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## Birthday party and one for the road: Reading from the stylistic perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The paper aims to demonstrate some strengths and limitations of linguistic and discourse-based methodologies applied in the analysis and interpretation of texts which have been used for more than two decades. It argues that the interplay/contribution of linguistic and literary dimensions in the text organization is consensual. Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1958) and *One for the Road* (1984) are analysed and interpreted from the perspective of language dimensions, pragmatic functions, dialogic and polyphonic structure.

**Keywords:** Dialogic texts; linguo-stylistics; language; narrative voice; Pinter.

### Introduction

The paper aims to investigate the linguo-stylistic nature of literary (drama) language in terms of how powerful participants are controlling and constraining the contributions of the non-powerful or rightless participants; the directive speech acts such orders, commands and questions in the extracts arise from the questioner(s). The other main argument is that language studies can be all the richer as a result of greater attention to literary language use and that literary studies can be similarly enriched by greater attention to the creative formations and reformations of spoken and written English in a wide variety of contexts of use.

We also argue that literary-based linguo-stylistic methodologies can promote and foster more effective language development on the part of learners of English. Since fuller integration of language-based approaches to text study is seen as a positive way of democratising access to literary texts, not only does understanding the connection between language and literature require recognition of the ways which illuminate the textual character of ideological discourses, it throws light to different turns of communicants as well. The interpretative procedures used in the analysis of the extracts from *The Birthday Party* and *One for the Road* are seen as operations in which the dialogues are propelled.

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## The Goals

The selected data are studied in order to reveal the potential of stylistic, literary and linguistic value of each language:

- (1). Structure in realizing different pragmatic functions what, in fact assumes that language does not stand apart from experience as a parallel symbolic structure, but rather “completely interpenetrates with it” (Sapir 1974: 49), because, as Sapir proposed, “for the normal person every experience, real or potential, is saturated with verbalism” (Ibid.: 49-50).
- (2). Study the reasons why the responses of the questioned evoked a negative impression on the questioner(s) and why the latter refused to listen to any information that conflicted with his own beliefs and how his/their emotionally charged accusations blocked and harmed the communication process. He, as a persuader, did not even try to change or influence his victim’s opinions and behaviour with well-designed language and non-verbal stimuli. On the contrary, the victims were forced to accept persuasive threats without thinking critically because they were constantly “bombarded” and “behaviourally blamed” by the questioners’ strong language.

### 1.2. Assumptions

The following assumptions will help to clarify the above mentioned aim and goals:

- (1). The practice of stylistic dimension comes about at any point of intersection of language of a text with the elements which constitute the literariness of that text (Carter 2003: 193);
- (2). The literariness of a conversation is not immediately obvious. A range of contextually generated effects (sarcasm, insult, humiliation, threatening) produce meanings that are non-literal and require readers to make indirect, interpretive inferences;
- (3). Casual conversation between the people of unequal social status (“blaming” and “blamed” ones here) intrinsically reflects how the sides insert an unequal evaluative position into the ongoing discourse;
- (4). The linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences valid in analysing, interpreting and explaining of situationally contextualized language materials of English drama are cognitive and modular, the most significant aspect of this modularity being a contrast between syntax and semantics (Canale and Swain ctd. in Skehan 2007: 21).

### 1.3. Methodology

One sided interpretation is ambivalent regarding the restrictedness of its capacity. In order to justify multifaceted and complex nature of hand-in-hand efforts of linguistic, literary and stylistic dimensions in the text organization, other principles which are based on their so-called rational/unequal contributions in the fulfilment of the general purpose are required. Here, we adopt the eclectic principle according to which the truth cannot, in principle, be encompassed by any one theory or point of view, being rather distributed across different theories and points of view –which entails that it can only be found through the full consideration of the ensemble of theories, both the extant and the possible ones.

In this principle, we can find a more categorical justification of positive tolerance of the dimensions; in fact, the diverse dimensions interact to complement each other in order to produce the general truth. The importance of such kind of approach is much more than merely theoretical: an important practical argument against the minimalist, i.e. one-sided interpretation is if the proposition “these dimensions, either equally or unequally, tolerate each other “means” to accept the existence and validity of that/those which cannot be suppressed”, the tolerant, as soon as the conditions permit him to suppress that which seems to it/them wrong, will do it, thus becoming ipso facto intolerant and we apply the eclectic principle “only if tolerance has its own positive value and grounding, such an outcome is likely to be avoided” (Dascal 2003: 460). In consonant with this view what can be highlighted is: “these dimensions do tolerate each other not because they are (un)able to dominate the others, but because they acknowledge the value and specific contribution of each other in “allowing” language to function effectively” (Ibid: 460).

#### 1.4. The Scope

We examine the contrasts in the speech styles of major characters and try to show how the multiple voices in the plays interact with one another. Though these voices are revealed as discordant and fluctuating in terms of the views they express, the dialectic itself is the tension between mutually supportive but antithetical patterns such as ruler and subject, oppressor and oppressed, questioner and answerer, etc., and we would expect these differences of role and antagonism as well as social inequalities to be reflected in the language of the play. In this sense, discordant polyphonies created in the plays serve to:

(a) be an indication of the problematic nature of the social and political issues with which Pinter deals, and;

(b) show how ideologies are linked to language (Fairclough 2001: 1-2).

“Focusing on ideological nature of language means committing ourselves to the view that language use is socially determined, and it rests upon common-sense assumptions. In terms of the author’s ideology in the polyphonic structure, the multiplicity of voices is in no way a strong stance against its being of authoritarian nature; though in the polyphonic novel, the characters are more liberated as they achieve voices and express their points of view, it does not challenge the validity of the authorial position” (Şekerci 2013: 255-6).

#### 1.5. *The Birthday Party and One for the Road*

Analysis of the dialogic parts from the two plays (“BP” denotes *The Birthday Party* while “OFR” stands for *One for the Road*) is concerned with the following:

(a) the relationship and status (is it one between equals?) of the participants and their purposes, and;  
 (b) what the speakers and the writer mean using this or that language piece in the given dialogic context in terms of the factors (linguistic and contextual clues as well as common-sense conventions, social dimensions and the surrounding text) which enable the reader to comprehend the meaning. The analysis of BP and OFR will be based upon the following assumptions:

1) The chosen dialogic extracts are seen as social actions occurring within particular social and historical contexts, and our focus is on the way that language is organized to enable conversation to work and implicate meanings which are overtly or covertly expressed;

2) The structure of dialogic genre is not only a reflection of social reality; it not only arises out of the socio-cultural or pragmatic context; rather it shapes the social context itself allowing people to use language with each other to accomplish everyday social life and create the varying social worlds in and through language.

3) The determinative effect of institutional and societal structures upon the dialogic language is reinforced by the representatives of those structures who, typically experiencing the conventions of everyday action, produce it, which in turn, is open to answer “what?”, “how”, and “why?” questions.

4) Placing the socially interpretive methodology at the core of the study of the dialogic language (the interpretive level) would also require placing adequate emphasis upon revealing the contribution and interplay of this or that dialogic extract; and with this, we return to the question of how grammatical and lexical structures relate or “get adapted” to varying social needs, thus not only running parallel to experience but rather giving every indication as to what is happening, why and how such kind of interaction is taking place, what, in turn, is resonant with the anthropologist view point that language also interpenetrates experience through preventing misinterpretation and miscommunication.

### 1.6. Descriptive and Interpretative Levels

The following dialogic part of BP is strikingly demonstrating how hopeless Stanley is and why Goldberg's and McCann's joint intentions make him submit to them. Having made him sit down, they begin to interrogate him:

**GOLDBERG:** Webber, What were you doing yesterday? (1)

**STANLEY:** Yesterday? (2)

**GOLDBERG:** And the day before. What did you do the day before that? (3)

**MCCANN:** Why did you leave the organization? (4)

**MCCANN:** Why did you betray us? (5) (Pinter 1960: 35).

It leads us to characterize the struggle between Stanley and his intruders in terms of what is said and how it is expressed: the relationship is an unequal one, with Goldberg and McCann firmly in control of the way the "question-answer" procedure develops and of Stanley's contribution to it with no self-reliance and misbehaviour (repeating Goldberg's question "yesterday?" as if he didn't understand what he meant) which, being unacceptable and irrelevant to the questioners, irritated them and instinctively and impatiently they asked Stanley to answer their questions (3,4,5) with a directly specified goal.

But Stanley's question "yesterday?" might have been a trial to mitigate the demands they make of him. That's why his question is reduced to "yesterday?" Another sensitive nature of the situation is that there is no acknowledgement of the information Stanley's "yesterday?" supplies. Not to let the situation go out of control, they exercise over Stanley's "yesterday?" in different ways: Goldberg interrupts Stanley by asking 3 and 4, and in 5 McCann immediately asks another question thus shutting off Stanley's interposition and driving him to formally and more precisely answer their questions and explain the reasons for 4 and 5.

To Pinter, such kind of questioning is determined by social conditions and especially by the nature of the relationship between the police and the so-called disobedient members of the society who have developed a deep sense of social injustices and can hardly remain blind to them.

For Peacock "the real struggle is not between Stanley and the institution whose representatives are Goldberg and McCann; the reality broadens the play's boundaries from a personal issue to a political scope and in terms of this approach, Stanley is only one of those who are suppressed by a higher institution or society" (1997: 65). For Goldberg and McCann, Stanley's leaving a reliable group and turning to individuality is a threat and totally unacceptable for institutions which are necessary and responsible for the continuity of a state, while Goldberg and McCann, as its oppressors, are necessary for performing the reintegration of Stanley. Using their brainwashing method, Goldberg and McCann first destroy Stanley's independent identity and then make him conform to societal rules by interrogating until he becomes totally silent and has a nervous breakdown. Only after that Stanley-like people become harmless as an "anonymous" part of the society (Ibid: 66-7).

Pinter demonstrates "how Goldberg and Stanley are completely opposite characters whereas the former is a conformist adhering to society, the latter is a non-conformist rejecting his bonds with society. The following utterances by Goldberg about his way of life and himself are more than enough to show us the middle class values of conformity" (Şekerci & Demiray 2013: 260).

**GOLDBERG:** ...You know what? I've never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed. (He rises and moves down C) That's why I've reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball. School? Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? Because I'm telling you, I'm telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write down anything. And don't go near the water. And you will find that what I say is true. (Vacant) Because I believe that the world ... (Desperate) Because I believe that the world ... (Lost) Because I believe that the world...(...) Do your duty and

keep your observations. Always bid good morning to your neighbours. Never, never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution!... (Pinter 1960: 61-62).

These values are the major factors dictating him how to act and what to do. This, in fact, means that the oppressors are the oppressed too. These utterances also illustrate the big controversies of the society. The social conditions determine and shape the behaviour and manners of the “public”. This extract is highlighting not only the social determination of language use, but also the linguistic determination of society. In his utterances, Goldberg does indeed seem and confess to be wholly dependent on the rules of his organization and this social and political relationship which determines his way of behaviour can be explicated in many different ways depending on what social traditions and custom people are operating with.

Developing the argument that language is a form of social practice, let us analyse how Goldberg and the like won and exercised power; and whether it is “in” or “behind” his utterances. The key information expected can be summarized as follows: Goldberg exercises control over disobedient people, firstly, in the opening turn, through declaring that his present day position is due to his personal contributions. Secondly, to the way the elders of the society showed him to act. Thirdly, to the equally explicit instructions as to how he should sequence his actions, and finally to the welfare and safety of his family. These are, for Goldberg, techniques of controlling one’s behaviour in the society if s/he does not want “to lose a tooth”.

Dukore exhibits it as “Goldberg and McCann are exactly the right people to this particular job, for they are representatives of the two traditional religions of Western Civilization, Judaism and Catholicism” (1962: 52). In the play, Stanley seems to be unable to defend himself, even cannot ask what crime or offence he is accused for. “He is always silent and towards the end of the play he almost completely loses his speech ability” (Şekerci 2013: 258). For Pinter, it is quite reasonable since “...Stanley cannot perceive his only valid justification...therefore he certainly can never articulate about it...he fights for his life. It doesn’t last long, this fight...he collapses under the weight of their accusation –an accusation compounded of the shitstrained strictures of the centuries of “tradition”...between you and me; the play showed how the bastards...how religious forces ruin our lives. But who is going to say that in the play? That would be impossible” (qtd. in Grimes 1999: 53). It shows that the negative effects of abusive language, religion, tradition and responsibility are on individuals.

The following extracts from OFR will be analysed as in line with the previously mentioned concepts and principles.

Nicolas talks to Victor in the First Scene in OFR as following:

What do you think this is? It is my finger. And this is my little finger. This is my big finger and this is my little finger. I wave my big finger in front of your eyes. Like this. And now I do the same with my little finger. I can also use both...at the same time. Like this. I can do absolutely anything I like. Do you think I am mad? My mother did...Do you think waving finger in front of people’s eyes is silly? I can see your point...but would you like the same view if it was my boot-or my penis? (Pinter 1985: 33).

Nicolas is displaying the absolute power he has. It is in accord with Pinter’s phrase “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (qtd. in Grimes1999: 101).

**NICOLAS:** (...) I run the place. God speaks through me. I’m referring to the Old Testament God, by the way, I’m a long way from being Jewish. Everyone respects me here. Including you, I take it? I think that is the correct stance (Pinter 1985: 36).

He presents himself as a man of faith and an honourable person, while he blames Victor for not being religious at all.

**NICOLAS:** (...) Everyone else knows the voice of God speaks through me. You are not a religious man, I take it? Pause You don’t believe in a guiding light? Pause What then? Pause So..morally...you flounder in wet shit. You know...like when you’ve eaten a rancid omelette.

Do you know the man who runs this country? No? Well, he’s a very nice chap. He took me aside the other day, last Wednesday, I think, it was, he took me aside, at a reception, visiting dignitaries,



he took me aside, me, and he said to me, he said, in what I can only describe as a hoarse whisper, Nic he said, Nic (that is my name), Nic, if you ever come to anyone, whom you have good reason to believe is getting on my tits, tell them one thing, tell them honesty is the best policy (Pinter 1985: 47- 48).

Nicholas takes power from higher authorities. Peacock puts it "...Nicholas is...a servant of his oppressive organization" (1997: 142).

Pinter claims "...he (Nicholas) will kill, allow rape, everything he can think of and torture. In order to protect his realm, anything is justified" (Pinter 1985: 16).

**NICKY:** Were they your soldiers?

**NICOLAS:** They are your country's soldiers (Pinter 1985: 58).

Nicholas states that the soldiers are the country's soldiers and supports the idea that the torture done by them is a state instituted torture (Şekerci & Demiray 2013: 264).

According to Quigley, "(...) Nicolas, the interrogator, derives some of his legitimacy and authority from his conviction that he speaks for a national consensus. Citing his country's leader, he portrays himself as one acting on behalf of a unified group against a lone dissenter and existence of that larger unity suffices to convert the dissenter into a traitor" (qtd. in Raby 2001: 10).

Once Gila talks about her father in the third scene, Nicolas gets angrier and angrier.

Your father? What is your father to do with it? Pause. Your father? How dare you? Fuckpig. Pause. Your father was a wonderful man. His country is proud of him. He's dead. He was a man of honour. He's dead. Are you prepared to insult the memory of your father? Pause. Are you prepared to defame, to debase, the memory of your father? Your father fought for his country. I knew him. I revered him. Everyone did. He believed in God. He didn't think like you shitbags. He lived. He lived. He was iron and gold. He would die, he would die, he would die for his country, for his God. And he did die, he died, he died, for his God (...) How do you dare speak of your father to me? I loved him, as if he were my own father (Pinter 1985: 65 - 66).

The complexity of Nicholas's reaction is due to how common sense can be foregrounded. This kind of effective judgement usually shows itself in cases if people are self-conscious about things or values which they unreflectingly take for granted. His discursive common sense (claiming that "He was iron and gold" unlike his daughter) is an ideologically major factor contributing to the coherence of his speech which also sustains unequal power relations directly. The speech opening questions "your father? What is your father to do with it?...How dare you?" in fact determine dominance relations between them and their incorporated ideological relations both of which are to a significant degree products of the socially 'blind-folded' conventions of the power.

Nicholas' speech shows just how our world and values are dependent on our beliefs and political boundaries. The words "iron" and "gold", ideologically contested and attributed to Gila's father, function as the focus of ideological struggle: Nicholas' speech within the figures of a language would lose its expressiveness and even "die" through a re-entry into itself by way of the no metaphor and thus Nicholas" passes through a continuous transition from a language of fiction to a language of speech" (Derrida 1995: 273). It is in full resonant with the fact that languages become deeply socio-cultural and they illuminate how humans structure the world (Ochs et al- Eds. 2006: 4).

In terms of grammar and vocabulary, Nicholas' speeches are social domains within which marked social and ideological patterns are created. E.g. fusion of the present and past tenses encodes an unchanging order within which Nicholas' central "eternal" truths prevail. Their rotation serves to create a view of the personality of Gila's father according to values which are certain, non-negotiable and permanent. As for the pronoun "you/your", it operates here, in fact, similarly to an indefinite pronoun and serves to register a sense of commonality of experience which deceptively links Gila with "people", which allows Nicholas to present both his own and Gila's father's views and values as incompatible with Gila's views and values.

It demonstrates the importance of the metaphorical use of “iron and gold”. Identification of Gila’s father with “iron and gold” serves to completely incapacitate her, as well as to distort and hide true state of affairs, and thus to subtly conceal rather than to openly reveal. In this sense, the literal meanings of “iron” and “gold” will be the relationship of the ideas to the affect they express. And it is the inadequation of the designation (metaphor) which properly expresses the passion. Being a sort of return and repetition of the discourse, “iron” and “gold” become the literal signs of the representer of the passion: the metaphoric signs of the object (Gila’s father) and the metaphoric sign of the affect (a person of determined / unyielding character who was also very popular amongst the people). Subsequently, the passionate spirit of Nicholas was caught within metaphor, which is indirect with regard to affect and which is strongly claiming that human language and human mind are not inherently literal.

On the basis of the above examples, we can notice that the interrogative forms are used by Nicholas to get an affirmative response from Victor (you are not a religious man, I take it ?) and to presuppose he is certain to receive a negative answer (you don’t believe in guiding light ?), the true nature of which is strengthened by the other reduced question (what then ?). Nicholas produces the uninverted yes/no questions not only because of his knowing the answer beforehand, but also to express his emotional state as well as to introduce a new topic.

Victor’s obligation to answer the question of the interrogator “Do you know the man who runs this country?” is underplayed by the other attitudinal question “no?” and the following sentences, some full, some others rather brief, in which, he is continuously underscoring his role in the eyes of Victor. Thus, OFR, in addition to implicit reflection of the severe policy employed by the powerful participants in Pinter’s earlier works, involves all kinds of direct control being exercised by the representatives of the political organizations and the state. That is to say, all the directive speech acts such orders, commands and questions in the play arise from the interrogators; it, in turn, is a direct and clear sign that the powerful participants have the right to give orders and ask questions, whereas Victor and his family have only the obligation to comply and answer.

### Conclusion

The value of the textual features in Pinter’s plays are real and socially operative, because they are set in the social interaction in which texts are generated and interpreted against a background of common assumptions giving textual features their values. Moreover, as the research shows, these assumptions and perceptions, in turn, include ideologies which are in line with particular power relations. The interpretations are usually produced by a combination of what is in the text and what is “in” the interpreter, in the sense, what social and political view he brings to interpretation.

The political conflicts in Pinter’s plays arise in terms of subjects from points of (a) discrepancies between their common-sense representations of the world, and the rules of the world they live in; (b) varying attitudinal aspects of the representatives of the world. Such kind of drama analysis adds to learners’ understanding of how language is used within a specific discourse situation drawing on linguistic, literary and stylistic nature of language. I am of the opinion that such kind of studies will enable those interested in drama studies to approach dialogic texts from different perspectives to see the deep structure of the drama texts.

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