

Links and Blocks: The Role of Language in Samuel Beckett's Selected Plays

Su-Lien Liao

Abstract—This article explores the language in the four plays of Samuel Beckett – *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Footfalls*. It considers the way in which Beckett uses language, especially through fragmentation utterances, repetitions, monologues, contradictions, and silence. It discusses the function of language in modern society, in the Theater of the Absurd, and in the plays. Paradoxically enough, his plays attempt to communicate the incommunicability of language.

Keywords—Language, Samuel Beckett, theater of the absurd.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN spite of the onslaught on language in the absurd theater, language plays a pivotal role in Beckett's plays both as a link between people and as a block that inhibits interpersonal relationship.

The functions of language are to express one's ideas, thoughts, and feelings, and also to enable one to communicate with the others. Language must be meaningful both to the speaker and to the listener; if not, they cannot communicate. Communication is possible when the speaker and listener have common concepts of the system of language they use. But for Beckett, language is not interactive; on the contrary, it is private: words germinate in the mind of the speaker; at an infinite distance from other people and also from the things the words signify.

The limitation of language as a communicative instrument is one of the major concerns of the theater of the absurd. The absurdist playwrights attempt to focus the audience's attention on the inadequacies and weakness of language. In their plays, language no longer functions as a communicative instrument for people to express their thoughts and feelings. For most people, language is used not only to reveal the truth, but also to conceal the truth. For the absurdist playwrights, even the idea of truth is an absurdity. For them, language seems to have lost its function of revelation and concealment. Words for them have become cliché-ridden and sterile, reflecting the sterility and meaninglessness of modern life.

In spite of Beckett's awareness of the incommunicability of language, paradoxically enough, language is one of the most powerful means of expressing his view of life. Indeed it is not accurate to say that Beckett devalues language. Rather, he revalues languages, investing it with a new evocative power, which serves to bring out the contemporary bewilderment, and perhaps the glimpses of some feeble hope beyond despair. The

dominant image, however, is that of sterility and absurdity, and Beckett's words unmistakably communicate this.

Beckett has written his masterpieces in French and then translated them into English. Writing in French, it is pointed out, has enabled him to express his ideas, and the images in his mind more clearly and economically. He has chosen French because as Esslin observes, he must have felt that "the use of another language may force him to divert the ingenuity which might be expected on mere embellishments of style in his own idiom to the utmost clarity and economy of expression" [1]. This is a plausible argument, but the choice of language is a personal one, and since he has chosen to have a life-long relationship with Paris, it is but natural that he has written his works originally in French, the vehicle of the avant-garde writers, Beckett's soul companions.

This article explores the language in the four plays of Samuel Beckett – *Waiting for Godot* [2], *Endgame* [3], *Krapp's Last Tape* [4], and *Footfalls* [5]. It considers the way in which Beckett uses language, especially through fragmentation utterances, repetitions, monologues, contradictions, and silences. It discusses the function of language in modern society, in the Theater of the Absurd, and in the plays.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. Section II gives an introduction to the theater of the absurd and the world of Beckett. Section III reviews the structural characters of style in Beckett's use of language. Section IV presents the role of language and reviews how Beckett uses the language in the four plays. Section V provides a summary of conclusions.

II. THE BECKETTIAN WORLD: THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD

Samuel Beckett was born in 1906 in a middle-class Protestant family in Dublin. In 1928, he went to Paris and joined the band of disciples of the famous writer James Joyce who influenced Beckett's writing very deeply. Beckett's first published work was an essay discussing the works of Joyce. In this essay, he points out the need for unity of form and content and also the author's right to create, if necessary, a formidable text irrespective of the difficulties the readers may have in understanding it. Beckett practices what he argues for in this essay in all his later works.

In 1953, Samuel Beckett's work – *Waiting for Godot* challenged the audience and the critics alike to find its meaning. It opened a new age for the theater – the Theater of the Absurd. Hale discusses Beckett's role in modern literature as an artist, a writer who is sensitive to the specificity of his time and capable of translating it into literary and dramatic forms that affect the audience [6].

Lyons thinks that the problems of Beckett's characters are

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also those of modern people [7]. The characters in Beckett's plays are desirous of complete freedom but powerless to fulfill it; supposedly free but governed by their traumatic history. Although they are unsatisfied with the environment in which they exist; they have no alternatives. They search for some meanings in their existence through games of language, through the performance of rituals, in the companionship of the others, and through many improvised "actions," but none of them seem to succeed.

For Beckett, man is conditionally free. His characters, searching meaning in meaninglessness, are always put in a nameless place "with half-remembered, half forgotten past" [8]. Beckett makes them group in a dark county, metaphorizing a hopeless wasteland, in which they become cosmic exiles.

The vagueness and unlocalization of Beckett's setting prevent the audience from perceiving the characters in a historical or specific situation, and force the audience to consider the characters in the plays as the symbolic figures of twentieth-century everyman.

Beckett rejects the use of the sequential plot in his plays. A complete circle, which is Beckett's favorite structure, shapes the whole structure of his play, whose end echoes the beginning. Perhaps Beckett uses the circular structure to imply that change has lost its significance or changes become nothing more than mere repetition. Perhaps he wants to show that man is just part of the process of nature which is an endless cycle. Or perhaps he wants to show that modern men alone with his characters adopt the mechanical process, and the rituals, but fail to see their significance. Fletcher and Fletcher point out that the absence of traditional plot of the realistic plays not only reinforces the repetitiveness and monotony in human existence but also insists on the play being always present, now [9]. Lyon also suggests that the techniques represent the stream of consciousness and question the integrity of objectivity and subjective vision of experience [7].

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF BECKETT'S LANGUAGE

James tabulates eleven structural characteristics of style in Beckett's use of language [10]. They are: repetition, monologue, stichomythia, phatic communion, word grouping, intentional dyntax, contradiction, clichés and pratfall, indelicacy, structural closure, and absence of language (silence).

A. Repetition

Language in Beckett is repetitive. Words, phrases, and sentences recur endlessly. The technique of repetition not only shows the monotonous repetitiveness of human action, but also breaks the sense of linear progression, for everything ends the way it begins. Furthermore, the repetition suggests the characters' inability to solve the problems, or even their unawareness of the problems.

The repetition of words often destroys the power of words, and distances the words from the time of the event which the words try to describe.

B. Monologue

In everyday use, monologue and soliloquy are interchangeable, designating almost any kinds of extended individual utterance. In literature, monologue is the broader category, and soliloquy is one of its species. Shipley gives a distinction between the two words [11]. "Monologue is distinguished from one side of a dialogue by its length and relative completeness and from soliloquy by the fact that it is addressed to someone." A soliloquy is spoken by one person when he is alone or acts as though he were alone. Beckett uses the monologue to show the breakdown of language, and the lack of interaction among the characters. It also indicates the estrangement of these characters from others. The increase in monologues tells us the characters inability to maintain a conversation with the egocentricity, the Beckett characters just want to express their own thoughts and they do not pay attention to other discourses. That is also why they must repeat their questions several times before they get an answer. Most of the time, the answers are not related to the questions. So they become virtually monologues and form part of a questioning game.

C. Stichomythia

Stichomythia in drama is a dialogue which consists of single lines spoken alternately by two characters. In Beckett, stichomythia elevates prose to the level of poetry but does not glorify language or construct beautiful metaphors. By using rhythmic stichomythia, Beckett calls our attention to the transmutation of the order of everyday reality into a "new order of artistic reality" [12].

D. Phatic Communion

Phatic communion is the speech which is used to establish the bonds of social communion between individuals [13]. In Beckett's works, the characters use words as a mean of passing time, as they wait for the things to take their course. That is why there are so many word games in his plays.

E. Intentional Dyntax

Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot* is an example of intentional dyntax. It confuses the readers; it seems to show a mind which is out of control. Lucky's speech is symptomatic of his diminishing powers. He is like an automaton, programmed to make certain deductions from a welter of material. It is thinking without reflection, a mechanical act devoid of wisdom. Though Lucky's powers are on the decline, he could still manage to communicate the very essence of his thought.

F. Contradictions

There are two types of contradictions in Beckett's plays: contradictions of verbal language and contradictions between language and act.

Beckett uses contradictions to work against the effectiveness of language, to imply that language has lost its function. However, his use of contradiction is ironic, for it is based on discrepant awareness on the part of the figure on the stage and the audience.

G. Clichés and Pratfalls

Any expression so often used that its freshness has worn off is called a cliché. A cliché may begin as a colorful expression, but heedless repetition dulls its original brightness. The characters in Beckett's plays use clichés to continue a conversation. The recurring use of cliché shows this necessity to keep in touch, in spite of the vacuity of the language they use. The characters try so hard to find something new to say but they fail. They cannot bare the silence, so the only thing for them to do is to repeat the same words, the same pointless topics, or the questions without answers again and again.

Clichés and pratfalls enhance the comic effect on stage and break the sentimental expectations one may have of a meaningful progression of the action of the plays. Beckett uses clichés and pratfalls to illustrate the inadequacy of language, the pointlessness of everyday conversation. He also uses them to achieve alienation effect to prevent people from sentimental reactions.

H. Absence of Language (Silence)

Silence plays a very important role in the works of Beckett. We may say that in Beckett's plays, silence speaks louder than any other verbal expressions. The recurring silence separates dialogues, isolates the words of the characters, and isolates the characters from one another. Silences are Beckett's most powerful weapon to attack language; they show the ineffectiveness of language, the disintegration of thoughts and speech, thoughts and actions. However, without language there will not be any dramatic silence. Besides, Beckett forces his audience to experience the distances between the characters through the silences between speeches.

Silences speak of the emptiness within, and the agony of knowing it, and the need to break it. The scene presents an audio-visual image that is pathetic, and possibly tragic.

IV. BECKETT'S LANGUAGE IN THE PLAYS

The break-down of language in Beckett's plays is shown by the loss of meaning in the words themselves, by the inability of the characters to remember what has just been said by themselves or others, or by the degeneration of dialogue which becomes a mere game used to pass time. The use of language in the four plays is considered more specifically here.

A. Language in *Waiting for Godot*

Waiting for Godot opens on an open country road where by a solitary tree two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, waiting for someone named Godot. Their waiting is interrupted by Pozzo and his servant, Lucky. Pozzo who carries a whip drives Lucky who carries all the baggage by means of a rope passes round his neck. The four characters engage themselves in what may seem to be an exchange of fragmentary, disjointed utterances. After Pozzo and Lucky leave, a boy enters bringing the message to Vladimir and Estragon that Godot cannot come that day but will come the next day.

Act Two is almost a repetition of Act One. Though, as we see, virtually the same action takes place twice, none of the characters can remember what happened the day before. There

are changes, of course, in Act Two. Pozzo is blind and the rope which binds him and Lucky becomes shorter. Each act of *Waiting for Godot* ends with "Yes, let's go. They do not move." Estragon and Vladimir always talk about leaving the place they are now in the same place they were on the preceding day. The phrase "we are waiting for Godot" is repeated again and again showing the situation in which Estragon and Vladimir are that of waiting. Whenever they are about to lose faith in their "action" or existence they remind themselves of their task. Cohn observes that "the repetitive passages summarize or parody several of the plays themes: the erosive effect of time, the relativity of facts, the futility of human activities, faith in God..." [14]. But the more times a phrase is repeated by the characters, the less power it has. That is why they repeat the sentence "we are waiting for Godot" more frequently in Act Two – when the phrase loses its power they need to convince themselves again.

The repetition of questions is one of Beckett's favorite language games. The question and answer formula can be found throughout the plays. Vladimir and Estragon keep on asking each other some trivial questions to make sure that they are keeping in touch. The questioning process shows that they use language to pass time, the questions they ask need not be answered, nor are they remembered by the questioners.

Repetition of words and phrases reveal the characters' concerns and predilections. Often their language is childish babble showing their regression into childhood which gives them the freedom to play out their absurd games and rituals. The words go to and fro between the characters, keeping them engaged and assuring them that they are not alone in a bleak world.

As language is used to pass time, the monologue enables them to endure the long, meaningless boredom of waiting when dialogue is impossible for them. Sometimes the monologue of a certain character reveals the idea the author wants to communicate. For example, Vladimir questions his own awareness, "Was I sleeping while the other suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?" Vladimir wonders about the nature of his experience. Beckett questions the nature of modern people's experience through the monologue of Vladimir.

The examples of stichomythia may suggest that the words used have no meaning for the listener and the speaker, and that the dialogue leads nowhere, for it does not show the development of the characters' thoughts as ordinary dialogue does. The conversation between Estragon and Vladimir about the voices does not take the action forward. The stichomythia indicates that mutual communication is not necessary in Beckett's world. The characters just need the voices or sounds to fill the void. That is why Estragon cries out "Let's make a little conversation." When the silence is prolonged, he cannot bear it any longer.

Beckett attributes the degeneration of dialogue to monologue, then to babble and sounds to the draining of language of its meaning. These utterances are the reflections of the characters' minds, or rather the thoughts that flash through their minds. They try to connect these reflections with their environment,

the past and the present so that they make some sense of their existence. Almost each stichomythia in *Waiting for Godot* lapses into silence showing the eventual failure of the characters to stave off the unbearable silence from their existence.

B. Language in Endgame

There are four characters in *Endgame*. The servant, Clov is the only character who can move. Hamm, the master, lies in an armchair on castors at the center of stage. Though he is immobile, he is the one who gives orders and wants everything to be done his way. His legless parents are put in two separated ashbins. The four characters confined to a narrow, closed space seem to be the last survivors of some catastrophe that has destroyed everything around. Confined to this twilight world, these characters attempt to while away the time by playing games of language and games of leaving and also by telling stories, but there is nothing new for them to tell, they repeat the old stories again and again. At the end of the play, Nell is dead; Hamm dresses for leaving, but remains motionless at the door when the curtain falls.

"It is finished." is the first sentence of *Endgame*. The words are a parody of Jesus' words on the cross: "it is finished." The words may be taken as a cry of despair or as an utterance suggesting the consummation of Jesus' mission. But, Hamm is not Jesus; his suffering leads nowhere, and saves no one. We do not know whether he means the end of the world, or his life, or his suffering. The words are ironic, a mock imitation of Jesus' words and his agony on the cross. The words "finished" is repeated again and again in the play. Clov's words "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished," and the following Hamm-Clov dialogue echoes the title of the play – *Endgame* for the characters are engaged largely in a play that repeatedly draws our attention to biblical episodes.

Clov's vision of the outside world is a "zero," a vacuous territory. His vision is close to the painter's vision of the exterior world as ashes. The repetition of the words "finished," "zero" along with the title imply that nothing new will happen and emphasizes the theme of "end," "finish," "no more."

Certain words get repeated in the dialogues. Dialogues between Hamm and Clov often start with the word "then" which often prolongs each utterance without in any way serving to specify the meaning. The word "then" which is a silence-filler gives them the time to think another topic to talk about. The word "can't" which occurs in most of their dialogues reveals impotent situations that virtually immobilize the characters involved.

In Beckett's plays, a lot of phrases are repeated again and again. They are used to emphasize an idea or theme, for example, the recurring phrases of "we are getting on," "there are no more..." and "things taking their course" in *Endgame* stress the consuming and decaying of the world in which they exist.

Stichomythia occurs in the dialogue of *Waiting for Godot* very often. There are also a number of examples of stichomythia in *Endgame*, but the characters here do not even have the patience to keep the game of words, or the patience to let other people finish their speeches. Each of the examples of

stichomythia is interrupted by some character. People just want to find someone to be there with them, to hear their words, but do not want to listen to others. That shows the egocentric mind of modern people.

Beckett often uses intentional dyntax to interrupt the prolongation of comic routines, boring banality, or meaningless gestures or dialogue. For instance, Hamm interrupts the possibility of a sustained interaction with the sentence, "We're not beginning to... to ... mean something?" This sentence shows that the characters cannot remember not only what they just have been told but also what they have just spoken. Sometimes the intentional dyntax, especially the repetition of the words with the same meaning expresses the doubt and uncertainty within the character and is used as a powerful tool to achieve the alienation effect which enables the audience to think and to judge.

Clov threatens Hamm that he will leave him. Hamm thinks that Clov cannot leave him; they repeat the question of Clov's staying or leaving very often. Like Estragon and Vladimir, Clov talks about leaving often to convince himself the possibility of his leaving. Clov keeps on saying that he will leave Hamm, leave the house, but he reappears the next moment, a pattern that likely to repeat. As in *Waiting for Godot* and in *Endgame* words do not ensure action. Clov's threatens to leave Hamm, but has not left him. It is not quite clear at the end of the play whether he will leave or not, though he is all set to leave. These lines show the contradiction between language and action. We can always find examples of this type of contradictions in Beckett's plays.

C. Language in Krapp's Last Tape

Krapp who is sixty-nine years old now has kept the habit of recording his review of his life of the year on each of his birthdays for thirty years. He has not only kept the habit of recording, but also the habit of drinking, eating banana, and criticizing his early selves while he listens to his tape. In this play, Krapp listens to three incidents related to his younger selves. Two of the three incidents are about the termination of relationships: one is about his mother's dying day the other is about him and a woman's agreement to stop their relationship.

Kennedy suggests that *Krapp's Last Tape* is about an old man's dialogues with his previous selves [15]. The whole play seems to be composed of several monologues, not dialogues. Though old Krapp comments on what he hears on the tape, there is no exchange between him and his previous selves. Old Krapp is like an author who organizes his material in any way he likes to create his fictional world.

By pressing the buttons on his machine, Krapp recreates experiences by listening to his monologues. He controls and re-experiences the most beautiful or sordid memories of his life with the rewind button of his tape recorder. He re-creates the erotic scene with a girl in a canoe three times in the play.

Not only does he re-experience the previous moments of his life, but also tries to find the meaning of the monologues. Beckett also uses monologue to show the breakdown of language, and the lack of interaction among the characters which indicates the characters' alienation from others. The

numerous monologues tell us the characters' inability to maintain a conversation because of their egocentricity. Because of the egocentricity, people just want to express their own thoughts and do not pay attention to others discourses. That is also why they must repeat their questions several times before they can get answers. Through monologue, Beckett uses the technique of the stream-of-consciousness to attack audience's sense of time, place, and order.

When we hear Hamm talking in monologue to the toy dog, and Krapp to the spool, we feel the sense of isolation, of loneliness of the characters and of modern people. They cannot find hearts which open to them, which are willing to care, to listen.

D. Language in *Footfalls*

In *Footfalls*, May, the protagonist, is presented restlessly pacing the floor from right to left, from left to right. She utters a lot of disconnected sentences while pacing. Another voice which belongs to May's mother is occasionally heard from the darkness.

From the mother's voice, we learn of Mary's addiction to walking. Motion is not enough for May; she must hear the sound of her steps as an evidence of her existence.

The repeated voices of the tape in *Krapp's Last Tape*, and the repeated tempo of May's pace in *Footfalls* "one two three four five six seven eight nine wheel ..." show the mechanical repetitions and sterility of the characters' lives. For the characters of *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Footfalls*, everyday is just an exact repetition of the previous day: Hamm goes around in his room with the help of Clov every day, Clov may be the next Hamm, and Hamm may be the next Nagg, Krapp repeats the recording and listening habit for forty years, May's pacing to and fro never changes day after day.

Most of the dialogues in *Footfalls* are constituted by Amy's questions. The questions in all these plays stress one thing in common: The uncertainty and doubt of the characters' mind.

Exhaustive enumeration and echo are one of Beckett's language devices in repetition; they add the comic elements of the plays. Besides that, we can find enumeration in Hamm – Clov dialogue and May's questions:

May: Would you like me to inject you again?

Voice: Yes, but it is too soon. (Pause.)

May: Would you like me to change your position again?

Voice: Yes, but it is too soon. (Pause.)

May: Straighten your willow? (Pause.) Change your draw sheet? (Pause.) Pass your bedpan? (Pause.) The warming-pan? (Pause.) Moisten your poor lips? (Pause.) Prey with you? (Pause.) For you? (Pause.) Again?

There are numerous dialogues which violate, or obliterate what was just said in the previous speech in Beckett's early plays. There are still contradictions of verbal language in *Footfalls*, every time May asks her mother, "Do you want me to... for you?" She gets the answer "yes" then "but it is too early." "Too late" denies her previous answer "yes."

V. CONCLUSION

When we read these four plays, it is almost impossible for us to ignore the decline of the dialogue. As the dialogue declines, the monologue keeps increasing in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. *Krapp's Last Tape* may be considered as several extended monologues. In *Footfalls*, what matters is not the questions and answers exchanged between May and her mother, but the sounds May makes when she paces the floor. Hence, we may say that in these plays dialogues give way to monologues and monologues to sounds. Beckett uses this strategy to show the mental state of the characters. They know that something debilitating is happening to them, but they do not know what it is nor how could this steady degeneration come to an end. They cannot bear the uncertainty; that is why they must talk. If there is no one to talk to, they still have to resort to monologue or make sounds endlessly to release the tension and to prevent the discourse from coming to an end. It is like whistling in the dark when people are alone. That is also the reason why May says that: "the motion along is not enough, I must heat the feet, however faint they fall".

Beckett's characters talk when they are together, or they indulge in monologues when they are alone. They talk, because they have nothing to do; when they have nothing to say, they keep silence. When they cannot bear the silence any longer, they speak again. Speaking is the only way they can prove to themselves that they are not alone. For Beckett's characters, speaking or playing games or singing songs is intended to pass time. They must wait and endure their lot, but they cannot wait and endure in silence. This is an interesting observation, for words convey thoughts. But in Beckett's world wherever he wants words become patter, and get dissociated from thoughts. Speaking and keeping silence become a cycle presented often to show the inadequacy of language, though the same cycle could communicate meaning wherever Beckett chooses to do so.

We use language to think and to express ourselves. That is why we are frightened when we hear Lucky's irrational speech. The act of speaking gives man his dignity and shows man's ability to think coherently and logically. Lucky's master, Pozzo does not allow him to speak until he is asked to. His action deprives Lucky's ability to coordinate thought and language.

Beckett successfully uses language to demonstrate the function of language in human existence. The language patterns used by the characters emphasize the themes of absurdity and tedium of Beckett's plays. One of Beckett's important themes of human irrationality is presented by the characters' irrational language. The theme of human alienation which is also conveyed in Beckett's new, special and unusual usage of language.

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