Twentieth Century Plays

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Martin Esslin wrote that 'if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings.' Yet this essay will begin by placing Absurdist dialogue as an extension of, rather than a total departure from, the language of 'a good play.' A brief comparison will be made between Harold Pinter and Noel Coward, both of whom ask audiences to seek psychological drives beneath mannered speech. Overlapping thematically but differing stylistically from Pinter, Ionesco vocalises these psychological drives into a more broken, 'babbling' language. Yet Esslin's association of linguistic 'babbling' with total 'incoherency' must be questioned, and it will be argued that both playwrights require audiences to locate meaning within even the most broken of speech. Disagreeing with Counsell's concept that 'the only meaning of Absurdist drama is meaninglessness,' this essay will close by considering the vital importance of non-verbal signifiers – such as set, prop and physical behaviour – as cognitive compliments to disorientating language. Hence, it will be argued that both dramatists use verbal and non-verbal signifiers extremely self-consciously, making audiences experience and evaluate their own language.

This essay will begin by arguing that the dialogue in *The Homecoming* greatly resembles the linguistic strategies of pre-war dramatists such as Noel Coward. Pinter himself expressed a great deal of admiration for Coward, even directing *Blithe Spirit* at The National Theatre in 1976. This can be set against Esslin's notion that Absurdist dramatists universally reacted against preceding patterns in dramatic discourse, to the extent that playwrights demanded a 'radical devaluation of language.'[1] Yet Pinter does not find that words are in themselves 'meaningless,'[2] as Brown believes, but highlights the ways in which all speakers use language to reveal and suppress meaning. Hence, Esslin's statement that all Absurdist speech is incoherent babble does not take into account moments when language remains lexically intact, yet is nonetheless surreally disorientating. An audience member's confusion over Pinter's language may lie in this philosophy Pinter inherits from Coward; that meaning lies *in between* utterances, and it is evident in the passages below that audiences must look beyond what one of Coward's own characters refers to as 'a lot of small talk, with other thoughts going on beneath.'[3]

'OTTO: It was very hot in Manila.
LEO: It was also very hot in Singapore...
HELEN: Was this all a pleasure trip?
LEO: Life is a pleasure trip, Mrs. Carver…
OTTO: That was beautifully put, Leo. I shall always remember it.' [4]

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[1] *TTOTA,* p.26.
[2] John Russell Brown, *Theatre Language* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), p.36
[3] Noel Coward, 'Small Talk: A One Act Play', quoted in Kenneth Tynan, "In Memory of Mr Coward." *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*. (London: Cape, 1975), p.59.
[4] Noel Coward, *Design For Living*, (London: Heinemann, 1933), p.63

'LENNY: Just give me the glass.
RUTH: No.
Pause.
LENNY: I'll take it then.
RUTH: If you take the glass…I'll take you.'[5]

In both passages, dialogue acts as the site of struggle between what words mean and how characters use them. In the first extract, for instance, Otto's denotatively complimentary statement ('that was beautifully put') is undercut with our sense of the sarcasm behind the utterance: thus meaning derives not so much from the words themselves, but their delivery in performance, and their interaction within chains of dialogue. Likewise, tying Pinter's passage to Saussurean linguistics, the signifier of a 'glass of water' clearly adopts a meaning beyond that which it denotatively signifies. Within the context of the utterance, particularly on Ruth's threat 'if you take the glass…I'll take you,' a spectator sees that the glass in fact represents the struggle for male or female dominance. Thus, by creating this gap between a signifier and its universal signified, Pinter imbues the most recognisable everyday language with a sense of incoherency. Moreover, his ability to alienate us from the simplest conventional speech, clearly distinguishing spoken language from the more sinister subtext, neatly ties into trends in post-war performance techniques: Stanislavski instructed actors that 'the spoken word, the text of the play, is not valuable in itself, but is made so by the inner context of the subtext.'[6] Thus, the performance of Pinter's subtext appeals to an audience member's own psychological drives, suggesting – as Coward demonstrates – that even when discussing the weather, humans are always thinking about how to produce and receive language.

      If Ionesco will later be shown to explicitly express such psychological processes into incoherent babblings, further cracks are created in Esslin's grouping of Absurdist dialogue when considering Pinter's pause. The direct counterpart to Ionesco's streams of speech, the pause is not, as Hallis has observed, evidence of the Absurdist belief in 'the failure of language.'[7] Rather, a character's silence is self-consciously part of the defence and attack drive Pinter felt permeated *all* human communication. Coward expresses such calculated silences in the use of ellipsis in the first passage, whilst Pinter makes such moments even more explicit in the second passage. Here, Lenny, taken aback by Ruth's stark refusal of his order, pauses in order to signal the very delicacy with which he is choosing his next form of attack; an approach which is markedly different from Ionesco's statement that silence signals the moment 'the mind is worn out.'[8] Pinter's pause, rather than being merely 'poetic,'[9] highlights the performative nature of all onstage and offstage speech. In practical terms, such moments of stillness also make audiences even more conscious of their own status as spectators to such violent, private exchanges. A spectator might feel such discomfort partly because pauses dramatise our own communicative processes, pointing to our own constant concerns over how our utterances are being perceived. And whilst Esslin notes that such silences highlight this contradiction between dialogue and our psychological processes, he contradicts himself when stating that a pause signals the moment when language has 'totally lost its rhetorical' element[10]. The pause, rather, is the most rhetorical mode of expression,

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[5] Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), pp. 51-2. All further quotes from this text will refer to the same addition.

[6] Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character,* trans. Elizabeth Hapgood, (London: Reinhardt and Evens, 1949), p.114.

[7] J.R Hallis, *Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence,* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), p.131.

[8] Eugène Ionesco, introduction to 'The Chairs' in *Plays VI*, transl. Donald Watson, (London: Calder, 1958), p. viii. All further quotes from this text will refer to the same addition.

[9] Bill Naismith, *Harold Pinter*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p.184.

[10] Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, (London: Methuen, 1970), p.283.

providing the audiences glimpses of characters' psychological motives. Despite Esslin's distinction between pre-war and Absurdist dialogue, then, this initial comparison between Coward and Pinter's stylistic techniques might help set up the argument that language may appear most nonsensical not when it is broken into babble, but within the maintenance of – and momentary pauses between - the very structures of 'witty repartee and pointed dialogue.'

If Pinter requires audiences to actively seek his characters' unconscious desires beneath the dramatic utterance, it could be argued that Ionesco vocalises these drives more directly in his use of babble. In *The Chairs,* much of the dialogue seems to originate from the pre-symbolic space: this enacts Kristeva's theories of the Symbolic and Semiotic, whereby the subject's separation from the mother, and the realm of the Semiotic, coincides with an induction to the Symbolic world of order and language.[11] If in Pinter's plays such psychological sensations are articulated into recognisable everyday speech, Ionesco keeps his communication relatively pre-logical; when the Old Woman cries 'Leelo, lahlo…norphan-lo', words are reduced to sounds, leaving the audience to disentangle this outpouring of sensation.[12] These particular neologisms rely upon the visual language of the play to aid comprehension, whereby the Old Man and Old Woman's intimate cradling is shown to be somewhere between husband and wife, mother and son. In a Kristevan sense, then, an audience member is positioned in the dialogic relationship between the Symbolic and the Semiotic, whereby we are required to insert meaning on the babblings. Yet we might disagree with Esslin's notion that the use of babbling is necessarily incoherent. A spectator might detect the word 'orphan' in the utterance itself, suggesting that even in presenting babble, Ionesco's neologisms maintain a sense of structured, semantic associations. Combined with the Oedipal imagery expressed in the Old Woman's rocking of the Old Man, our own recognition that 'norphan' is 'not orphan' situates language, even at its most free, as being highly structured, interacting with preceding statements in the manner of 'witty repartee and pointed dialogue.'

Hence, both Pinter and Ionesco seem to recognise this need for nonsense to avoid becoming no-sense, as evident when the Old Woman declares 'it is in talking that one finds ideas, words, and then ourselves.'[13] Pinter and Ionesco thus present a clear link between our use of language and the formation of identity. For Ionesco, the development from incoherent babble into the Symbolic Order coincides with our ability to lie: the Old Man and the Old Woman, for instance, later give audiences two directly contradictory statements over whether they have any children. The audience is shown to be complicit with their gradual corruption, as their lies only begin when the invisible guests start to arrive on stage. Therefore, even though Brown states that Ionesco's language always emits 'a mood and not an ideology',[14] Ionesco's development from babble into corrupt speech in fact dramatises the processes by which humans move into the ideological, social sphere. In a starkly differing attitude, Pinter suggests that adults should never be able return to this pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic bliss. At the end of *The Homecoming*, as Ruth adopts the mother-like pose of stroking Joey's hair, Max stammers 'wait…what…what.'[15] This is markedly different from his earlier patterns of speech ('even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn't such a bad bitch.')[16] Yet by the end of the play, his childlike rolling on the floor adds to this sense that Max's loss of power has resulted in a regression from speech, back to man's pre-logical roots. There is thus a structural opposition between the development of language and identity

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[11] Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p.6.
[12] *The Chairs*, p.133.
[13] *The Chairs,* p.170
[14] John Russell Brown, 'Mr Pinter's Shakespeare' in *The Critical Quarterly,* 5, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) pp. 251-264.
[15] *The Homecoming,* p.137.
[16] *The Homecoming,* p.6.

in each play. Audiences witness the breakdown of Max's previously performative, didactic dialogue into the babbling psychological processes Ionesco has presented at the forefront of *The Chairs.* Ionesco, however, sees the tragedy in the development from babble itself, where the old couple jump from the window in one final attempt to free themselves from the socio-linguistic order they have been ushered into.

There thus exists in both *The Homecoming* and *The Chairs* a tension between free, babbling language and the inevitable entrance into conventional, recognisable speech. Esslin includes Pinter in the ranks of the Absurdists who engage in a project to 'liberate humanity' from such institutional speech to 'living language.'[17] Yet whilst Ionesco certainly states that the use of conventional, clichéd language signals the fact that man's life is essentially 'senseless, useless, absurd,'[18] Pinter heavily relies upon the very conventions of everyday language. His dialogue works precisely because it is so recognisable, and the shock that this generates for audience members is felt particularly on Ruth's final line in the play: 'Don't become a stranger.'[19] In one final attack on her domineering husband, she expresses her wish to leave Teddy and become his brother's whore in a tone that is conventional, clichéd and naturalising. The fact that so shocking a scenario be uttered in such recognisable speech might account for the reason why many spectators walked out of *The Homecoming's* preliminary tour, declaring 'they're exactly like animals!'[20] For if Ionesco presents a baby's babble to include the audience in a current, prelogical currency, Pinter achieves reactions of shock by articulating our animalistic drives in a language disturbingly akin to our own.

Another common response to both dramatists' work is laughter, and we could account for both reactions – laughter and horror – as deriving from an essential unaccountability in the language. Clearly, neither Ionesco's babbling sounds nor Pinter's more conventional speech explicitly explain the surreal action of each play. The Old Man's statement in *The Chairs* appears representational of both dramatists' view of the importance of incoherency: 'Can't you see it's a picture? It doesn't matter what it's supposed to represent.'[21] Yet it is arguable that we laugh at Absurdist drama, whether we understand it or not, because Ionesco and Pinter are consciously using language structures to trigger such bodily responses. Freud writes that we laugh at language which constantly topples contradictory patterns: for instance, Ruth's answer of 'If you take the glass…I'll take you' echoes and then modifies Lenny's order, 'Just give me the glass.' So laughter in Pinter is self-reflexive, as it makes a spectator immediately question his own value systems. At the moment that we laugh, we in fact reveal a shared understanding with the amorality of his characters' violence, and this disturbs us.

Similarly, Iser notes that a spectator laughs to show that we understand what's happening on stage, which is particularly crucial in an Absurd production.[22] Ionesco exposes this by breaking speech down to the point where we laugh at words we don't understand: audiences laugh because they perceive themselves to be socially and linguistically superior to the babble of the infantile couple. Ionesco views laughter itself as betraying the audience's own sense of condescension, questioning in his critical writings the notion that 'what distinguishes man from the other animals is that he is the animal that laughs.'[23] Thus, despite differing language uses, both playwrights' ploys for laughter reinforce what they saw as essential truths about the human condition. Whilst Iser states that Absurdist laughter has 'no

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[17] *TTOTA,* p.410.
[18] Quoted and translated in *TTOTA,* p.23.
[19] *The Homecoming,* p.136.
[20] Anonymous reviewer quoted in *British Playwrights, 1956-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook,* ed. William W. Demastes, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p.35.
[21] *The Chairs,* p.161.
[22] Wolfgang Iser, 'The Art of Failure', *Samuel Beckett,* eds. Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince, (London: Longman, 2000), p.204
[23] Rosette Lamont, *Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Rosette C. Lamont, (Englewood Cliffs ; London : Prentice-Hall, 1973), p.1.

cathartic effect,'[24] Pinter's mannered exchanges and Ionesco's bursts of babble self-consciously provoke laughter to make us question and learn from why we laugh.

Hence, if an audience member cannot look to language alone to locate meaning in Absurdist drama, this essay will close by considering the interaction of non-verbal signifiers in Absurdist dialogue. Counsell stresses the absence of dramatic signification in Absurdist theatre: 'space signifies only space, and movement symbolises movement alone.'[25] When faced with disorientating language, however, a spectator inevitably has an extra reliance on non-verbal information to transmit meaning. According to Counsell's theory, Pinter's domestic, naturalistic stage would operate on a Concrete register, as neither the speech nor the stage is differentiated from the social realm of the audience. Yet whilst Counsell maintains that signs within the Concrete register 'do not function symbolically,'[26] Pinter's chairs adopt a greater significance than simply providing a sense of detail. At the end of the play, *'Ruth sits relaxed on her chair…Joey kneels.'*[27] An audience member thus takes the sign from the concrete realm and draws a symbolic significance *separate* to what's revealed in dramatic speech: nowhere is it vocalised, but the image provides the spectator with a sense that the positioning of chairs is emblematic of marking territory. For Pinter, then, audience comprehension often take place in the *absence* of speech, where the non-verbal signs shift from signposting the concrete world to marking a more abstract, symbolic significance.

Brown states that if conventional, well-made plays present stories, Absrudist dramas present complex 'poetic image.'[28] Yet it is in this fusion of dialogue and image that the meaning of Absurdist plays becomes partly disentangled. In a key scene from the play, Lenny attempts to draw Teddy into an argument about words and their significance when pointing to a table: 'you mean it's nothing but a table. Some people would envy your certainty.' Teddy's responsive direct address – 'you wouldn't understand my works' - embroils the audience into the debate over what words and things actually signify.[29] Thus, Pinter explicitly fuses non-verbal and verbal signifiers, philosophically questioning where language begins and ends.

Ionesco's non-verbal signifiers are even more important compliments of speech. When faced with babbling language, audiences look for additional information from the stage: as with Pinter, furniture is again a site of power, as dozens of chairs are brought on for the Old Man and Old Woman's guests. Yet in an inversion of how audiences process a Pinter play, spectators are here required to project their own sense of concrete detail onto the invisible, abstract aspects of the stage. For instance, when the Old Woman comments upon an invisible guest dressed in 'red, white and blue', we imaginatively project what is missing, and this harmony between non-verbal and verbal language seems to enact Ionesco's existential philosophy: 'faced with the perpetuum of reality…the human response is to impose form and meaning upon it.'[30] The responsibilities of such a task is never clearer than at the end of *The Chairs*, when the couple's suicide is followed by laughter and cries of 'Sh!' from the invisible attendees. Whilst the Old Woman's earlier address – 'This chair is for you'[31] – broke the line between stage and audience, Ionesco's finale makes all spectators complicit in the couple's death. Ionesco expresses this message through the in between spaces of verbal and non-verbal language, overlapping with Pinter in making audiences engage with and question their own mental operations.

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[24] 'The Art of Failure', p.223.
[25] *Signs of Performance,* p.15.
[26] *Signs of Performance,* p.7.
[27] *The Homecoming,* p.136.
[28] *Theatre Language,* p.58.
[29] *The Homecoming,* p.84.
[30] Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy,* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005), p.103.
[31] *The Chairs,* p.152.

This essay has argued against Esslin's collective grouping of Absurdists and any sense of a universal attitude against language. To introduce this notion, a brief comparison was made between Pinter and Noel Coward, problematising Esslin's theory of a radical shift from pre-war to post-war dramatic discourse. It was argued that Pinter inherits from Coward the importance of conventional speech, and renders it disorientating by subtextually referencing the psychological drives beneath any utterance. Contrastingly, Ionesco places such internal processes at the forefront of his dialogue, and asks a spectator to insert a sense of order onto babble. The main theme of both *The Homecoming* and *The Chairs*, it was suggested, is the very processes by which language shapes and can destroy one's identity: hence, Ionesco portrays the tragic transition from babble into adulthood, whilst Pinter presents the desperate human wish to regress to this state of pre-linguistic infanthood. Common reactions to the productions – shock and laughter – were considered, suggesting that such bodily audience reactions to babble or cliché deliberately prompt us to reflect on our own value systems. This point was furthered when considering the audience's own role in comprehending Absurdist drama: whether language is syntactically intact or split into a string of sounds, it is perhaps not as incoherent as Esslin suggests. In an effort to prove this, the essay closed by considering each playwright's fusion of verbal and non-verbal signifiers to aid audience cognition, arguing that each spectator is called to witness an 'endless play of signs and regeneration of meaning on stage, verbal and non-verbal, from which no set truth is obtainable.'[32]

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[32] Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.87.

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