speaker is to receive an answer from hearer:

- 1.The addressee is in a position to supply information i.e. know the answer.
- 2.The addressee accepts the speaker as a person allowed to ask a question.
- 3.The addressee know the referent the speaker is asking about ‘shared knowledge’ AB-events or B-events.
- 4.The addressee believes that he will be given the opportunity to reply or turn.
- 5.The addressee interprets the question as relevant to the topic or situation.
6. The addressee believes that information is important to the speaker and to the development of the interaction i.e. acts on the ‘cooperative’ principle.

The researcher classified the wh-questions into four types according to their discourse function ranging from those which allow maximum response and initiative to minimum or no response.

(Representative examples for each category are in table 2).

Type A:

these share the interactive function of a normal question requesting information. They are inserted at various stages of the discourse to give Stanley the illusion that the goal of the interaction is to make conversation and the intention of the speaker (and in turn the hearer) is phatic communion. Consequently, questions under this category urge Stanley to display his understanding of turn-talk, of the cooperative principle and of the ties of solidarity. Hence, type A representative all secure some kind of response.

According to conversational rules Sacks et al. say:

When A addressee a first-pair part such as a question to B, A then selects B as a next speaker and selects for B that he next perform a second part of the adjacency pair A has started i.e. answer.

But both Goldberg and Stanley violate this convention in their interaction. Note the following:

Goldberg: Webber, what were you doing yesterday?

Stanley: Yesterday?

Goldberg: And the day before. What did you do the day before that?

Stanley: What do you mean?

Stanley's response is neither 'cooperative' nor 'relevant' because he questions the question. While Stanley's response is a delaying device. It has a closed sequence since it leaves to the first speaker (Goldberg) the right to reply by repeating his first adjacency pair. So instead of enacting a conversation on his own ground, Stanley uses his turn to question condition 2 (**mentioned above**).

According to convention Stanley's question functions as an obligation to repeat what has been said. However, Goldberg denies Stanley the right to ask him and proceeds with another elicitation. In thus doing, Goldberg refuses to be selected for a turn by Stanley and retains the first speaker's role or the distributor of turn which is an index of power.

Again, Stanley refuses the respondent role and denies conditions 2, 5 and 6 (**above**), that is, demonstrating to the speaker that he is in no obligation to answer and does not accept him in the role of questioner. Goldberg also follows suit. He breaches the rules and switches to another type of questions (**C discussed below**).

While both characters violate conversational rules, it is obvious that Goldberg's initiations are not genuine request for information since they do not wait for it. Rather, they are used to impose the respondent role on Stanley.

Notice how Goldberg fronts the vocative 'Webber' to initial position, as it were, nominating Stanley to contribute to the interaction (3) prior to this sequence 'Mr. Webber' had been used on 3 instances. Having dropped the formal address 'Mr' we would expect the informal first name vocative to appear. On the contrary, the formal 'Webber' remains thus breaching the principle of politeness proposed by Leech (1983). Indeed, power and solidarity (Brown & Gilman, 1960) are in conflict here where 'Mr' is dropped for solidarity, but 'Webber' is kept for the power semantic and is maintained throughout.

Type B

In the theory of presupposition failure (1976) Harder & Lock term as ‘Achieved Rhetorical Behaviour’ instances where the speaker is rightly taken by the hearer to be rhetorical, that is, not sincere about something which belongs to the background assumptions of the hearer. The speaker in this case is making fun of the hearer and the hearer knows that.

The questions I have allocated to type B create an achieved rhetorical behaviour by treating the personal or trivial as important to the discourse and worthy of elicitation. They violate rule 5 and 6 as well as breach the ties of solidarity between speaker and hearer. Moreover, the questions carry the covert presupposition that the addressee does not know the answer or cannot remember the event (e.g. when did you last have a bath/wash a cup/pray?). in that sense their illocutionary force is that of a challenge and hence are indirectly manipulated to secure a response from Stanley against his will. The first two question remain unanswered and then Stanley begins to negotiate for the right to take a turn. It is by interpreting the presupposition as a challenge that Stanley complies with Goldberg and falls into the designed role of a frustrated respondent. Likewise, it is by concealing the attempt at bullying that the speaker succeeds in manipulating the hearer.

Type C

The questions allocated to this category presuppose the fictiveness of a proposition and request a response about the motive of the hearer in carrying out the proposition. Moreover, they assume that both proposition and presupposition are true of the addressee. As the diagram shows if the addressee choses to answer the proposition, he does not answer the presupposition and if he negates the proposition, he is only asserting the presupposition and vice versa.

The discourse value of ‘why’ questions is powerful because it transfers to the addressee a large scope of initiative: to preserve the topic by structuring reasons and so occupy the floor for the length of speaking time or to switch the topic and change the plane of discourse. While these questions create an illusion of interaction, they violate the principle of phatic communion. Being elicitations, they impose a turn upon Stanley but being composite with false presupposition and proposition, they block that turn. In breaching convention 3 (above) this category frustrates the opportunity of a move and commits the hearer to the role cooperative participant. Moreover, McCann structures similar patterns right after Goldberg to the extent that the interlocutors’ contribution seems to belong more to the ‘shared knowledge’ of A1 (Goldberg) and A2 (McCann) than to that of Stanley (AB or B-events).

Type D

Questions grouped under this type overtly violate phatic communion. Their propositions are not related to any topic, are irrelevant to the interaction and are not part of shared knowledge. The speaker is aware that the hearer does not recognize the presupposition and is also aware that he is not deceiving the hearer who knows this fact; however, the speaker perseveres with the presupposition and is serious about it. Thus doing, the speaker is showing non-solidarity and the speech act is what Harder & Kock call overt bullying.

While both proposition and presupposition are outside the knowledge of the hearer (Stanley), the speaker deliberately manipulates them by elicitations and commanding nominations (e.g. 'speak up, Webber') in order to compel the hearer to produce a response and simultaneously make him aware of his inability to do so. Consequently, it is by increasing his capacity to speak that Goldberg reduces Stanley's capacity to respond establishing the pattern of domination. The intended perlocutionary effect of this category is to batter Stanley to a scream and the type of questions both characters use 'do'.

YES/NO TYPE

By their very discourse function, polar questions allocate a limited turn to the hearer but impose an obligation to reply. In the text there are 2 sequences of the type amounting to B questions. Consider the following:

Goldberg: Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

Stanley: Neither.

Goldberg: Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

Stanley: Both.

Goldberg: Wrong! It's necessary but not possible.

The exchanges breach both the principle of phatic communion and the rules governing questions since the speaker already knows the answer to his question. The sequence brings in the atmosphere of a classroom where the teacher queries the students to check on their knowledge and control their behaviour. In fact, polar questions are injected in the interaction to narrow down Stanley's turn to monosyllabic utterances. Together with the types these acquires the function of legal cross-examination.

Statement of the Study

As used in the data even the statements have the interactive function of questions. According to Labov ‘if A makes a statement about a B-event, it is heard as a request for confirmation’. The statements are thematically related all sharing the illocutionary force of accusation directed at Stanley for contaminating and marring that which is sacred and innocent. Now if A accuses B of a certain event, the presupposition is that such an event took place and is ‘true’ of B; the presupposition also entails that B should receive the blame. Therefore, in as much as the statements are assumed to be B-events they request confirmation and in as much as the statements are accusations they all the more impose a reply.

However, both the space and the opportunity of response are blocked due to the density of the accusation (discussed in IV.2.) and again Stanley is denied a turn. The intended perlocutionary effect of bewilderment is achieved. Stanley’s lack of protest communication his acceptance of the proscribed role of non-entity.

IV.2. The Structure of the interaction.

According to Sinclair & Coulthard (1975) discourse is made of a hierarchy of interaction, phase, exchange, move and act. Each phase includes the exchanges performed by speakers through their moves which are realized in acts. The interaction has been organized into 4 phases according to the negotiated roles participants tried to achieve through their acts. The phases have been based on the nature of Stanley’s assumed role and have been delimited by the following discourse markers ‘you’re on the wrong horse’. ‘Now, now, wait’ and in the Sanitorium- ‘. The distribution of questions and their narrowing down response range as well as Stanley’s roles, responses and discourse boundary are schematically represented in the diagram (Appendix c).

Phase one: Contest of Roles

Stanley displays repeated efforts to convert the role of addressee into the role of addresser by placing requests for repeats. Goldberg denies him that role by overriding his statements and asking different question types. Refusal to reach mutual recognition of each other's acts severs the ties of solidarity between participants. Stanley signals a refusal to play the game by his 'you're on the wrong horse'.

Phase Two: Elusive Speaker

Stanley assumes this role by performing acts of discursive and uncooperative replies. By switching to type A questions Goldberg creates the illusion of phatic understanding of turn-talk and ensures Stanley's participation. When it occurs, Goldberg moves to polar questions to control the space of the participant.

Phase Three: Respondent Trap

Stanley takes up the challenge implied in type B questions and in thus doing falls into the respondent role. The diagram shows the emergence of statements and composite acts (Goldberg A1 & McCann A2) which narrow down the range of Stanley's replies.

Phase Four: Joe Soap

Stanley calls himself Joe Soap or the weakest of the party. His responses are minimal and end with a dramatic 'Nothing' which is, in many respects, the state he has been reduced to.

The diagram shows that in an ongoing interaction every move is a psychologically crucial moment at which point a set of rules has to be applied. Failure to do so breaches the binding principle of phatic communion between speaker and hearer and succeeds in communicating violence of emotions. Indeed, the data of this Pinter play follows the rules only to break them. In a two-party conversation the floor is taken/allocated by the participants in a phatic sequence of ABABAB. However, that sequence is recurrently breached. Questions in general signal the giving way of one's speaking turn to the hearer and in the data the signal is emphasized by the falling-intonation which wh-questions attract. Yest, the addressee's turn is not really given for several reasons. As shown in IV.1. questions assume false presupposition which do not belong to the binding principle of shared knowledge (AB events) or B-events, rather they seem to belong to A1 and A2 and thus block the turn. Alternatively, acts become composite where a new act is opened before the completion of a preceding one as the following example:

Goldberg: What have you done with your wife?

McCann: He killed her.

Or

Goldberg: Who does he think he is?

McCann: Who do you think you are?

Operating on this connecting power of A1 and A2, their acts become incoherent to the third party who is ousted of talk and subjected to an inferior position. The density of question types acts as a mechanism for the performance of acts without interpretation. Consequently, it is by reducing and blocking B's capacity for response that A increases his own capacity for speaking and the duration of time taken in so doing is the duration of the exercise of power.

Finally, it is by constantly failing to apply the phatic rules of conversation that the characters repeatedly finish off Stanley by verbal blows. In that sense Pinter's characters. Commonly labelled as non-communication, succeed perfectly well to communicate each other violence of emotions. In that sense too Pinter's style commonly known as discursive and absurd becomes a poignant tool at the disposal of his characters. The repetition with which the interaction proceeds functions as a ritual. The long sequence closes with two 'mysterious priests' Goldberg and his acolyte McCann leading away 'the heifer'-a battered Stanley – 'to the sacrifice'. 'Where does thou' lead him is the question left for the audience to answer in social context.

Notes

Conclusion

This paper has extended conversational rules to a new context—dramatic texts in particular. The analysis has attempted to demonstrate that the rules need govern the production of utterances otherwise patterns of power or violence may set in. The analysis contributes to an exhaustive study of the works of art. It is hoped that the methodology may prove useful to both language teacher in speaking and reading classes as well as to the literature teacher in reading dramatic texts. It could help in teaching English as a second language if the rules govern the situations.

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