

Some Modes of Devaluation of language in Beckett s Waiting for Godot

Dr.Zeydan Khalaf Omar
College of Education-University of Anbar

Abstract

Beckett s Waiting for Godot was originally written in French under the title En attendant Godot and later on translated by Beckett himself. There are two tramps Vladimir and Estragon who wait for the appearance of Godot in a bare landscape. This play represents the theatre of the absurd in which people are presented as living in an unfathomable world, which they can neither comprehend nor understand. They are doomed endlessly to repeat the same futile and meaningless actions. This gloomy attitude towards life was developed first in Europe which witnessed two fatal wars.

Beckett s Waiting for Godot exhausts man s rationale efforts to explore reality and seek the meaning of existence and self. It addresses the essential concerns of man and his universe such as his craving for meaning and knowledge of existence, the limitation of his mind in the process of understanding, and the failure of human efforts to form a meaning out of the chaos of existence.

In the present paper , absurdity has been defined according to the different modes of disintegration of language, such as misunderstanding, repetition, nonsense, clichés , etc. The writer breaks the rules of conversational language and deliberately uses a mysterious and absurd form of language, language is devaluated because Beckett feels that it hides more things than it reveals. The dialogue is characterized by the gap between what is uttered and what is conveyed thus language serves to reinforce inertia instead of stimulating action.

1. Introduction

Beckett s Waiting for Godot has challenged the critics in their attempts to explore the ideas and the type of language adopted in it. There is much discussion and little agreement among his critics about what his play says and what it implies.

The one aspect of his play that has aroused a considerable interest is the type of language used by this writer. He tends to a radical devaluation of language which takes various modes. This deliberate

devaluation reflects the modern temper of questioning the efficiency of language as an instrument of genuine communication.

The play is in two acts each of which almost follows the same pattern. Two tramps, dressed in rags, are found on an empty stage representing a country road. They are trying to keep an appointment with Mr. Godot, but they are not sure with whom the appointment is to be and what its purpose is.

My prime concern is not with the plot of this play, but rather with some modes of devaluation of language employed by Beckett herein. The language employed by Beckett has no grip on reality. In stead of describing what is happening, it misinterprets it or pushes it to one side. It prevents action instead of producing it. Intentions and utterances slide in contradictory directions. It is a poor, faulty instrument but there is nothing else to work with. The writer's genius is shown in his ability to turn words against themselves, making them show up their own emptiness. The language that can impose such effects on an audience must be a very special one. It is the language of this culture (at least in Europe) that has created its lies. Thus it is the aim of the absurd drama to tear language apart, until it discloses its deceptions. *Waiting for Godot* represents Beckett's real triumph. It brought him his international fame and established him as one of the leading names of the theatre of the absurd.

2. The Modes of Devaluation

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* various modes of devaluation of language can be traced. It can be said that there is nonsense, repetition, deviation of syntax and punctuation marks, the use of foreign words, lack of cohesion and the resort to meaningless dialogue.

In this research two of these modes, namely the nonsense and repetition will be studied. The emphasis on these two modes springs from the fact that language, according to Beckett, is meaningless. Thus it is replaced by either nonsense or repetition. These two modes represent the circularity and the emptiness of life of the European people after the second world war. It is an absurd world which is a frightening one. It has in itself no norms, no absolutes, no consoling certainties and no directions. People living in it have no sense or purpose. The characters, according to Brown "speak ordinary words that neither represent them accurately nor carry definition; when they seem to agree, they may be severally be thinking of different objects or resolving on opposite actions." (1) Here we have drama that moves

from dialogue to solospeech at any moment. Language is repetitive , laughable and pathetic.

2.1 Nonsense

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* it could be said that dialogue is useless because there is nothing worthwhile to talk about. This is in agreement with the absurdist's belief that since life is meaningless, communication among human beings is useless. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meanings, and where there is no communication there can be no exchange of thought.

A true understanding of the nonsensical language used in this play must be based on an examination of the function of language in a stage dialogue. What goes on between the two tramps, for example, is only a huge accumulation of words which are mainly intended to pass time and thus overcome the agony of silence. Consider:

Vladimir: Say something!

Estragon: I'm trying.

(Long silence)

Vladimir: (in anguish). Say anything at all!

Estragon: What do we do now?

Vladimir: Wait for Godot. Act Two . P. 63

This empty speech is in conformity with the theme of the play which is represented in the first sentence uttered in this play:

Estragon (giving up again). Nothing to be done. Act One P.9

While they are waiting, Vladimir and Estragon try to pass the time by starting some sort of conversation: various topics recur in a seemingly haphazard fashion: Estragon: (recoiling before Pozzo). That's to say... You understand... the dusk...

Pozzo: waiting ? so you were waiting for him ? Act One p.23.

Lucky's long speech exposes a distracted mind which has lost the ability to bind the ideas and thus lost its control so as to utter disconnected thoughts : it occupies more than two pages without having a separate sentence :

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public
works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal
god quaquaquaquaqu with white beard
quaquaquaquaqu outside the time without existence
who from the heights of divine apathia divine
athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some
exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell

and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the Firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast and considering what is more that as a result of the labours left unfinished crowned by the acacacademy of anthropopometry of essay in posy ...Act One pp.42-43.

The ultimate meaning is lost in a maze of irrelevance and incoherence. The speech degenerates into mere noises. For example, the Latin term (qua) is a common term in scholastic theological debates, but in this case the repetition of the term becomes a quacking sound , adding a laughable note

to the speech. Similarly, the vocabulary becomes an absurd element: (aphasia) describes loss of speech due to brain injury , and (apathia) is a fictitious term obviously related to the English word (apathy).(2)Neither makes sense in the context.

The emptiness of dialogue clearly indicates the emptiness of the characters relationship with each other and the boredom of their life.The dialogue often goes in a form of cross talk:

Pozzo: And thank you.

Vladimir: Thank you.

Pozzo: Not at all.

Estragon: Yes, yes.

Pozzo: No, no .

Vladimir: Yes, yes.

Estragon: No , no. Act One P. 47

This swift repartee , according to Metwally is amusing ,but it is overcharged with metaphysical implications about the inadequacy of a human language.(3).

Such a playful and nonsensical language extends to complete irrelevant questions and answers:

Estragon: Why doesn't he put down his bags?

Vladimir: Rubbish.

Estragon: Are you sure?

Vladimir: Damn it, haven't you already told us ? Act One p.41

The dialogue in this play, in Al-Alwan's words is based on the principle that each line obliterates what is said in the previous line.(4).Consider:

Estragon: What a day !

Vladimir: Who beat you ? Tell me.

Estragon: Another day done with. Act Two p.59

In a dialogue like this , there is little verbal communication between the characters. Esslin states that :

They (two tramps) were merely using language to fill the emptiness between them, to cancel the fact that they had no desire to tell each other anything at all. In other words , from being a noble instrument of genuine communication language has become a kind of ballast filling empty spaces.(5)

Such a nonsense on the part of language extends to the use of foreign words. In this affair, Henchcliffe says that ...since Beckett's care for language is

notorious , he must deliberately have allowed a French nonsense word, with its implications, to stand in the English translation...(6)

Vladimir: But we could have done without it.

Estragon: Que voulez- vous?

Vladimir: I beg your pardon?

Estragon: Que voulez- vous?

Vladimir: Ah ! que voulez- vous. Exactly.

Act Two p. 65

Sometimes peculiar words are exchanged . Consider:

Estragon: Gonococcus ! Spirochaete !

Act Two p. 73

Vladimir: Moron !

Estragon: Vermin !

Vladimir: Abortion !

Estragon: Morpion !

Act Two p.75

This frivolous and trivial language might be intended by Beckett to serve certain purposes. Esslin considers Lucky's speech as a kind of parody to scientific and philosophical argument: (7)

That as a result of the labours unfinished of Testew and Cunard it is established as hereinafter but not so fast for reasons unknown that as a result of the public works of puncher and wattman ...

Act Two p. 43

This kind of gibberish forces Beckett to resort to the use of gestures and mimes which could be traced almost on each page.

2-2 Repetition

Upon reading or hearing Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* one becomes aware of his use of repetition. This characteristic will be tackled as a mode of the disintegrated language employed by Beckett. It is not the kind of repetition which is directed towards emphasis or additional explanation. It serves a completely different purpose. It shows us the character's desperate struggle to find the correct word and to fill the emptiness of the dialogue. Constant repetition always makes a word seems strange, pulling it loose from its usual context.

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* we notice that not only words and sentences are repeated, but even Act Two is almost a duplication of Act One itself. Characters appear in couplets, and one character often echoes the other changing the tone. Not only this, but even the gestures and movements are repetitive. According to Cohn,

Waiting for Godot is woven with repetition. Acts

and action repeat; props, lighting and settings

repeat, words repeat- doubles, triplets, multiplets,

in a single voice or two voices; less often, three

voices, and almost never four. (8) Repetition is intended by Beckett, because it maybe the only thing left in the hands of the characters. It works as a delusive means to reduce the degree of their boredom though paradoxically it is a sign of boredom itself. (9)

Beckett's recourse to repetition is, again, due to the meaninglessness of language in a meaningless life. Consider this dialogue:

Estragon: What am I to say ?

Vladimir: Say, I am happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Vladimir: So am I.

Estragon: So am I.

Act Two p.60

Thus the dialogue continues in its doleful repetitive course. Repetition in this play takes the following forms:

1- Refrain

Refrain in drama is defined by Cohn as " word or words often repeated during the course of a play, so that the audience grows aware of that repetition"(10). The major refrain in this play is the following:

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't .

Estragon: Why not ?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: Ah . (11)

The word " Godot" itself can be considered as a refrain word. Every now and then, the tramps mention their wait for Godot. When Vladimir is found lonely on the stage, he starts singing a meaningless song where the refrain " And dug the dog a tomb" is repeated for five times. Just as the entire structure of the play is repetitious and circular in nature, so Vladimir's song is recited similarly. Such refrains give the play a circular movement. They serve in Hayward's words to " communicate spontaneous image to the audience". (12)

2- Doublets

This play illustrates Beckett's versatile range of echo doublets (uttering words and sentences twice). Examine the following doublets used by the four main characters:

Estragon: This is how it is. (He reflects). The bough ... the bough ... (Angrily). Use your head, can't you?

Vladimir: You're my only hope Act One P. 17

Pozzo: (groaning, clutching his head). I can't bear it ... any longer... the way he goes on ... you've an idea ... it's terrible ... he must go ... (he waves his arms) ... I'm going mad... (he collapses, his head in his hands) ... I can't bear it any longer.

Act One p.34

Vladimir: A charnel- house ! A charnel- house !

Estragon: You don't have to look. Act Two p.64

Even in Lucky's speech, we can trace doublets which are full of bogus learned references:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public
works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal
god quaquaquaqu with white beard
quaquaquaqu outside time without extension

Act One p. 42

3- Triplets

Decidedly less often than doublets, Beckett resorts to triplets (repetition of words and sentences for three times), whether simple or echo. A simple triplet may be sarcastic:

Estragon: That would be too bad, really too bad. (pause) wouldn't it, Didi, be really too bad? (pause)

Act One p.16

Early in the play another acho triplet is repeated, with speaker's reversed:

Vladimir: It hurts?

Estragon: Hurts ! He wants to know if it hurts.

Act One p.10

Sometimes triplets take the form of interrogatives. An example of these is Vladimir's inquiry from pozzo regarding Lucky which covers the pages 31-34:

Vladimir: You want to get rid of him?,

Which once takes the form of a nonsensical question " You waagerrim?"

Thus refrains and doublets or triplets constitute the warp and woof of waiting for Godot in which gestural repetition is grounded on verbal repetition. Generally speaking, Beckett relies on these types of repetition to achieve a sense of boredom and monotony in the spectators. The words lose their dynamic power to communicate, the power of achievement and action. Therefore the repetitive device seems to be a very suitable means to reach this dramatic purpose.

3- Conclusion

The findings summed up in this research have revealed unquestionably Beckett's devaluation of language. This devaluation takes various modes which are deliberate. Beckett's intention seems to spring from the idea that since life is meaningless and useless, language is useless too. Dialogue is often replaced by gestures, silence and mimes. It may often seem as though the words need no interpretation at all. The action goes beyond the words uttered by the character. Beckett introduces various forms of language, ranging from parody of formal theoretical dialogue, which illustrates the circular pattern into semi monologues. Besides, there is an overwhelming use of silence at the expense of the articulate text. Whenever the characters have exhausted their trivial conversations, whenever they can no longer find some activity to help them pass the time, they think of leaving. In addition to that, the characters frequently throw words at one another without receiving any adequate reply. It can be said that the conversations reach no logical, coherent conclusions. This is in agreement with the absurdist's belief that since life is meaningless, communication among human beings is useless. Where there is no communication there can be no exchange of thought.

An outstanding finding can also be pointed out: language cannot be separated from theme. The absurdist s language satisfies the essential requirements of an absured theme, because their language is disintegrated and it loses its function as a means of communication. This means that they refuse to recognize the centrality of language.

Notes

- 1. John Russel Brown, Theatre Language (London: The Penguin Press, 1972) p.48.**
- 2. See Webster s Third New International Dictionary, Noah Webster(ed).Chicago: William Benton, Publisher.Vol.1, 1966 PP.98-99.**
- 3. Abdalla Metwalli, Studies in Modern Drama (Beirut: Bouheiry Brothers, 1971), P. 128.**
- 4. Mona A. Sahib Al-Alwan, Shakespeare and the Theatre of the Absurd. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Washington State University,1983), P.10.**
- 5. Martin Esslin, Absurd Drama (London: Nicholes & Company Ltd., 1976), P. 14.**
- 6. Arnold Hinchliffe, The Absurd : The Critical Idiom (Bristol: J.W Arrowsmith Ltd.,1969), P.64.**
- 7. Martin Esslin, Godot & His Children : The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in Modern British Dramatists edited by J.R Brown (Princeton. N. J, 1968), P. 60.**
- 8. Ruby Cohn, Just Plays:Becketts Theatre (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), P. 105.**
- 9. See Saad Fadhil Abbas, Traces of the Absurd Theatre in Recent Iraqi Plays. Unpublished M.A Dissertation. University of Baghdad. 1977, P.78.**
- 10. Ruby Cohn, op. cit, p.102.**
- 11. See Samuel Beckett Waiting for Godot. London: Faber & Faber 1965, Pages 48, 68, 71, 78, 84.**
- 12. Susan Hayward, The Use of Refrain in Beckett s Play, Language & Style,Vol. VIII, No. 4 P. 292.**

Bibliography

Abbas, Sa ad Fadhil.(1977). Traces of The Absurd Theatre in Recent Iraqi Plays.Unpublished M.A Dissertation. University of Baghdad.

- Al-Alwan, Mona. (1983). Shakespeare and the Theatre of the Absurd. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Washington State University.**
- Beckett, Samuel. (1965). Waiting for Godot. London : Faber and Faber.**
- Brown, John Russel. (1972). Theatre Language. London:The Penguin Press.**
- Cohn, Ruby. (1980). Just Plays: Beckett s Theatre. New Jersey Princeton University Press.**
- Esslin, Martin. (1968). Godot and His Children: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in Modern British Dramatists edited by J.R Brown. Princeton: New Jersey.**
- Esslin, Martin. (1976). Absurd Drama. London: Nicholas and Company Ltd.**
- Hayward, Susan. (1975). The Use of Refrain in Beckett s Plays. Language and Style.Vol.Viii No.4.**
- Hinchliffe, Arnold P. (1969). The Absurd : The Critical Idiom.Bristol:J.W Arrowsmith Ltd.**
- Metwally, Abdalla A. (1971). Studies in Modern Drama. Beirut Bouheiry Brothers.**