

A Discourse Analysis of Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape"

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Abstract

Many of us think that the language used to write absurdist plays is nonsense and has no connection marks. This research proves the reverse. Undeniable this language is a fragmental one full of pauses (short or long) and incomplete sentences. Yet to study and analyse it is a worthwhile task. The research is limited to Salkie's approach to analyse discourse which is applied to Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape" as a sample of absurdist plays. Although the play in question is one-acted play of six pages, it is a rich material for study and analysis. The reason behind the selection of this play in specific is that Krapp, the only character in the play, uses two different languages. The language of the young Krapp that can be described as being rational, realistic, and meaningful; and that of the sixty-nine year old Krapp which is in turn an excellent example of the language of Theatre of the Absurd though the connection marks are inserted within from time to time.

Salkie's approach embraces three sections: two of them are related to language and the other one to situation. To deal with these three sets of issues leads the research to ratiocinate some concluding remarks as evidence for what is mentioned above.

Introduction

Theatre of the Absurd appeared after the Second World War that caused deep destruction and loss of human certainty.

The most distinctive feature of the Theatre of the Absurd is its nonsense language and much of its dialogue can be described as meaningless babble (Martin, 1965: 7). The language used in Absurdist plays can be described as being purposefully elliptical, i.e., the primary things characters have to say are replaced by ellipsis or dashes (Lewis, 1966: 260).

The challenge the present study encounters is that it deals with Krapp the young (aged 39) and the old Krapp (aged 69). The latter uses a nonsense language, while the former is logical. For this reason, the majority of the speech throughout the play is Krapp's. There is a big difference between the language of the old Krapp and that of the thirty-nine year old Krapp represented in the voice of the tape. What proves such a claim is that Krapp at the age of thirty-nine uses the word "viduity" to describe his mother when she dies. Whereas Krapp at the age of sixty-nine fails to recall the meaning of this word. He stops the reel and goes to get the dictionary. So, Krapp's issue with the word "viduity" shows that Krapp used to manipulate a language that is no longer used by the old Krapp and seems to be completely bizarre to him.

As a matter of fact, Beckett's dialogue tends to be so long and redundant. According to Strunk and White, 2000: 76, reading long dialogue passages that contain no attributives or clues makes the reader feel lost and compels him to go back and reread the passage to remember who is speaking. In the play in question, there is no need to mention any attributive or clue. The reader can easily recognise whether the speaker is the sixty-nine year old Krapp or the tape (i.e., the thirty-nine year old Krapp) via the language verified above.

The bad circumstances after the Second World War influenced Samuel Beckett's writings. Absurdity, meaninglessness, and chaos, reflected in Beckett's writings, are features characterize life of people at that time. The evidence of this can be seen through the exaggeration in the use of pauses, hesitation in acting, and using clipped sentences just as it is the case in the following two examples:

- (1) I suddenly was them again. (Pause.) Incomparable! (Pause.) Ah well . . . (Pause.) These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them—(Krapp switches off, broods, switches on)—a help before embarking on a new . . . (hesitates) . . . retrospect. Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp."

(Beckett,

1976: 13)

- (2) "What I suddenly saw the was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—(Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switch on again)—"

(ibid: 16)

Critical Discourse Analysis is an approach of analyzing of a text or an extract by relating its marked linguistic forms to a relevant context of community or culture (Vendonk, 2002: 74). Linguistic forms in any text are, directly or not, motivated by specific value systems and beliefs. This approach reveals how conventional manipulations of language are imbued with dominant norms and even personal experiences. These values are linguistically mediated by writers in discourse (ibid: 75).

Through the arbitrary behaviour of Krapp, his criticism of his past, his loneliness, and his hopeless look to his future, Beckett has reflected the reality of his society. He also describes his personal experience in life just as his mother's death and his love story through the display of Krapp of his mother's death and his talking about his love experience with a woman who stands, according to the critics, for Beckett's beloved Peggy Sinclair (Bair, 1990: 91).

1. The Analysis of the Text

Salkie's approach to analyse a discourse or a text is based on three sections. The first deals with lexical cohesion that is subdivided into: Word Repetition, Use of Synonyms, Subordinates and Generals, and Opposites and Related Words. The second is related the grammatical cohesion which includes: Substitutes, Ellipsis, Reference Words, and Connectives. The last goes beyond cohesion by using Background Problem Solution Evaluation Pattern.

1.1 Lexical Cohesion

This section falls into:

1.1.1 Word Repetition

Knowlson (1976: 5) says Beckett's repetition, with or without variation in most of his works, are not merely structural devices or devices of forming comic patterns. They are tightly related to the main theme of his plays.

Beckett in this play handles not only the repetition of words but also of sentences and paragraphs. In the following example, Krapp repeats the words ('three' and 'five') over and over again. This repetition shows that Beckett focuses on one tape which is 'Tape five' from 'Box three' to be heard throughout the play.

- (3) "Box . . . three . . . spool . . . five. (*he raises his head and stares front. With relish*). Spool! (pause.) Spooooo! (*happy smile. Pause. He bends over table, starts peering and poking at the boxes.*) Box . . . three . . . three . . . four . . . two . . . (*with surprise*) nine! Good God! . . . seven . . . ah! The little rascal! (*he takes up the box, peers at it.*) Box three. (*he lays it on the table, opens it and peers at spools inside.*) Spool . . . (*he peers at the ledger*) . . . five . . . (*he peers at spool*) . . . five . . . five . . . ah! the little scoundrel! (*he takes out a spool, peers at it.*) Spool five. (*he lays it on table, closes box three, puts it back with the others, takes up the spool.*) Box three, spool five".

(Beckett,1976:10)

Sentence repetition can be found in the example below:

- (4) "Ah finish your booze now and get to your bed. Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that. Leave it at that.

(ibid: 19)

Repeating a whole paragraph, in the following example sheds light on the physical side of Krapp's love story:

- (5) "We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! (Pause.) I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side."

(ibid:17)

This paragraph is mentioned on page (17) and repeated on page (19-20). Krapp winds the tape back to repeat the same part. This action emphasizes the importance of the information it contains. It also reflects Beckett's real love story.

1.1.2 Using Synonyms

Beckett uses synonyms from time to time. In the following example, Beckett uses the verb "fancy" as a synonym of the verb "imagine" in order not to make his language boring:

- (6) "I close my eyes and try and imagine them. *Pause. Krapp closes his eyes briefly. ... Wonderful woman, though. Connaught, I fancy.*"

(Beckett,1976:12)

Sometimes Beckett uses a synonym of more than one word to replace a single word, for example (memorable=never to be forgotten). See the following example:

- (7) "Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indulgence until that memorable night in March at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing."

(ibid: 15)

In fact, using synonyms appears in a new frame when Beckett puts the word "viduity" side by side with its detail meaning or definition. See the following example:

- (8) "*(reading from dictionary)*. State—or condition of being—or remaining—a widow—or widower. (Looks up. Puzzeled.) Being—or remainig? . . . (Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.) "Deep weeds of viduity" . . . Also of an animal, especially a bird . . . the vidua or weaver bird . . . Black plumge of male . . . (He looks up. With relish.) The vidua bird!"

(ibid: 14)

Here, old Krapp is confused and uncertain about the exact meaning of the word "viduity" used by young Krapp of the tape although it is so clear from the context of the speech. Yet, the old Krapp refuses to recognize the fact of his mother's death. That is why he moves to another meaning of the entry in the dictionary which is "the vidua or weaver-bird" which is far away from the real meaning the context determines.

1.1.3 Superordinates and Generals

Beckett links words in many places either by mentioning the general thing of the word or what is called superordinate, for instance (animal/bird) that can be found in the example above.

"A bird" is a particular part of a more general word "animal". "A bird" in return can be referred to as a superordinate of a specific kind of birds which is "vidua or weaver-bird".

1.1.4 Opposites and Related Words

"Krapp's Last Tape" is full of opposite images. In the following examples, Beckett uses incompatible opposites near each other.

(9) "all the light and dark and famine and feasting of . . . (*hesitates*) . . . the ages!"

(Beckett1976: 18)

(10) "(KRAPP switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on)"

(ibid: 14)

(11) "Hard to think of her as a girl. Wonderful woman though. ... Did I sing as a boy? No. (Pause.) Did I ever sing? No."

Beckett uses words like (light, switch off, and girl) that are so easy to the reader to expect their opposites because there are no other alternatives.

In the following extract, Beckett uses the antonym (day and night):

(12) " KRAPP: (sings). Now the day is over

Night is drawing nigh-igh,

Shadows—"

(ibid: 13)

It is not necessary to use two opposite words to reflect the concept of opposition. The use of opposite ideas side by side serves the same aim. Life of people after the Second World War was full of contrast, uncertainty, and confusion. So, Beckett applies these features in his plays by using opposites

and antonyms (that have been dealt with above), and contrast images just as 'dark nurse' in the following example:

- (13) "Mother at rest at last. . . . Hm. . . . The dark ball. . . . (*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Pazzled.*) The black ball? (*He peers again at ledger, reads.*) The dark nurse. (*He raises his head, broods, peers again at ledger, reads.*) Slight improvement in bowel condition."

(ibid: 11)

Everyone knows that 'dark' is a symbol of bleakness and death while 'nurse' is a symbol of mercy and life. Yet, using this contrast here is justified since Krapp is talking about the death of a mother who was sick, so she was in need to a nurse. Describing the nurse who was helping his mother in her sickness as being dark is a reference to his mother's death.

In the example below, Beckett makes another contrast:

- (14) "Crawled out once or twice, before the summer was cold. Sat shivering in the park, drowned in dreams and burning to be gone. Not a soul. (Pause.) Last fancies."

(Beckett, 1976: 18)

Summer should not be cold. The only reason that justifies this contrast is that the thirty-nine year old Krapp is sitting outside (in the park) at midnight. In the same example, there is another contrast when the sixty-nine year old Krapp describes himself, thirty years ago, as being (drowned and burning). This contradictory image is justified later on when Krapp (aged 69) continues saying "Last fancies", meaning that he merely imagines so.

Another contrast can be found obviously in this example:

- (15) "... With all this darkness around me I feel less alone."

(ibid: 12)

Darkness around persona increases his loneliness. In the example above, the decrease of loneliness while Krapp is surrounded by darkness adds a sense of oddness and contrast. Through such contradictory images, Beckett tries to say that darkness became a common feature that characterized people's lives at that time since they were so depressed and hopeless.

'Celebrated the awful occasion' is another example of contrast because celebration is an action which occurs when there is a happy occasion not an awful one. So, making such strange mixture reinforces the theme of opposition.

As contrast and opposition have meaning relations, it is possible to study contrast within opposition.

1.2 Grammatical Cohesion

This section falls into:

1.2.1 Substitution

This cohesive device strengthens the link between one part of the text and what precedes it. In the example below, Beckett uses a verbal substitution that links two sentences together.

(16) "I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—(Pause.)—
after a few moments she did, ..."

(Beckett, 1976: 12)

The verb 'did' is used as a substitution for 'opened her eyes and looked at me'.

1.2.2 Ellipsis

To omit a word here or a clause there is a trick used by a writer to fasten pieces of his text together. For instance, Beckett here uses a noun ellipsis:

(17) "*(strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp's at a much earlier time).*"

(ibid: 11)

Here, the elliptical word is 'voice'.

1.2.3 Reference Words

Before dealing with the reference words manipulated by Beckett all over the play in question, there is an urgent necessity to know the meaning of these words and how they are different from their substitutes.

Salkie (1994: 64) makes clear that reference words carry no full meaning by themselves without the help of their environment.

The first difference between reference and substitution is that reference shows the relation between the meaning of a word and its milieu that can be the text or the real world (ibid: 65).

The second difference is that one is free to use a substitute or the original word instead while using reference is inevitable and there is no chance to replace the reference item with the original word (Salkie, 1994: 66).

No one denies the important role that reference words play to link sentences of a text tightly. Beckett has used certain

personal references in writing 'Krapp's Last Tape' but not in a usual way. See the following example:

- (18) "I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to . . .
(hesitates) . . . me. (Pause.) Krapp."

(Beckett, 1976: 12)

Usually the reference word follows the word it refers back to, yet in the example above the reference word 'me' precedes the original word 'Krapp'.

Here is another example of personal reference:

- (19) "... Old Miss McGlome always sings at this hour. But not tonight. Songs of her girlhood, she says. Hard to think of her as a girl. ..."

(ibid: 12)

In the following example, the demonstrative reference can be noticed:

- (20) "... Everything there, everything, all the—(*Realizes this is not being recorded, switches on.*) Everything there, everything in this old muckball, ..."

(ibid: 18)

The third kind of reference, which is comparative reference, can be found in the following example:

- (21) "... after her long viduity (*Krapp gives a start*), and the— (*Krapp switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on*)— ..."

(ibid: 14)

1.2.4 Connectives

There are many types of connectives yet Salkie (1995: 76) concentrates on four types only. The first type is additive connectives whose presence in a sentence informs the reader that there is more information to add. See the following example:

- (22) "*Finally he has an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging, and goes with all the speed he can muster backstage into darkness.*"

(Beckett, 1976: 10)

'That is to say' is an additive connective used by Beckett in its abbreviated form, for example:

- (23) "*Front center a small table, the two drawers of which open towards the audience.*

Sitting at the table, facing front, i.e. across from the drawers, a wearish old man: KRAPP." (ibid: 9)

'Also' is another additive connective used when Krapp is looking for another meaning of the word "viduity". See example number (8).

The second kind of connectives is opposition connectives that shift the attention of the reader to another idea completely different from the previous one just as the case in the following example:

- (24) "*We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side"*

(ibid:20)

In the example below, Beckett makes a strange blend between the additive and opposition connectives:

- (25) "Whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me. And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her—not having been introduced—she threatened to call a policeman."

(ibid: 15)

The connective before the last one is the causal one. The cause connectives are used to justify what has come before. For example:

- (26) "... but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. ..."

(ibid: 17)

The fourth and last sort of connectives is time connectives. This sort shows the sequence of the events. Just like the other types of connectives, Beckett has successfully used this one. 'Then' is the most common connective of time.

- (27) "... --upper lake, with the punt, bathed off the bank, then pushed out into the stream and drifted. ..."

(Beckett, 1976: 16)

'Finally' is also a time connective that indicates the sequence of the events in the following example:

- (28) "*He turns, advances to the edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he bites off the end, turns aside and begins pacing to and fro at edge of stage, ..."*

(ibid: 10)

1.3 Beyond Cohesion

Larger Patterns

A certain way to structure information in a text, or even extract, is to make it coherent. To analyse this kind of situation, it is important not to deal with the text in isolation, but in conjunction with the knowledge and expectation of language users. That is to say, texts are organized by writers, consciously or not, into larger patterns. One of these patterns is the Background Problem Solution Evaluation Pattern adopted by Salkie in his model.

What is needed to know to understand the situation is presented within Background. The Problem presents the dilemma, crisis or puzzle of the situation. The solution of the dilemma or crisis and the overcoming of the puzzle come in the item of Solution. Whether the solution is good or not is determined within the item of Evaluation. And if there are two solutions rather than one, the best one is assessed within Evaluation (Salkie, 1994:91).

Here is the application of this pattern on an extract taken from the play in question"

The Extract:

Tape: "—back on the year that is gone, with what I hope is perhaps a glint of the old eye to come, there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn, after her long vidiuty (KRAPP gives a start), and the—(KRAPP switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on)—a- dying, after her long vidiuty, and the—

KRAPP switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of 'vidiuty'. No sound. He gets up, goes

backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it on table, sits down and looks up the word.

Krapp: (*reading from dictionary*). State—or condition—of being—or remaining—a widow—or—widower. (*Looks up. Puzzled.*) Being—or remaining? . . . (*Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.*) 'Deep weeds of vidiuity.' . . . Also of an animal, especially a bird . . . the vidua or weaver-bird. . . . Black plumage of male. . . . (*He looks up. With relish.*) The vidua-bird!

Pause. He closes dictionary, switches on, resumes listening posture."

(Beckett, 1976: 14)

The Background:

Krapp, at the age of sixty-nine, is listening to a tape recorded by himself when he was thirty-nine year old and celebrating his birthday alone.

The Problem:

While the old Krapp is listening to the tape, he cannot remember the meaning of 'viduity'.

The Solution:

As a solution to this dilemma, Krapp switches the tape recorder off, winds back the tape a little bit, switches it on again, and listens carefully to the word. Yet, he fails again to remember. So, he brings a large dictionary to check the meaning of the word, finds two different meanings of the same word, feels confused, and then picks up the second meaning. From the last line, it is clear, according to Krapp, that the dilemma has ended. So, he closes the dictionary and sits in silence.

The Evaluation:

The evaluation of the solution tends to be negative since widowhood is the closest meaning of the word according to the situation.

Conclusions

The concluding remarks can be summed up as follows:

1. Beckett uses the element of repetition not only with words but also with sentences and paragraphs.
2. Beckett uses phrases and complete definitions as synonyms of words.
3. Using superordinates and generals is so important to link the parts of the text. For that reason, Beckett uses them to make his text coherent.
4. Contrast, as a literary device, has been classed, in this research, under the label of the cohesive device 'opposition'.
5. Beckett uses only one type of substitution (verbal substitution) and one type of ellipsis (noun ellipsis) but this maybe rendered to the shortness of the play that consists of twelve pages only. Yet he succeeds in using the whole three types of references (personal, demonstrative, and comparative references).
6. Connectives form the hugest component among the grammatical cohesive devices. Therefore, Salkie focuses on only four types of connectives that are applied in the play in question. He also makes a blend between two types of them.

7. What is beyond cohesion can be used as a successful way to analyse any text. Salkie displays a pattern of four elements: Background, problem, solution, and evaluation. The importance of this pattern lies in presenting a text or extract from another perspective that may aid the reader to reach a wider comprehension of what he reads. It also gives him an opportunity to assess the character's way to solve his problems.

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تحليل الخطاب لمسرحية سامويل بيكيت "آخر شريط مسجل لكراب"

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الملخص

يعتقد العديد منا بأن اللغة المستخدمة في كتابة المسرحيات العابثة هي لغة تافهة ولا تحتوي على أدوات ربط. وهذا البحث يثبت العكس. لا يمكن الإنكار بأن هذه اللغة ذات جمل غير مكتملة، أو مجزأة وملبئة بالوقفات (سواء كانت طويلة أو قصيرة)، ولكن دراستها وتحليلها في الوقت نفسه مهمة تستحق العناء. إن هذا البحث محدد بطريقة (سالكي) في تحليل الخطاب، وهي مطبقة على مسرحية بيكيت "آخر شريط مسجل لكراب" المأخوذة بوصفها انموذجاً للمسرحيات العابثة، وعلى الرغم من كونها مسرحية ذات فصل واحد مكون من ست صفحات فقط، إلا إنها مادة غنية للدراسة والبحث. إن سبب إختيار هذه المسرحية بالتحديد هو إن كراب الذي هو الشخصية الوحيدة في المسرحية يستعمل لغتين مختلفتين: لغة كراب الشاب التي تبدو منطقية وواقعية وذات معنى، ولغة كراب ذي التسعة والسنتين عاماً بالمقابل تعد مثلاً ممتازاً للغة مسرح العبث على الرغم من أن أدوات الربط قد أدرجت ضمنها من حين لآخر.

تشمل طريقة (سالكي) ثلاثة أقسام: إثنان منها يرتبطان بتحليل اللغة، والجزء الثالث يرتبط بتحليل الموقف. يؤدي التعامل مع هذه الأجزاء بالبحث الى إستنتاج بعض النقاط المستخلصة كدليل على ما ذكر أعلاه.