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Conversational Maxims and Implicatures in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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Abstract:

The elements of absurdity, uncertainty and ambiguity seem to be integral to life in the postmodern world. The characters in an Absurd play often struggle to find the apt manner of expression. Dramatic dialogue in Pinter's drama is a representation of the irrationality of everyday conversations in life. The characters in a Pinterian play often use language as a weapon for self-defence, in order to protect themselves from some unknown threat and terror. They usually do not co-operate with one another in their conversational exchanges. H. P. Grice's Co-operative Principle is a basic concept in Pragmatics. According to Grice, the Co-operative Principle is a norm governing all co-operative interactions among individuals. The speakers during a conversational exchange may not observe the conversational maxims at times. Sometimes the speaker may not be willing to abide by the Co-operative Principle. In an absurd play, the characters often, either deliberately or secretly, subvert the conversational maxim and principle for some selfish motives. Thus, there are various instances of maxim violation. This research paper aims at the application of Grice's Co-operative Principle and its Maxims to Pinter's comedy of menace, *The Birthday Party*. The study is an attempt to throw light on the study of dramatic dialogue in literature from a new perspective through the application of Grice's interpretative model/framework in order to help the readers to derive at the intended meaning out of the seemingly uncooperative utterances of Pinter's absurdist characters.

Keywords: Co-operative Principle, conversational exchange, maxims, implicatures, absurdity

The analysis of dramatic dialogue as discourse has caught the attention of linguists and stylisticians towards the late 1970s and early 1980s with the developments in different methods of analysis like Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis and Pragmatics. These areas of linguistic study have equipped the researchers with different tools and techniques to analyse dramatic dialogue as discourse. Compared to other genres of literature, drama has often been regarded as the 'neglected child' in the area of stylistic analysis (Culpeper et al. 3). Spoken

conversation was considered as an unstable form of language, hence, the analysis of dramatic texts was relatively given less attention. Early stylistic study primarily concentrated on the analysis of poetry texts foregrounding the figures of speech at different levels of linguistic analysis. Much importance was not paid to the dynamics of spoken utterances or interaction in dramatic texts. However, this gap was later on filled with the proliferation of sub-disciplines like Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics during late 1970s and early 1980s. The introduction of various theories and frameworks of Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics have greatly impacted the analysis of dramatic situations and characters in a dramatic text. One such framework or tool that has equipped the stylisticians in analyzing the meaning of utterances in dramatic texts is H. P. Grice's notion of 'Co-operative Principle' which has been developed in the essay titled 'Logic and Conversation' (1975). This paper outlines the theoretical framework of Herbert Paul Grice's 'Co-operative Principle' (1975) and then goes on to analyse some selected dramatic extracts from Harold Pinter's absurd play, *The Birthday Party* (1958) using the theoretical insights from H.P. Grice's framework of Co-operative Principle. The present paper aims at exploring the absurd relationship and characterization of the different dramatic characters in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* using Grice's interpretative model of 'Co-operative Principle'.

"Co-operation is a term often used in linguistic literature to characterize human behaviour in conversation" (Davies 1). This term is used in the context of dialogue analysis. There was a growing interest in the meaning of utterances, rather than sentences. H. P. Grice (1913-1988) was a British philosopher of language. Grice's contribution to the nature of meaning has greatly influenced the philosophical study of semantics. According to H.P. Grice, there is a difference between saying and implying, as, saying is a kind of direct speech act and implicating is an indirect speech act. The general principles H.P. Grice proposed are what he called the Co-operative Principle and the Maxims of Conversation. According to Grice, the Co-operative Principle is a norm governing all co-operative interactions among individuals. "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" (Cooper 57). Thus, it may be said that whenever a conversation unfolds, the participants/speakers are expected to obey a general Co-operative Principle. It is significant to note that implicatures can be established by envisaging the four conversational rules or maxims according to the Co-operative Principle. Grice's four conversational maxims are as follows:

A. Maxim of Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

B. Maxim of Quality

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

C. Maxim of Relation

1. Be relevant.

D. Maxim of Manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly. (Cooper 57)

Grice's Co-operative Principle is a basic concept in Pragmatics. According to Grice, we should make our 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 we are engaged. He labels this as the Co-operative Principle (Grice 45). "Grice is concerned with the distinction between saying and meaning: how hearers recognize the utterer's intention when speakers use implicit language" (Davies 6). The basic assumption of Grice's principle is that people normally co-operates in the process of communication in order to reduce misunderstanding. Grice provides a model of how interpreters draw certain types of inferences from conversations. As far as exchange of information is concerned, Grice argues that conversation is primarily a co-operative endeavour.

It is significant to note that, if the dramatic dialogue does not appear to conform to Grice's conversation model, then we do not assume that the utterance is nonsensical; rather we assume that an appropriate meaning is there to be inferred. In the words of H.P. Grice, a maxim has been flouted, and an implicature generated. "Grice places emphasis on the role of speaker-intention in the process of meaning-recognition" (Davies 12). Dramatic dialogue in Pinter's drama is a representation of the irrationality of everyday conversations in life. The characters in a Harold Pinter play often make use of improper syntax which is replete with tautologies, repetitions, pauses, silences and self-contradictions. The characters in a Pinterian play often use language as a weapon for self-defence, in order to protect themselves from some unknown threat and terror. They usually do not co-operate with one another in their conversational exchanges. This study is an attempt to throw light on how the communicative strategy of co-operation relates to different aspects of characterisation in Pinter's absurd play *The Birthday Party*. This research paper studies the dramatic dialogue in literature from a new perspective through the application of Grice's interpretative model/framework in order to help the readers to derive at the intended meaning out of the seemingly uncooperative utterances of Pinter's absurdist characters.

It is significant to mention Grice's notion of 'implicature' before attempting to explore how the linguistic strategies of co-operation are used by the characters in Pinter's absurd play *The Birthday Party*. The word implicature means to hint, suggest or convey some meaning indirectly by means of language. The speakers during a conversational exchange may not observe the conversational maxims at times. A speaker may opt out from the operation of the maxim. Sometimes the speaker may not be willing to abide by the Co-operative Principle. He or she may

deliberately or secretly subvert the conversational maxim and principle for some selfish motives. Thus, there are various instances of maxim violation. “The most interesting reason for failing to observe a maxim is thereby to say something indirectly; Grice calls this way of generating meaning an ‘implicature’ (Cooper 57). H.P. Grice distinguishes between two kinds of implicatures. The two kinds of implicatures are conventional implicatures and non-conventional or conversational implicatures. The distinction between conventional and non-conventional implicature has its basis in the speaker-meaning and sentence-meaning (Grice 45). Conventional implicatures convey the same extra meaning regardless of the context. On the other hand, conversational implicatures convey different meanings according to different contexts. Thus, it may be said that, there is a difference between what a speaker or character in a drama says and what he/she implies or suggests. The current study aims at the application of Grice’s theoretical framework outlined above in the paper to five selected dialogue extracts from Pinter’s comedy of menace, *The Birthday Party*.

Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* (1958) is his first full-length play. This play is a movement from comedy to menace and dramatizes the plight of an emotionally troubled man in his thirties named Stanley Webber. Stanley’s disposition suddenly turns sullen at the news of two new boarders in the boarding house where he resides. This apparently ordinary man is threatened by the two strangers for an unknown reason. The two men – Goldberg and McCann – organize a birthday party for this terrified man who insists that it is not his birthday. The presence of these two characters brings a sense of menace in the play. The characters in this play mostly use language for the purpose of self-defence or domination, which reflects their sense of insecurity and isolation. The play offers an intense and frightening metaphor for the underlying fear and insecurity that the sensitive individual has of the outside world. The play deals with the theme of absurdity of human life and situation, therefore, it would be interesting to note how the different characters conform to Grice’s notion of ‘Co-operative Principle’ in this play.

The first extract, selected from Act I of the play *The Birthday Party* (1958), contains the routined conversation between Meg and Petey, a childless and aging couple who live in a dilapidated boarding house in a seaside town. Stanley Webber, a young man in his late thirties, is the only lodger in that boarding house run by the couple. The numerical numbers placed before the names of the characters in this extract indicate the turn number. This has been mentioned in order to help the analysis of the character’s dialogue. The following conversation between Meg and Petey in the beginning of the play reveals interesting traits about Meg’s character:

The Extract

- (1) MEG: I like listening to the piano. I used to like watching Stanley play the piano. Of course, he didn’t sing. (Looking at the door.) I’m going to call that boy.
- (2) PETEY: Didn’t you take him up his cup of tea?
- (3) MEG: I always take him up his cup of tea. But that was a long time ago.

- (4) PETEY: Did he drink it?
- (5) MEG: I made him. I stood there till he did. I'm going to call him. (She goes to the door.) Stan! Stanny! (She listens.) Stan! I'm coming up to fetch you if you don't come down! I'm coming up! I'm going to count three! One! Two! Three! I'm coming to get you! (She exits and goes upstairs. In a moment, shouts from STANLEY, wild laughter from MEG. PETEY takes his plate to the hatch. Shouts. Laughter. PETEY sits at the table. Silence. She returns.) He's coming down. (She is panting and arranges her hair.) I told him if he didn't hurry up he'd get no breakfast.
(Pinter 13-14)

Meg's excessive care and affection for Stanley, a young lodger in the boarding house, is somewhat disturbing as revealed in the very first turn in the above extract. Meg, a woman in her sixties, shares an ambiguous relationship with Stanley Webber. Meg appears to be a very complex character, as she seems to have a dual relationship with Stanley which is quite evident from the fifth turn in the above dialogue excerpt. She behaves both like a mother and a lover to this young man. Meg flouts Grice's second maxim of Manner ('Avoid ambiguity') and thereby the above conversational exchange implicates that Meg, the childless elderly lady shares a complex relationship with her young lodger, Stanley Webber. This doting landlady fulfils her maternal instincts and desires by treating Stanley as her son. Meg also seems to develop a close affinity and romantic relationship with this young man, especially in the absence of her husband in the household.

The second extract, in which we again have a conversational exchange between Meg and Stanley in Act I of the play *The Birthday Party* further affirms their ambiguous relationship:

The Extract

- 1) MEG: . . . Was it nice?
- 2) STANLEY: What?
- 3) MEG: The fried bread.
- 4) STANLEY: Succulent.
- 5) MEG: You shouldn't say that word.
- 6) STANLEY: What word?
- 7) MEG: That word you said.
- 8) STANLEY: What, succulent – ?
- 9) MEG: Don't say it!
- 10) STANLEY: What's the matter with it?
- 11) MEG: You shouldn't say that word to a married woman.
- 12) STANLEY: Is that a fact?
- 13) MEG: Yes.
- 14) STANLEY: Well, I never knew that.

- 15) MEG: Well, it's true.
- 16) STANLEY: Who told you that?
- 17) MEG: Never you mind.
- 18) STANLEY: Well, if I can't say it to a married woman who can I say it to?
- 19) MEG: You're bad. . . .
- 20) STANLEY (absently): I don't know what I'd do without you. . . .
- 21) MEG (pouring the tea, coyly): Go on. Calling me that. . . .
- 22) MEG (shyly): Am I really succulent?
- 23) STANLEY: Oh, you are. I'd rather have you than a cold in the nose any day. . . .
- 24) MEG (sensual, stroking his arm): Oh, Stan, that's a lovely room. I've had some lovely afternoons in that room. (Pinter 17-19)

In the above extract Stanley and Meg's erotic intentions are evident. Stanley describes the fried bread served by Meg for breakfast as succulent in the fourth turn. Meg mentions that the word 'succulent' should not be used to a married woman in the eleventh turn of the above excerpt, and apparently appear to be offended by the use of this word. Meg's desire to be reassured whether she is really succulent or not later in the conversation, which is mentioned in the twenty-second turn, proves the fact that they share a very close relationship with each other. These textual evidences speak of an unusual intimacy between the two.

Hence, it can be said that Stanley fails to fulfil the second maxim of Manner ('Avoid ambiguity') and the Relation maxim ('Be relevant') of Grice's Co-operative Principle by using the word 'succulent' in the above conversation with an elderly woman. The use of the word 'succulent' by Stanley is quite ambiguous. It reveals his complicated relationship with Meg. This word is neither relevant to the fried bread nor to an old lady like Meg. Thus, the use of the word conversationally implicates a perverse side of Meg's role as a mother to Stanley. Meg is delighted by Stanley's use of the word 'succulent' to describe the fried bread, and later to describe her, which is very evident in her last three turns in the above dialogue extract.

The third extract chosen for analysis is taken from Act II of the play *The Birthday Party*, in which Goldberg and McCann verbally assault Stanley Webber in the form of a ferocious cross-examination:

The Extract

- (1) GOLDBERG: Is the number 846 possible or necessary?
- (2) STANLEY: Neither.
- (3) GOLDBERG: Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?
- (4) STANLEY: Both.
- (5) GOLDBERG: Wrong! It's necessary but not possible.
- (6) STANLEY: Both.

- (7) GOLDBERG: Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?
- (8) STANLEY: Must be.
- (9) GOLDBERG: Wrong! It's only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity.
- (10) MCCANN: Right! . . .
- (11) GOLDBERG: Speak up Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?
- (12) STANLEY: He wanted to – he wanted to – he wanted to. . . .
- (13) MCCANN: He doesn't know!
- (14) GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?
- (15) STANLEY: He wanted to – he wanted to. . . .
- (16) GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?
- (17) STANLEY: He wanted. . . .
- (18) MCCANN: He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!
- (19) GOLDBERG: Which came first?
- (20) MCCANN: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?
- (21) GOLDBERG and MCCANN: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?
STANLEY screams. (Pinter 50-52)

The above extract begins with a series of questions asked by Goldberg to Stanley, which is mentioned in the first few turns of the extract. The series of questions thrown at Stanley like 'Is the number 846 possible or necessary?' in the first turn and 'Chicken? Egg? Which came first?' mentioned in the twentieth turn in the above excerpt, appear to be very improbable and unanswerable. The duo, mainly Goldberg, intentionally ask him apparently logic-based questions which are actually nonsensical. Stanley is unable to respond well to such weird questions, which were primarily asked only to confuse him. Stanley's inarticulate and paranoid responses reflect the mental setback that Stanley has received as a result of such nightmarish verbal assault. This is very evident when Stanley attempts to respond in the twelfth, fifteenth and seventeenth turn in the extract. He is psychologically tormented and inhumanly humiliated by obscure questions asked by the duo. Goldberg and McCann torture Stanley physically and psychologically. Goldberg purposely violates Grice's first maxim of Manner ('Avoid obscurity of expression') in all his questions, in order to torture Stanley who breaks down completely. Finally, the questions and non-stop detailed accusations become increasingly bizarre, and at last Stanley screams which spells his imminent downfall in the play *The Birthday Party*.

The fourth extract, in which Goldberg and McCann are engaged in gently wooing Stanley, has been selected from Act III of the play *The Birthday Party*. This long sequence of talk is shared mostly between the two cryptic intruders:

The Extract

- (1) GOLDBERG: . . . You'll be able to make or break, Stan. By my life. (Silence. STANLEY is still.) Well? What do you say?
STANLEY'S head lifts very slowly and turns in GOLDBERG'S direction.
- (2) GOLDBERG: What do you think? Eh, boy?
STANLEY begins to clench and unclench his eyes.
- (3) MCCANN: What's your opinion, sir? Of this prospect, sir?
- (4) GOLDBERG: Prospect. Sure. Sure it's a prospect.
STANLEY'S hands clutching his glasses begin to tremble.
What's your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?
STANLEY concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.
- (5) STANLEY: Uh-gug . . . uh-gug . . . eeehhh-gag . . . (On the breath.)
Caahh . . . caahh. . . .
They watch him. He draws a long breath which shudders down his body. He concentrates.
- (6) GOLDBERG: Well, Stanny boy, what do you say, eh?
They watch. He concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches.
- (7) STANLEY: Uh-gughh . . . uh-gughhh. . . .
- (8) MCCANN: What's your opinion, sir?
- (9) STANLEY: Caaahhh . . . caaahhh. . . .
- (10) MCCANN: Mr. Webber! What's your opinion?
- (11) GOLDBEG: What do you say, Stan? What do you think of the prospect?
(Pinter 84-85)

In Act III of the play *The Birthday Party*, Stanley appears in the morning holding his broken glasses in his hand. Stanley sits with a blank face and looks at the floor. Goldberg initiates the above conversational exchange with his first two turns in the extract. Though Goldberg and McCann frighten Stanley in the beginning, they pretend to be his well-wishers at the end by mentioning about the 'prospect' in the third, fourth and last turn of the dramatic extract. Stanley trembles involuntarily in fear and anxiety, thinking of the problems ahead of him. Stanley becomes almost speechless and motionless. He attempts to speak, but fails miserably. The disabled Stanley is only able to emit some indistinct sounds from his throat, which is evident in the fifth, seventh and ninth turn of Stanley Webber. Stanley seems to violate the first maxim of Manner of Grice's Co-operative Principle ('Avoid obscurity of expression') in these turns of the extract. The inarticulate grunts and sounds made by Stanley Webber in the last Act of the play suggest his 'last desperate rejection of what is happening to him' (Naismith 53).

The significant point that should be mentioned here is that the above extract from the absurd play *The Birthday Party* between the two tormentors – Goldberg and McCann – and Stanley, the

silent victim, reveals the fact that Stanley has been eventually reduced to a dumb sufferer. He can no longer speak like a normal man, and is only able to reply with inarticulate grunts and sounds from his throat. Hence, this significant extract from Act III of the play throws light on Stanley's consequent collapse and disintegration in the play.

The fifth and the final extract chosen for analysis is taken from Act III of the play. This short extract from the last scene of the play *The Birthday Party* comprises a conversational exchange between Meg and Petey, which is very similar to their routined conversational exchange in the opening scene of the play:

The Extract

- (1) MEG: Where's Stan?
Pause.
Is Stan down yet, Petey?
- (2) PETEY: No . . . he's . . .
- (3) MEG: Is he still in bed?
- (4) PETEY: Yes, he's . . . still asleep.
- (5) MEG: Still? He'll be late for his breakfast.
- (6) PETEY: Let him . . . sleep.
Pause.
(Pinter 86-87)

The above extract begins with Meg's turn in which she enquires Petey about Stanley Webber. Petey is very much aware of the fact that Stanley has been taken away by the two mysterious men in the car despite his ineffective protest. But, when Meg returns home from shopping, Petey hesitates to reveal this to her which is very evident in the second turn of the extract. Petey intentionally violates Grice's first maxim of Quality ('Do not say what you believe to be false') in the fourth and sixth turn of the extract. Petey lies to Meg saying that Stanley is still asleep in his room. It should be noted that this brief conversational exchange between the oblivious Meg and the defeated Petey mirrors the shattered domesticity of the household as well as the fragile interpersonal relationships of the members in the family.

Finally, we may conclude by saying that Paul Grice's interpretative conversational model has enabled us to understand Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in a better light. Grice's theory of Cooperative Principle has helped in drawing insightful inferences from the selected dramatic extracts, carefully chosen from this puzzling play. The discourse analysis of the text has helped in a great way in demonstrating various important aspects like ambiguous relationship between characters, theme of menace and threat from the outside world and the sense of insecurity and isolation of postmodern man in Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*. The play, *The Birthday Party* as a whole reveals that whatever happens to humans in life is not necessarily based on logic or reason. They deal with absurdity of human reality.

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