

**Analysing Grice's Maxims in Pinter's Play 'Trouble in the Works' (1959):
A Literary Pragmatic Approach**



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Summary:

The present paper is an application of a literary pragmatic approach to Pinter's drama, namely his play *Trouble in the Works* (1959). To this aim, we analyse the play based on Grice's maxim theory, where we seek to analyse how and why Pinter's characters in the play employ certain linguistic patterns at specific contexts to generate particular dramatic effects. Moreover, this work illustrates that the violation of the conversational rules is the source of absurdity. After analysing the data, the findings of the present enquiry demonstrate how the violations of Grice's cooperative principles account for the absurdity of the play.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Grice's cooperative principles; dramatic texts; Pinter's drama; theatre of the absurd.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language has always been considered as a means of communication. It is used by different 'users' for different purposes and to create different effects. In literature, language is also used discursively for multiple functions. A writer may use language for different intentions, and his product can also be interpreted differently. A novelist or a short story writer, for instance, expresses himself and tells the reader different things via language. A playwright, when presenting his plays acted by characters with an attempt to convey meaning, addresses his audience via language, too. But, what about using language for other less expected purposes for creating uncertainty, for instance, sinking in ambiguity, or looking for nothing into darkness; that is, using language for getting a breach of communication? In this case, isn't language used as a means of manipulation? This kind of language is the major concern of the British

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playwright whose drama is regarded as the unique genre among the other dramatists of his era.

The postmodernist, contemporary playwright and Nobel Prize winner, Harold Pinter (1930-2008) created the so called "Pinteresque" language, a seemingly very simple language. Yet, it most often leads to ambiguity, breach of communication and silence. The choice of such British playwright is due to his position as a prominent contemporary dramatist, and his distinctive use of language as well.

2. The Theatre of the Absurd

Pinter is the playwright to whom belongs the type of drama that critics call 'absurd'. This kind of drama, labelled "The Theatre of the Absurd", is an especially productive tool for foregrounding the routine and common place in verbal interaction (Simpson 1997).

The "Theatre of the Absurd" is a phrase used to describe the plays of the 1950's and 1960's, which were derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus; "*Myth of Sisyphus*" written in 1942. Camus defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd (as cited in Esslin, 1972). Later on, playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and some others shared the view that man inhabits a universe whose meaning is indecipherable and that his place within it is purposeless. For them, man is troubled and obscurely threatened.

Needless to say, drama has, for a long time, not raised any attention from linguists or stylists and was considered as the 'neglected child'. It was until 1970's and 1980's, and with the development of English stylistics researches, a number of linguists become interested in drama.

Analysing Pinter's play, by applying a literary pragmatic approach indeed may provide important insights into the analysis of drama, whose most distinctive feature is its dialogues. So, the main objective of the present work is to show the significant role of pragmatic analysis in clarifying the linguistic behaviour of language users in the process of communication. Besides, the similarities between drama dialogues and ordinary conversations make it possible for the theories of conversational analysis to be applied to the analysis of modern dramatic dialogues. In this respect, an investigation of the structure of verbal interaction will take place and an assessment of the strategies that speakers and hearers use in conversation will be put forward. To this end, Grice's cooperative principles in conversation (1975) will be developed.

It is worth mentioning that the aim of the present paper is not to show the absurdity of Pinter's language or to contend Pinter's relation with Theatre of the Absurd. This work is merely designed to show the degree of absurdity, or oddity as Simpson (1997) calls via a model that seeks to analyse drama dialogues from the structural perspective as well as the strategic one. It is noteworthy that structure and strategy of language are, according to Simpson, regarded as the two important dimensions, which serve as a useful conceptual model for explaining how conversations work.

3 Dramatic Texts

Prior to analysing Pinter's play, it is necessary to give an overview of dramatic texts in general and Pinter's drama in particular. Regarded as a unique tool to explore and express human feeling, drama is considered as an essential form of behaviour in all cultures, and it is a fundamental human activity. It is the specific mode of fiction, which is represented in performance. It is worth mentioning that the structure of dramatic texts is, unlike the other forms of literature, influenced by the stage on which the actors perform drama in theatre and before the audience. This is, however, what is known as a play, which is a term designated by the use of drama in the narrow sense. Yet, the difference between drama and play lies in the fact that the former is literature, which is a written text, whereas the latter is a show, which is usually performed on stage. (Short, 1989, p.141)

Short (1989) once addresses such fundamental question: If we want to understand plays, can we sit in a classroom – or even in an armchair – and read them or should we be sitting in a theatre? It is fundamental because the stylistics of drama is based on the assumption that one can gain a rich understanding of a play by analysing the text. On Short's account, the problems which raise the realm of criticism on the theatrical experience are two-fold. First, plays have to be treated in a different way from other literary works. Second, the object of dramatic criticism becomes variable in the sense that both meanings and value will change not just from one production to another but also from one performance of a particular production to another. So, he claims that there must be a distinction between literary and theatrical analysis. Literary criticism should take the text as its object of investigation and develop techniques of textual analysis able to cope with the implied aspects of meaning. Theatrical criticism deals with comparing different ways of performing the same scene, first, in terms of its theatrical effect and second, in terms of its faithfulness to the dramatic text. Short has always stated that if a close attention is paid to the linguistic form of dramatic texts, a huge amount of information will be inferred about an appropriate way to perform these texts.

4. The Cooperative Principles in conversation: Grice's Maxims

By involving the cooperative principles, this analysis has a focus on the way speakers use different tactics at a particular context during a conversation. As explained by the paradigmatic axis, which is a term known as the axis of selection (Simpson, 2004, p.86), a strategic continuum is formed ranging from direct to indirect along which different types of utterances are given. The indirectness used in these utterances will be explained when presenting the work of the philosopher Paul Grice (1975).

Regarded as one of the first linguists who attempt to account for meaning as it develops in conversation, Paul Grice (1975) distinguishes between what a sentence means and what someone means when uttering that sentence. Grice's article, which was published in 1975 and served for exploring the strategies of verbal interaction, has influenced the study of the way speakers use indirectness in conversation. Grice provides an interpretative model that explains how to draw inferences from

conversation (Culpeper, Short and Verdonk, 1998, p.54). He argues, however, that conversation is considered as a co-operative effort, and he contends that what enables this conversation to carry on is an assumption that we as speakers have purposes for conversing and that we recognise these purposes to be achieved if we co-operate (Cooper in Culpeper, Short and Verdonk, 1998, p.56-57). Grice calls the assumption the "**co-operative principle**" (henceforth CP) and states it imperatively as follows: '*Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged*' (Grice, 1975, p.45). By developing the CP, which is as Simpson points out, a basic assumption that speakers normally plan in order to achieve purposeful and effective communication in conversation (Simpson, 1997, p.148), Grice asserts that if speakers wish to observe the C.P they have to obey four conversational maxims:

- 1- The maxim of **quantity** says that speakers should be as informative as is required, that they should give neither too little information nor too much.
- 2- The maxim of **quality** says that speakers are expected to be sincere; that is, to be saying something that they believe corresponds to reality. They are assumed not to say anything that they believe to be false or anything for which they lack evidence.
- 3- The maxim of **relation** says that speakers are assumed to be saying something that is relevant to what has been said before.
- 4- The maxim of **manner** says that we should be brief and orderly, and avoid obscurity and ambiguity.

These maxims are not regulative as grammatical rules and in a conversation, they are not always observed, otherwise, this conversation would become "**an over-literal, direct and unsophisticated routine**" (Simpson, 1997: 148). Therefore, it is not important to obey the four maxims, and this is in fact the main concern of Grice's theory. Grice (1975) argues that many of the '*non-literal*' meanings that occur in an interaction are derived from "**deliberate departures from these maxims**". The so-called departures can take a number of forms:

a- **Opting out a maxim**: making clear that one is aware of the maxim, but is prevented for some reason from observing it. Politicians and reporters of news can be in this situation.

b- **Violating a maxim**: speakers are said to '*violate*' a maxim when they know that hearers will not know the truth and will only understand the surface meaning of the words. In this respect, speakers supply insufficient information; that is, they say something insincere, irrelevant or ambiguous, and hearers wrongly assume that they are cooperating.

c- **Flouting a maxim**: This is the most interesting way of breaking a maxim. The assumption is not that communication has broken down, but that the speaker has chosen an indirect way of achieving it. It may be that something in the situation prevents giving a direct answer to a question; considerations of politeness may inhibit the speaker to give a direct answer. In many cultures, it can be socially unacceptable to say exactly what is in one's mind unless one knows the hearer very well. Thus, we

might prefer not to say to a shop assistant, for instance, and this is what I usually do when I go shopping, as I hand back a dress, "This looks awful on; I don't want it after all", but rather "I'll go away and think about it and maybe come back later". Here, the speaker is not lying, and the shop assistant knows that s/he has no intention of returning. Similarly, in Britain, if the response to an invitation to a romantic date is "I'm washing my hair tonight", the inviter knows that it means "I'm free but I don't want to go out with you". So, when speakers appear not to follow the maxims but expect hearers to appreciate the meaning implied, as in the case of the shop assistant or the romantic date, we say that they are 'flouting' the maxims.

Just as with an indirect speech act, the speaker implies a function different from the literal meaning of form. Hence, when flouting a maxim, the speaker assumes that the hearer knows that his/her words should not be taken at face value and that they can infer the implicit meaning. Here, the speaker leaves the listener doing some inferencing work so as to reveal the hidden meaning that the utterance conveys. These hidden meanings are referred to as implicatures and they are characterized by the kind of utterances which are situated at the indirect end of the strategy continuum.

5. The Analysis of the Play

Pinter's *Trouble in the Works* is a three- page sketch from a revue called "*One to another*". It was performed for the first time in London in 1959. The sketch is about people in a machine parts' factory. A representative of the workers (Wills) has a meeting with the manager (Fibbs) about rising dissatisfaction among them (the workers). Like all Pinter's plays, the sketch has very few directions. The scene is set at the manager's office in the factory. As Pinter is a firm believer in a small stage set, this sketch is set in a single room. In fact, the setting determines how the workers' representative behaves towards the manager, whereupon he brings some bad news to his boss, but as he represents his colleagues, he has not to back down and admit their defeat in front of their superior. Indeed, he may even enjoy the power he has over his superior. This setting, however, plays an important part in the sketch, for it is considered as a metaphor of society and the leader-follower relationships.

The play describes a conversation between a factory shop steward and his manager. Here, the worker tells the boss that the men in the mill are satisfied with the working conditions and it is the product that they object to. The workers on the one hand are, however, not satisfied with everything they make. In fact, the naming of the products and their ridiculousness that the workers have come to dislike symbolize the uselessness of human activities and make it clear that the conditions of these workers are not to be envied. On the other hand, the manager, who is apparently the founder of the factory and responsible for many of the products that he can only see as examples of perfection, is faced with a wide-spread dissatisfaction and a protest against everything he believes in.

The title of the sketch literally refers to the problems encountered on the factory floor, but metaphorically, it denotes the general issue of problems that arise out of people's dissatisfaction. Hence, it is worth saying that the overall theme of this

sketch is said to be dissatisfaction with the human condition. Although he is using humor and irony, Pinter is, in an absurd dialogue, alluding to the inhuman, ridiculous mechanical nature of industry and the sense of entrapment that people feel when doing meaningless work.

As it belongs to the Absurd Theatre, the sketch comes to its end without providing the reader or audience with a solution. Here, too, the reader or audience can make his own predictions on the ending of the play. Broadly speaking, the contemporary dramatist, Harold Pinter is well-known for his absurdist plays that always make more sense than it is thought. Therefore, the present sketch contains a political satire in the sense that the boss-employee relationship reflects the political consciousness that Pinter had against the conditions witnessing the era when the sketch was written.

As mentioned above, the sketch takes place in an office in a factory, where the manager, Mr. Fibbs, was seated in a swivel chair at a large desk on a raised dais and dressed in a three-piece suit. After a knock at the door entered the representative of the workers, Mr. Wills, and sat down on a small chair in front of the desk and below the dais.

In terms of discourse structure, the dialogue is organized into three blocks of exchanges. These blocks are collections of exchanges which are broadly related by the attitude of the interactants to each other. The first block of these exchanges shows Fibbs dominant over Wills and the third block demonstrates Wills dominant over Fibbs, while the second bulk of the exchanges provides the mediation for the change of their attitudes. The shift from one situation to another is, indeed, regarded as one of the characteristics of such sketch, which is its absurdity. The fact that by the end of the sketch the role relations, being established at the beginning of the piece between the two characters and which should normally exist between an employer and a worker, has been reversed really denotes the absurd nature of the text.

It is worth noting that the division of this text into three sections has deliberately been done. The first section ends in Wills' sentence:

Wills: Oh, the men are very grateful for all the amenities, sir.

The second section starts with Wills' utterance:

Wills: They just don't like the products.

The reason for selecting such division is due to the fact that Wills' above sentence is considered as a hinge point that joins the two sections by virtue that in this sentence Wills initiates for the first time a conversational exchange in the sketch. Here, Wills first replies to Fibbs question about the good amenities that Fibbs is, as all the managers are, satisfied. Then, he adds a new comment.

A key structural feature of the passage is that in the first section of the dialogue, it is Fibbs who is responsible for initiating every single exchange; it is he who makes all the opening moves and controls the topic of discourse, which is being aware of the cause of the trouble. He also uses the speech acts of commanding and questioning which denote that he is socially superior to Wills. This superiority, however, can be easily perceived from the beginning. Fibbs always uses last name only, whereas Wills uses either the title plus the last name (Mr. Fibbs) or "sir".

Wills, by contrast, initiates nothing and is instead answering Fibbs's questions exactly by producing no extra comments of his own. He even uses the lexical items that are used by Fibbs rather than bringing his own words. In this respect, Wills is charged with the responsibility for supplying supporting moves to Fibbs's opening moves. The bulk of exchanges, here, are straightforwardly two-part structure. Some are of the 'stating' type where the act *statement* evokes the act *acknowledgement*:

Fibbs: Well, now, Wills, I hear there's been a little trouble in the factory.

Wills: Yes, I ...I suppose you could call it that, Mr. Fibbs.

There is a marked exception to this dominant pattern of structure, which takes the form of a three-part exchange, as mentioned below:

Fibbs: You got my message?

Wills: I just got it.

Fibbs: Good.

Here, Fibbs' second turn functions as an evaluation of Wills' response. This sort of three-part exchange structure is explained in terms of the context of classroom interaction. Outside the classroom context, the use of teacher-pupil interaction (such kind of exchange) tends to be restricted to situations where one of the interactants is more powerful than the other. This, however, what characterizes the first section of the text when an employer-worker relationship takes place.

Another exception to this pattern of structure is provided by Wills' statement which does not receive the acknowledgement that it predicts:

Wills: Well, Mr. Fibbs, it's simply a matter that the men have...well, they seem to have taken a turn against some of the products.

Fibbs: Taken a turn?

Instead of giving an acknowledgement, Fibbs follows Wills' statement with a question which halts the progression of the dialogue. As it constitutes a 'breach' in the discourse framework, Fibbs' question in this exchange is regarded as a challenging move.

Moreover, the one-sidedness of the dialogue in this section is further reinforced by the length of speakers' conversational turns. While many of Wills' responses are minimal, Fibbs tends to hold the floor for much longer than his interlocutor.

The second bulk of exchanges continues with the two-part structure by adopting the questioning type whereupon Wills tries to get rid of the unease that he was feeling in section one. However, Wills was uneasy to tell his boss that the workers protest against the products and he had to give exact answers to his superior. He is trying to explain how intransigent the workers were towards the products that the manager was so attached to.

Section two, hence, shows the two men exchanging the control of conversation. So, Fibbs takes back the initiative in his sentence:

Fibbs: Which ones don't they like?

Wills attempts to take control when saying:

Wills: It's not only the brass pet cock, Mr. Fibbs.

Fibbs takes it back and says:

Fibbs: What else?

Section three, on the other hand, is marked by the fact that Wills takes back the initiative when saying:

Wills: All I can say is they're in a state of very bad agitation about them. And then there's the gunmetal side outlet relief with hand wheel.

And from this point, he never loses it. With regard to the discourse framework of section three, it is quite apparent that the challenging moves take the lion's share in this section. However, all the statements uttered by Wills are followed by Fibbs' questions rather than acknowledgements.

As the sketch progresses through this section, Wills' lexis becomes dominant and, unlike section one, Wills, in the last part of the sketch tends to hold the floor for much longer than Fibbs so that at the end, when talking about the bronze draw off cock with and without hand wheel, Fibbs merely repeats what Wills is saying.

Going back to the notion of superiority, it is worth saying that the last section in this sketch is known by the absence of the vocatives that mark the official status relations of the interactants. Comparing the quantity of these status marking vocatives in the first and second sections of the text, it is apparent that section one contains five instances of "Mr. Fibbs", one instance of calling "sir" and three occasions where Fibbs uses "Wills".

In section two, there are only two occasions of using "Mr. Fibbs", one instance of "sir" and none of "Wills". Section three includes nothing of these vocatives at all. This leads, however, to the absurd situation whereby the manager, at the end of the sketch, becomes at the mercy of his employee.

Yet, this is not the only thing that makes the text unreal. Another case, however, helps unfolding the absurdity of the sketch. This case has, according to some critics, witnessed a series of clashes between characters and audience by virtue that Wills and Fibbs spend their time discussing items that critics have always had large doubt about their existence. In addition to that, the use of technical terms like 'flange' and 'bronze draw' and the fact that both men in the sketch presuppose that these objects are to be evaluated not in terms of their utility but emotionally, like Fibbs' words: 'beautiful products', 'lovely parallel male stud couplings', 'perfection' and 'my own Jacob's chuck' make the problem of interpretability greater. What made it even worse is the fact that some words and phrases transmit sexual connotations as 'off cock', 'pet cock' and 'brandy balls'. This final line was, in fact, written in published version but it has been changed to 'trouble', as it is mentioned in the present work, when it was examined by the BBC. Since it is Pinter's sketch, "Trouble in the Works" makes more sense than it is thought.

In terms of Grice's theory of maxims, Wills' unease about telling his boss the cause of the trouble in the first section is pointed out by his flouting of the maxim of manner. In his reply to Fibbs' claim:

Fibbs: Well, now, Wills, I hear there's been a little trouble in the factory.

Wills: Yes, I... I suppose you could call it that, Mr. Fibbs.

Wills might have replied only with "yes", but that would have broken the maxim of quality since Fibbs considered, in his previous sentence, the problem as a little trouble, and, in fact, what was happening has clearly been more than a little trouble. Thus, he uses the modal verb 'could' which allows the possibility of 'couldn't'.

In his sentence:

Wills: Well, I don't exactly know how to put it, Mr. Fibbs.

Wills breaks both manner and relation for he was ambiguous about saying what was happening.

Considering the following exchange:

Fibbs: Now come on, Wills, I've got to know what it is, before I can do anything about it.

Wills: Well, Mr Fibbs, it's simply a matter that the men have... well, they seem to have taken a turn against some of the products.

Here, Wills first hesitates and has to reformulate his sentence (the men have...well), and then he gives the important information about the men that they have taken a turn against the products. This reformulation, however, is embedded under the use of the word "seem" and it is repeated in Wills's utterance:

Wills: They just don't seem to like them much anymore.

And also in his sentence about one kind of the products (i.e. the brass pet cock):

Wills: They just don't seem to like it any more.

Furthermore, in the sentence about rod ends:

Wills: There are rod ends and rod ends, Mr Fibbs.

It is noticed that Wills breaks the maxim of relation on the ground that he does not directly answer the question of his boss (i.e. Fibbs: where could you find a finer rod end?), and also the maxim of quantity for he creates a kind of tautology when repeating the word 'rod ends'. Hence, the implicature behind this saying is that Fibbs's rod ends are, on Wills's account, not superior at all.

Another breaking (floating) of the maxim of relation takes place in Wills's answer to Fibbs's question as mentioned below:

Fibbs: Where could you find a finer hemi unibal spherical rod ends?

Wills: They just don't want to have anything more to do with it.

Here, it is noticed that Wills gives no relevant answer to Fibbs's question.

In terms of relevance theory, when Wills presents a tautological utterance by repeating the same words, Fibbs has first to decode the phrases and then infer what Wills intended to convey. This is, however, what is known by Sperber and Wilson as the inferential model.

6. Conclusion

The present enquiry is a literary pragmatic investigation into Pinter's sketch belonging to the plays of comedy of menace. To this purpose, Grice's Maxims have been deployed in the aim of demonstrating that methods and perspectives from linguistics are relevant to the analysis of Pinter's works. The analysis of the language in *Trouble in the Works* and the attempt to explain it from a conversational analysis

perspective has revealed the way Harold Pinter fashions his language in order to create the effects perceived in the play.

After analyzing the strategies used in the play, the findings of the current study show that the language used by the characters has offered an account for the linguistic choices. In this respect, and despite the initial work by Grice (1975), it is not clear to know how conversational implicature fits in exactly in the text. Moreover, it is not easy in some cases to know whether a particular maxim is broken or not. A speaker might break the maxim of manner, for instance, either to implicate something or to try to disguise something from his interlocutor as Wills does in the present sketch. The maxim of quality has often appeared to be broken in the sketch when Fibbs and Wills quite frequently repeat what has already been said in another form.

Yet, the meaning of these characters' behavior is not regarded as an implicature, rather a part of the general social expression. So, the ordinary conversation also possesses the technique of implying what goes beyond the explicitly said. This is, however, observed in *Trouble in the Works*, where the implicature that occurs passes not from character to character but from author to audience

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