

# An Analysis of Dialogue in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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## **Abstract:**

Harold Pinter is one of most dominant playwrights of second half of the nineteenth century. His plays are belonged to absurd theatre. His entire plays pervades by 'an ever-present anxiety, a sense that nothing is certain' always. The seemingly meaningless conversation of his dramatic dialogue reveals sense of absurd atmosphere, but the absurdity of his dialogue has more and deeper consideration, fundamental privilege of existence of his taciturn characters. The present paper is an attempt to analysis the dialogue in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. The analysis of dialogue is based on the on book of Mick Willis and Simon Shepherd's *Studying Plays*. They have mentioned five functions of dialogue in their book. An analysis of these five functions of his dialogue can give more meaning and interpretation to his use of ordinary human conversations.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, dialogue, The Birthday Party, Meg, Petey, Goldberg, Mccann, Stanley,

## **Introduction:**

Mick Willis and Simon Shepherd make the difference of text as playtext- pretext means 'dramatic text' and theatrical text which means 'production or performance' of the play. Each dramatic text contains an 'implied theatrical production;' so it is 'previous' to the theatrical text. The dramatic text is made from dialogue and stage directions where as in theatrical text combined of character, dialogue, space, action and actor's body. (1-3) Even Martin Esslin posits in his article 'Language and Silence' that 'A true understanding of Pinter's use of language must be based on deeper, more fundamental consideration:' in order to understand Pinter and his use of language one must 'start from an examination of the function of language in stage dialogue generally – and indeed from considerations of the use of language in ordinary human intercourse itself.' (194) Willis and Simon Shepherd have given five functions of dialogue which can be applied to Pinter's dialogue to get the different aspect of his dialogue and reliable information about his characters and their motif in the plays.

## **Five functions of dialogue:-**

### **1. Conversational exchange between characters:**

The first important function of dialogue in any play is the interaction, talk, interpersonal communication passes between characters on the stage. It is based on social status of character, his turn taking, dynamic exchange, his idiolect and sociolect way of talking. It indicates the motif and purpose of the character in the play. It develops the action and leads it towards the end of the play. For the convenient of the details study of the dialogue, the exchange of conversation is divided into more aspect of conversation working.

#### **1.1 Turn-Taking**

The participants take turn in conversation and if it is conversation like everyday life as in the plays of post war modern dramatists, then turns are not lengthy and sophisticated like Elizabethan drama. Pinter was the master to pick up such every day dialogue of contemporary middle class man from London. Such conversation of turn-taking continues with cue from a person and then another person response and give the cue to continue the dialogue. It lasted till the chain of cue and response broken and again it starts with another new cue and response or repeated to clarify for the other persons.

Take the example from *The Birthday Party*, Meg asks Petey about his morning walk and later about the news of a baby from the Newspapers.

MEG: What time did you go out this morning, Petey? (cue)

PETEY: Same time as usual. (response)

MEG: Was it dark?

PETEY: No, it was light?

MEG: (beginning to darn). But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.

PETEY: That's in the winter.

MEG: Oh, in winter.

PETEY: Yes, it gets light later in winter.

MEG: Oh.

Pause.

What are you reading?

PETEY: Someone's just had a baby.

MEG: Oh, they haven't! Who?

PETEY: Some girl.

MEG: Who, Petey, who?

PETEY: I don't think you'd know her.

MEG: What's her name?

PETEY: Lady Mary Splatt.

MEG: I don't know her.

PETEY: No.

MEG: What is it?

PETEY: (studying the paper). Er-a girl.

MEG: Not a boy?

PETEY: No.

MEG: Oh, what a shame. I'd be sorry. I'd much rather have a little boy.

PETEY: A little girl's all right.

MEG: I'd much rather have a little boy.

Pause... Vaguely (10-11)

Pinter is skillful in using such conversation based on simple subject, but use of turn-taking and developing the cue and response are the way through which Pinter develops the plot of his plays and attracted the attention of the readers and audience to his plays. Pinter's dialogue is taken from everyday speech, but the turn taking way of every character emphasizes on motif and psychological aspect of the characters. He uses phrases and rhythms of day to day talk with faithful accuracy and tone. Though the selected dialogue of *The Birthday Party* is simple conversations in the flow of clichés, repetitions, questions and interjection; the underneath of them is feeling and perceiving far more reflective and insightful thought than what they are able to articulate through their dialogue. In the first dialogue of *The Birthday Party*, Meg wishes to be a boy child which she didn't. Dialogue is of course the norm of the behaviour of Pinter's characters' speech, and this fact is underscored by the brevity of their utterance and the rhythmic nature of their turn-taking. Their interchanges differ in many ways from their discussion one with another, but they are nevertheless dialogical in nature. Pinter's dialogue suggests more than mere words and phrases on the printed text. They are resembled to life like conversation of the different temperamental personality which expressed with their moods and intrinsic motif.

## 1.2. Types of Turn

Type of turn in plays of any characters depends on the clue and response. Mick Willis and Simon Shepherd have given three type of conversational clue: Statements, questions and commands. Each clue can be responded differently by different person based on situation and enforcement of others as in case of Stanley, Meg, McCann and Goldberg. Types of turn of the characters and their response to the clue develop subtlety of

the dialogue. It reveals key aspect of their conversation and exposes the danger of communication rather the non-communication between two or more characters. Even Mick Willis and Simon Shepherd quoted various responses to three clues different on person and relation as -

“Statement: affirm deny  
 Question answer  
 refuse to answer  
 ask for qualification  
 Command obey  
 question  
 refuse”

To prove the point of Wallis and Shepherd, we can get the examples from three plays

MCCANN (to STANLEY) : I'll take your glasses.

MCCANN takes STANLEY's glasses.

MEG: Give me the scarf.

GOLDBERG: (holding LULU). Tie his scarf. Mrs. Boles.

MEG: That's what I'm doing. (To STANLEY.) Can you see my nose?

GOLDBERG: He can't. Ready? Right! Everyone move. Stop! And still! (63)

The examples of the type of turn from his select play expose Pinter's use of temperament of characters' balance, timing and rhythm for the response of others clues. The example of Blind man's Buff is taken from second act of *The Birthday Party* in which they are playing the game; so all others simply follow the instructions of Goldberg and obey him. We found that Pinter's use of turn taking device in his dialogue continues the conflict towards the end and makes crucial structural force on link overall poetic images of his character's life in his work .

### 1.3 Topic control, initiation of exchanges, and lexical control

When we talk in real life in a group or conversation of two persons, it always starts by the clue from one of the participants. The conversation is depending on the clue, exchange of ideas, correction of concepts of others to lead it in a proper direction for meaningful message and fruitful conclusion. In such conversation there is a controller of the topic, inventor of the topic and a participant who corrects others with proper words and phrases. In simple way Wallis and Shepherd called it as topic control, initiation of exchange and lexical control. After studying Pinter's plays, I found a number of events in dialogue where the characters struggle to find the topic, to initiate exchange and to use proper word for his emotions. Martin Esslin right to say -“In Pinter's dialogue we can watch the desperate struggles of his characters to find the correct expression; we are thus enabled to observe them in the –very dramatic- act of struggling for communication, sometimes succeeding, often failing.” (200)

There is a passage of dialogue between Stanley and Meg in that Stanley does not inform Meg of any fact he knows nor she to him. For examples-

STANLEY: Meg. Do you know what?

MEG: What?

STANLEY: Have you heard the latest?

MEG: No.

STANLEY: I'll bet you have.

MEG:I haven't.

STANLEY: Shall I tell you?

MEG: What latest?

STANLEY: You haven't heard it?

MEG: 'No. (23)

In the conversation, it is Stanley who initiates the topic and controls it up to the end. There are a number of examples of such incidents in all of his plays. The first act of *The Birthday Party* initiates with Meg and Petey, but dominated by Stanley and later two acts by Goldberg and McCann.

#### 1.4 Length of turn

Another important aspect of dialogue is the length of turn taken by a character in communications. Imbalance of length of turn is one indication of power of difference between characters in conversation. But it is not the rule that lengthy dialogue means dominated the action. Sometime it is the revelation of their haunted memory to disclose their past and to support their present situation. In interrogation scene of *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann dominate the action with their witty questions of blames through short exchanges. But apart from the exception, Stanley's revelation of his unsuccessful concert to Meg in act I, Goldberg's past memory, Meg's toast for Stanley from *The Birthday Party*. These long turns mark a significant and identifiable step in the development of the plays and its theme. Their major role and crucial part is for the turning point in the plays to reveal important aspects of character's motives or attitude.

#### 1.5 Terms of address

Short said in his article 'Discourse analysis and the analysis of drama' that the system of terms of address the speaker employ is an important marker for the type of relationship between characters and for the breaking of the rules of decorum such relationship entails. As suggested by Wallis and Shepherd, the most important aspects of terms of address are 'naming systems and pronoun systems.'(55-56) The dramatist employs different technique of addressing by using forenames or surnames, terms of endearment or of insulting words which changed the course and meaning of the scene or bind the relationship of the characters. All the ways of address by the characters to one another in the play or on the stage ultimately contributed the mutual understanding, inner feeling for others or strong hatred in a violent act of misunderstanding between them.

In *The Birthday Party*, Meg addresses Petey with his name or simply used pronoun 'you' for him, but her endearment to Stanley reflected by her various loving address just like a child as Stanley, Stan, Stanny, 'that boy', ---Petey addresses Meg or 'you, but to Stanley by his name or pronouns. –

Meg to Stanley - *Stanley, Stan, Stanny, 'that boy'*

Petey To Stanley – *Stan or Stanley*

Lulu to Meg- *Mrs Boles*

Goldberg to McCann – *McCann*

McCann repeated called to Goldberg – *Nat* on page no. 27, 28, 29, 30 in the textbook.

#### 2. Information as to time and place:

The audience or readers of the play get the information of time and place through the characters' conversation which is scattered in the play. The time and place of various events which happened or will happen in plays are meaningful to get the overall meaning and structural unity of the play. Most of the time the character remembers his past memory which has important to his present image and decision or dilemma. Even the time and place relates the play with fictitious space not only on the stage, but beyond the stage which certainly prove crucial to develop the dialogue, communication, plot and social phenomenon of the complete play. The opening scene of *The Birthday Party* between Meg and Petey indicates that the play starts in early morning time of summer - when he went out for walk it was light and after coming home he brought with him newspaper to read. Later Petey greets Stanley with morning. Stanley tells to Meg about his job opportunities at Berlin, Athens, Constantinople, Zabreb, Vladivostock etc and reminds his concert at Lower Edmonton

#### 3. Information about action:

Dialogue of any play must give the information of action of characters which is happened on the stage and elsewhere before the actual enacted action of the play. The audience should be aware about the past, present and immediate suggested future action of the character and the dramatist systematically provides it to the

audience through his characters' dialogue. The previous analysis of plot and action elaborated this aspect more clearly to point out information about action in the development of the structure of the play.

#### 4. Actual enactments:

The most important function of dialogue is the actual enactments on the stage as said by Wallis and Shepherd 'how characters speak and what about; what is said of other.' The action of the play is embodied in the dialogue itself. When the character says something to other or others, it has effect on other characters as well as on the audience. It is important how does the dramatist select his characters, but it more important how does he select their language to present his idealistic attitude of society. As Adrian Page says about the dramatic dialogue that they 'are considered not for their content but as actions of various kinds.' To consider various performatives aspect of Pinter's dialogue in the select play, the Speech Act Theory of J. L. Austin and John R. Searle will play significant part.

#### 4.1 Speech Acts

The philosopher J. L. Austin developed the concept of 'Speech Act' in his book '*How to Do Things with Words.*' His theory suggests two types of utterance one constative and another performative. The constative utterances consist of stating facts while performative embodies in commands, requests, vows, promising, naming etc. But later with John R. Searle he elaborated his theory and propounds that utter sentence can be analyzed with three different speech acts simultaneously. The Speech act theory has proven to be a useful tool for analyzing dialogue.

##### 4.1.1 Locutionary Act :

The locutionary act is concerned with the literal or superficial meaning of an utterance. It consists in saying something by the speaker which is understood by the listeners.

##### 4.1.2 Illocutionary Act

The Illocutionary act consists in doing something through the act of utterance. We perform illocutionary act in saying something such as asking a question, ordering someone to do something, promising, asserting something etc. This act also deals with the implied meaning of an utterance of the speaker.

##### 4.1.3 Perlocutionary Act

Perlocutionary act consists in the effect of an utterance of speaker on the listener and his response to the speaker's utterance. It is performed by means of saying something, such as persuading someone to do something, convincing him, making him angry etc. The Locutionary act reflects a verbal act, the Illocutionary act reports the verbal act and Perlocutionary act expresses the effect of it on the speaker.

Let us illustrate the usefulness of speech acts in the analysis of Pinter's dialogue from his play. The analysis of the dialogue with speech act theory is limited as it is one of the aspects of dialogue in the research. The following dialogue is taken from 'The Birthday Party'-

Stanley crosses to him and grips his arm

STANLEY: (urgently). Look-

MCCANN: Don't touch me.

STANLEY: Look. Listen a minute.

MCCANN: Let go my arm.

STANLEY: Look. Sit down a minute.

MCCANN: (savagely, hitting his arm). Don't do that! (41-42)

Stanley initial utterance 'Look,' and McCann's 'Don't touch me,' are locutionary acts, bring out its basic literal meaning and is to be understood in the context of the fact that Stanley and McCann have been in a mood to fight by holding arm and hitting between them. The illocutionary act that Stanley performs through his utterance is that of threatening McCann and forcing him to sit down; while McCann in return to his response performed to illocutionary act of first threatening him and then requesting him to let his arm and not to do that. The perlocutionary act expected by McCann that Stanley should free his arm. However, Stanley's response

indicates rejection of McCann's suggestion. That is the illocutionary act performed through Stanley's ordering words 'Look, Sit down a minute.' McCann responds to this by hitting his arms and forcefully ordering him 'Don't do that!' The perlocutionary act expected by McCann that Stanley should not do the same thing again. Adrian Page says, "...to transform certain illocutionary acts may not recognizably alter the play, but to deviate from the pattern of perlocutionary acts constitutes a radical revision of the narrative structure."

We conclude from the above selective analysis of dialogue of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* that it is the conflicting and contradicting illocutionary and perlocutionary acts which make the event thoroughly theatrical. Speech act moves the play along strengthens our view of the dramatic dialogue. The speech act theory is fully equipped to provide us tools and techniques for the analysis of the communication between the characters and the audience. The analysis of Pinter's dialogue with Speech Act theory revealed his colloquial and realistic everyday communication of his characters.

#### 4.1.4 Felicity Condition

Searle classified speech acts of Austin in term of Felicity Conditions. He thinks that felicity conditions are keys to make successful conversation in life. The play depends on the mismatch between the illocutionary acts of characters and the conditions in which they make them. According to him, there are four types of felicity conditions which should fulfill the following four conditions:

1. Preparatory condition: The conditions that have to be in place before the speech act can be uttered which focuses only upon the textual content.
2. Propositional content condition: The proposition that the speech act concerns focuses upon background circumstances.
3. Sincerity condition: The feelings that you have to perform the speech act sincerely which focuses upon the Speaker's psychological state.
4. Essential condition: It focuses upon the illocutionary point.

Searle used the term 'happy' for the non-defective speech act and 'unhappy' for the defective speech act. In a dramatic dialogue, all these conditions are often violated, only the dramatic interlocutor often accepts the defective utterance as 'happy' utterance. The felicity conditions results in a performative 'unhappy' or infelicitous performative or a 'misfire' because of violation of any of them. There are a number of instances of violation of the felicity conditions in his play.

MEG: Where's Stan?

*Pause.*

Is Stan down yet, Petey?

PETEY: No... he's...

MEG: Is he still in bed?

PETEY: Yes, he's ... still sleep.

MEG: Still? He'll be late for his breakfast.

PETEY: Let him...sleep. (86-87)

The above instance is taken from the last scene of third act of *The Birthday Party* where Petey and Meg are discussing after Stanley's escort by two outside forces Goldberg and McCann. Petey makes false statements about Stanley. He knows that what he is saying is not true, but these utterances are 'happy' utterances for Meg. He, as well as the audience knows that Stanley has already been taken away, but still these 'falsifications' are 'happy' utterances for Meg, who believes them to be true. The analysis of the selective dialogue from the play leads us to conclude that the violation of these conditions contributes not only to the first type of theatrical communication but helps us understand also the second type of theatrical communication, that is, communication between characters on the stage and the audience.

## 5. Information about characters:

The fifth function of dialogue is to convey the information about characters. Willis said that it is a type of exposition about the character by himself or by others to get more information about them to the readers. We get the number of instances in Pinter's plays where the characters reveal themselves or of others to develop the plot and the action of the play. In the beginning of *The Birthday Party*, Petey reveals his routine of morning walk and Meg giving tea to Stanley in his room. Later Stanley reveals about past performance and Meg, Goldberg, McCann and Lulu about their past. Though it is blamed on Pinter not to give much information about his characters like well-made play; the lack of information in his plays is the distinctive quality and pinteresque trait of them.

## Conclusion:

All these five functions of dialogue are embodied into conversation of the characters and are the characteristic of the person speaking. His masterly technique of dialogue acquainted with his knowledge of stage and performance of the plays. It is not only conversational exchange between characters, but their turn taking, types of turn, topic control, initiation of exchanges, and lexical control, Length of turn, terms of address are also most important to get the meaning from the dialogue of characters. The dialogue can convey to the reader / audience about the information of time, place and action. It is the dialogue which can perform various actual enactments. The last and most important function of dialogue is the information about characters. The analysis of Pinter's dialogue in *The Birthday Party* with these functions reveals various different aspects and the technique of his dialogue.

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