

Silence: True Communication

SILENCE, VRAIE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This paper examines the issue of communication in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. The main characters Gus and Ben are simple characters and their means of communication are the central theme in this play. It shows that even though the two characters interact and talk and discuss, they don't really communicate. The essence of the difference between just talking and really communicating is analyzed.

Key words: Silence, communication

Résumé: L'article présent examine le problème de communication dans *Le Serveur muet* de Harold Pinter. Les personnages principaux Gus et Ben sont des figures simples, et leur sens de communication est le thème central de cette pièce. L'article montre que, bien que les deux personnages s'interagissent, parlent et discutent, ils ne communiquent pas véritablement. L'essence de la différence entre la conversation et la communication est analysée.

Mots-Clés: silence, communication

Harold Pinter, English dramatist, was born in 1930, in Hackney in London's East End. He is the son of an English tailor of Eastern European Jewish ancestry, and studied at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Central School of Speech and Drama. One of the most important English playwrights of the last half of the 20th century and the most influential of his generation, Pinter writes what have been called "comedies of menace." Using apparently commonplace characters and settings, he invests his plays with an atmosphere of fear, horror, and mystery. The peculiar tension he creates often derives as much from the long silences between speeches as from the often curt, ambiguous, yet vividly vernacular speeches themselves. His austere language is extremely distinctive, as is the ominous unease it provokes, and he is one of the few writers to have an adjective—Pinteresque—named for him. His plays frequently concern struggles for power in which the issues are obscure and the reasons for defeat and victory undefined. He has won many prestigious honors, the crowning of which was the 2005 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Pinter began his theatrical career as an actor, touring with provincial repertory companies. He has continued to act throughout his career, working on stage, in films, and on radio and television. His first produced effort as a playwright, a one-act drama entitled *The Room* (1957), was followed such plays as *The Birthday Party* (1957,

film 1967), *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), *A Slight Ache* (1958), and *The Dwarfs* (1960). Pinter adapted several of these and later plays for film. *The Caretaker* (1959, film 1963) was his first great commercial and critical success and was followed by numerous plays, including *The Collection* (1961), *The Homecoming* (1964, film 1969), *Landscape* (1967), *Old Times* (1970), *No Man's Land* (1974), *Betrayal* (1978, film 1981), *A Kind of Alaska* (1982), *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *Moonlight* (1993), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), *Celebration* (1999), and *Remembrance of Things Past* (2000). By and large, Pinter's later dramas, often more overtly political than his previous works, have been greeted with less critical acclaim than his earlier plays.

The Dumb Waiter is one of Pinter's masterpiece, in which a dumb waiter, the small lift used to transport meals and dirty crockery between floors in restaurants, is at the centre of Harold Pinter's tense two-hander. Set in an anonymous basement in Birmingham, two assassins await their instructions and as tension turns towards dark farce, the dumb waiter drones into action delivering ever more exotic culinary requests and, eventually, the go-ahead to proceed with the kill with a twist.

Pinter's work is heavily influenced by Samuel Beckett, who used silence-filled pauses for a revolutionary theatrical effect. Pinter has spoken of

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speech as a stratagem designed to cover the nakedness of silence, and these aims are often evident in the dialogue of Gus and Ben. Ben's most prominent response to Gus's constant questions about the nature of their jobs is silence. Lurking underneath this silence is always the threat of violence, the anticipation of something deathly—the play ends as Ben trains his gun on Gus in silence.

In Pinter's plays, the exchange of words between characters is only the most superficial level of communication, while the gestures accompanying verbal exchanges, pauses hesitations and, most essentially, silences form the second level of communication. Pinter commented once on silence, or the so-called subtextual meaning in his plays:

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke-screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silences falls se are still left with echo but are never nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.

Concerning the interactions between the two characters Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, their communicating mainly falls into four types, and in the following examples drawn from *The Dumb Waiter*, how true communication can be only achieved through silences is rather self-evident. The setting of the play is a basement with two beds, a serving hatch, a kitchen and bathroom to the left, and another passage to the right. At the very beginning of the play, in silence, Ben reads a newspaper on his bed while Gus ties his shoelaces on his bed. Gus finishes and walks to the kitchen door, then stops and shakes his foot. Ben watches as Gus takes a flattened matchbox out of his shoe. After he and Ben exchange a glance, Gus puts it in his pocket. From his other shoe, he takes out a flattened cigarette carton. They exchange another look, and Gus puts the carton in his pocket before he leaves for the bathroom. There's a sound of the toilet chain being pulled without it flushing, and Gus returns. Silence is permeated in the room. Both of them have something to do except talking with each other, from which one can hardly imagine the relationship between them: they are actually partners. Ben keeps reading the damned newspaper, while Gus does trivial and meaningless things repetitively. Their eyes meet twice but that doesn't lead to interactions breaking the state of silence. With silence—the stage direction—appearing three times, it is obvious that Either Ben or Gus wants to talk to each other, let alone to say communicate with each other. Silence is the way they protect themselves. The more they express themselves, the more they are exposed to the other, the more dangerous they might feel about themselves.

Comparing to both assassins keeping their mouth

shut, most of the times, either of them remains muted, at the same time the other might raise some topic and thus creating an atmosphere of communicating. See the conversation between Ben and Gus below.

Gus : *I want to ask you something.*

Ben : *What are you doing out there?*

Gus : *Well, I was just—*

Ben : *What about the tea?*

Gus : *I'm just going to make it.*

Ben : *Well, go on. Make it.*

Gus : *Yes, I will. [He sits in a chair. Ruminatively.] He's laid on some very nice crockery this time, I'll say that. It's sort of striped. There's a white stripe. [Ben reads]*

It's very nice. I'll say that. [Ben turns the page.]

Gus wants to ask Ben something, in response, Ben raised another topic questioning what Gus is on earth doing. Thus Gus immediately moves on to where Ben leads their conversation to. Ben demands Gus to make the tea While Gus gives an positive answer, he still sits in the chair appreciating the crockery. Both Ben and Gus, especially Ben, avoid real communication with each other. Towards Gus' questions, Ben either avoid answering the question straightforwardly by changing another topic, or just keep silence as if Ben were not in existence.

In the third type, Ben and Gus just quarrel with each about trivial things. For example, Ben and Gus debate the phrase "light the kettle"; Gus feels one should say the "gas," since that is what is being lit, or "put on the kettle," a phrase his mother used. Ben will have none of this, and challenges Gus to remember the last time he saw his mother (he can't remember). After further arguments about the phrase, in which Ben reminds Gus that he's the senior partner, Ben chokes Gus and screams "THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!" It is the culmination of their debate over the phrase "Light the kettle." More important than the actual debate is the way Ben's language gradually becomes more menacing as he insults and intimidates Gus, challenging him to remember when he last saw his mother and calling attention to his own seniority. The act of choking physically cuts off Gus's ability to speak, making Ben doubly powerful, as his voice grows in power and Gus's diminishes. Ben may also harbor some resentment about Gus's lower-class phrase, and perhaps his hostility springs forth from this. Ben later expresses delight when the more sophisticated man upstairs uses the phrase, "Light the kettle," just as he does.

Towards the end of the play, Gus' repetition of Ben's instructions can illustrate the last type of their communicating. Ben, quietly and with fatigue, gives Gus the instructions for the job, instructions that Gus repeats out loud. Ben instructs Gus to stand behind a

door, but to not answer a knock on the door. He must shut the door behind the man who comes in without exposing himself (Gus), allowing the man to see and approach Ben. When Ben takes out his gun they will have cornered the man. At this point, Gus reminds Ben that so far he hasn't taken his own gun out, but Ben then includes that Gus should have taken his gun out when he closed the door. Moreover, Ben states, the man—or girl—will look at them in silence.

Ben : If there's a knock on the door you don't answer it.

Gus: If there's a knock on the door I don't answer it.

This exchange occurs near the end of the play, in Part four. Ben states a series of instructions to Gus (who repeats each line) as to how they will carry out their job, which ends with their cornering the target with their guns, be it a male or female victim. Pinter directs the actors playing Ben and Gus to deliver their lines with a mechanical detachment, and the effect is that the ghastly deed of murder becomes drained of human emotion and sympathy. Gus is merely an echo, and the echo is much like silence, reinforcing Gus's status as a human "dumb waiter," manipulated and without any voice of his own.

"Silence": the stage direction that often speaks far more clearly than words ever could. The characters in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* are bound by this direction throughout the work, locked in a pantomimic parody of our own world. Pinter's dialogue, the stage directions and the world created within the play must follow this golden rule; however, silence is only one course within the larger meal. By examining the text, reading critical works, and studying Pinter's words himself we find that the meal we have trouble

swallowing is listed on the menu as "communication"; true communication is often something too difficult to even attempt. By "true communication" it is meant the ability to get another person to understand your ideas in their purest form; a notion that, after studying *The Dumb Waiter*, is increasingly in decay.

Pinter, now 75, who has been the doyen of the British theater since his first play—"The Room" was performed in London in 1957—is awarded this year's Nobel Prize for literature, one of the few writers for the English speaking stage ever to be so honored. He joins such pivotal figures of the 20th century theatre as the Irishman Samuel Beckett and the American Eugene O'Neill as laureates of the literary world's most precious prize.

What else would you have called him other than the dramatist of many pauses — those enigmatic, pregnant and at times sinister pauses his actors affected on the stage — that left you wondering, hours after the curtain had come down, how you had ever heard such silence. In his work, the mystery of our human being is inseparable from the conviction that we are precarious creatures inhabiting a world where forces of unreason and contradiction have dark governance.

That was the power of Harold Pinter, a playwright whose originality was so compelling that it has brought into the lexicon the term Pinteresque, to describe an atmosphere of expectation, where real characters speak "unrealistically," or inconsequentially, as people actually do in everyday life. He evoked that atmosphere of dread simply by having his stage protagonists engage in conversational repetitiveness and seeming irrationality, served up as objects of interest in and by themselves.

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