

Linguistic Approaches to Literature ∞

Storytelling and Drama

Exploring Narrative Episodes in Plays

Hugo Bowles

John Benjamins Publishing Company

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Amsterdam / Philadelphia



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bowles, Hugo.

Storytelling and drama : exploring narrative episodes in plays / Hugo Bowles.

p. cm. (Linguistic Approaches to Literature, ISSN 1569-3112 ; v. 8)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Narration (Rhetoric)
2. Drama--Technique.
3. Dialogue.
4. Discourse analysis, Literary.
5. Storytelling in literature. I. Title.

PN1697.B69 2010

808.2--dc22

2009040135

ISBN 978 90 272 3340 0 (Hb ; alk. paper)

ISBN 978 90 272 8869 1 (Eb)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

Acknowledgements

This book has taken several years to complete and I must above all thank Sonia Zyngier and Willie van Peer, the editors of this series, for their careful editing and encouragement during the writing process. I also owe a huge debt to Jane Sherman whose thoughtful and thorough review in the final stages brought about considerable improvements in the text.

The book has benefited considerably from input from linguists and stylisticians. I have received comments on individual chapters from Neal Norrick and Peter Douglas and support and suggestions from Sara Laviosa, Stefano Brugnolo, John Pilling, Daniela Guardamagna and Rossana Sebellin. My thanks to all of them. I am also grateful to Peter Stockwell, David Herman and Monica Fludernik for sending me advance copies of their (now published) work.

As a linguist approaching a literary topic, I have also relied heavily on literary scholars to fill in the “dramatic” gaps in my knowledge and I am grateful for conversations and correspondence with colleagues better versed in theatre studies than I. Simon Taylor and Dermot Heaney in particular have been an endless source of stories often from plays which I never even knew existed. While writing the book, I also gave two papers on conversational style in literature, one at a conference in 2006 on “Corpora, Discourse and Style” in Sassari and the other at the “Beckett in Rome” conference in April 2008. I am grateful to the conference participants for their comments.

I must finally thank my family – Stefania, Emily, Luca and Daisy. It is not easy living with someone who is trying to write a book and it is they in the end who have made it possible. This book is dedicated to them and to my mother, who first told and read me a lot of stories.

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Introduction

Clov: What is there to keep me here?

Hamm: The dialogue. (*Pause*) I've got on with my story. (*Pause*)

I've got on with it well. (*Pause. Irritably*) Ask me where I've got to.
(S. Beckett, *Endgame*)

Storytelling can be a frustrating business. As Hamm tries to tell his story in Beckett's *Endgame*, he is often exasperated with his listener, Clov, and with his own failed attempts to narrate the "chronicle". Storytelling can also be frustrating in real life. In *Untold Stories* (2005), a collection of autobiographical writings, the dramatist Alan Bennett describes how he was attacked one night by a gang of youths on an Italian seafront while walking with a younger male friend. After Bennett had reported the incident, the police presumed that he had been cruising – an idea in Bennett's words "so far from the truth it was almost comical" (2005: 569) – and decided that the assault had been his own fault. Here Bennett analyses how he was unable to tell what happened in a way that could make them change their minds:

"This happened" is the most that one can say; to get into why it happened, why it should not have happened, or how one did nothing to make it happen, implies that there could be an alternative story that could be sketched out, the denial in itself conferring some authenticity on the alternative. I see now how women who have been attacked find themselves incriminated when they are asked to explain it, and how, in classic fashion, by simply recounting the circumstances of an assault, the victim becomes the culprit.
(Bennett 2005: 568)

Bennett illustrates how the act of storytelling opens the door to interpretation and misinterpretation and that "recounting circumstances" depends fatally on the situation in which we are required to do the recounting. A story cannot be told when the hearers think they know it already.

It is not just the police who are sceptical about what they are told. Here, in Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* (2003), the boot is on the other foot – two brothers are dubious about what the police are telling them:

Katurian: Why are we being so stupid? Why are we believing everything they're telling us?

Michal: Why?

Katurian: This is just like storytelling.

Michal: I know.

Katurian: A man comes into a room, says "Your mother is dead", yeah?

Michal: I know my mother's dead.

Katurian: No, I know, but in a story. A man comes into a room, says to another man, "Your mother's dead." What do we know? Do we know the second man's mother is dead?

Michal: Yes.

Katurian: No, we don't.

Michal: No, we don't.

Katurian: All we know is that a man has come into a room and said to another man, "Your mother is dead." That is all we know. First rule of storytelling. "Don't believe everything you read in the papers."

Michal: I don't read the papers.

Katurian: Good. You'll always be one step ahead of everybody else.

(M. McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, Act 2, Scene 1)

Katurian, characterized as a writer in the play, is suggesting that listener response – scepticism or credulity – is a feature of all storytelling episodes, not just the ones that take place in interrogation rooms of police stations. Even among friends, storytellers need to guard against scepticism by making their stories credible. In fact, Katurian's advice – "don't believe everything you read in the papers" – is a warning that is applicable to any analyst of conversational narrative. A story is first and foremost a discursive construct.

Keeping a story credible fulfils what is known in narrative research as a "telability" condition. Maintaining listeners' interest, as described below, fulfils another:

Chance: I was born in this town. I was born in St Cloud.

Princess: That's a good way to begin to tell your life story. Tell me your life story. I'm interested in it, I really would like to know it. Let's make it your audition, a sort of screen test for you. I can watch you in the mirror while I put my face on. And tell me your life story, and if you hold my attention with your life story, I'll know you have talent.

(T. Williams, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Act 1, Scene 2)

Princess's idea of storytelling as an audition presents it as an ongoing process which involves holding the attention of the listener: if it does not, then it fails as a story. Telling a story means, above all, telling a *good* story.

Yet these two tellability conditions can be in conflict. The idea that stories have to be interesting is at odds with the parallel requirement that they be credible. As Labov's reportability paradox shows (Labov 1997), the most interesting or "reportable" events are also those that are least likely to be believed. Thus, in trying to make a narrative "tellable", storytellers are forced to weave their way between keeping audiences entertained while making sure they keep faith with what they are being told. This double bind makes the narrator vulnerable. If Chance tells Princess an uninteresting story it will mean that he has no talent, while for Bennett the more details he puts into the story the less likely it is to be believed by the police. He explains this further:

Just by telling the story one loses the facts, shakes them out and makes them available for interpretation and rearrangement. Instinctively, in telling the story one guards against misinterpretation, but to lay stress on the innocence of one's conduct is to imply that there have been other occasions, similar situations, dark nights with boys on seafronts where one's behaviour might be more blameworthy. (Bennett 2005: 569)

Bennett illustrates how the vulnerability of the storyteller translates into interactional behaviour designed for self-protection. For Bennett the need to be believed produces behaviour which aims to "guard against misinterpretation" – a good illustration of Goffman's view (1981) that talk is carried out by taking up a particular stance in relation to other speakers. Likewise Princess's claim that maintaining interest in personal narrative is "a sort of screen test" echoes Goffman's well-known comparison between acting and social behaviour (Goffman 1969). Storytellings are continual rehearsals in self-presentation aimed at pleasing different audiences at different times.

The idea that narrators are vulnerable, that they are dependent on their audiences and that the facts are always in doubt – in short, that storytelling is a delicate enterprise – has been a boon for the theatre. This book is about how all these features of tellability are exploited by dramatists. The tellability of narrative episodes can be manipulated for all kinds of dramatic purposes – to fill in background information about a character, for example, or to refer to an event that has taken place offstage. In the first scene of *Hamlet*, when the ghost tells the story of how he was poisoned, he is describing past events and preparing the ground for future ones. The way the story is told focuses the audience's attention on the listener, i.e. on Hamlet's reaction rather than on the Ghost's performance, because it is on Hamlet that the subsequent dynamics of the play depend. On other occasions the focus will be on the narrating character – dramatists confront their tellers with bored, diffident or sceptical audiences and the narrative journey is more akin to walking a tightrope, as the teller tries to balance the competing demands

of interest and credibility. In all cases *the narration becomes the drama* and understanding the telling of the story, not just the plot itself, becomes important for an understanding of the play as a whole.

Aim of the book

The aim of this book is to explore how narration can become drama. It analyzes storytelling as interaction in plays and shows how they relate to the drama as a whole. In the final chapter of his book *Conversational Narrative*, Norrick (2000) proposes that narrative episodes in plays are an area to which the analysis of stories in everyday speech can be usefully applied. This book takes up his suggestion and aims to extend the insights of conversational narrative research systematically across the domain of drama.

Three main threads of argument are developed here. The first is how definitions of narrative can be related to stories in plays. Past and present narrative research has been particularly concerned with this theoretical question. Bamberg (2006a, 2006b), among others, has argued that Labov's research on conversation (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972) and Bruner's cognitive paradigm (Bruner 1987), which are based on narrative structure, have foregrounded certain kinds of autobiographical, reflective story at the expense of other "small stories". This book will suggest that extending the range of analyzable narratives to include hitherto neglected "small stories" can be advantageous for dramatic discourse.

The second is the analysis of interactional behaviour in storytelling episodes. The book will focus on the way narrators try to involve their listeners, attending to audience face needs as well as their own, and on the way listeners react, positioning themselves in relation to the narrator and other participants. Goffman's view of talk as a form of self-presentation is thus an important part of the analytical approach. One of the difficulties which has bedevilled linguistic approaches to drama is that play-texts are fictional representations of talk rather than transcripts of actual conversation. This lack of authenticity, it is sometimes claimed, makes it ineligible for analysis by linguistic methods that depend on naturally-occurring talk. It is hoped that Goffman's categories for speech production will provide a stronger theoretical framework and a more plausible rationale for treating idealised talk as if it were social behaviour.

The third thread is the dramatic treatment of tellability and how stories in plays work as literature. This involves examining narrative trajectories which move in different directions in the play-text: on the one hand we have the writer of the play whose literary task is to make what Bruner (1987), paraphrasing Joyce, calls "an epiphany of the ordinary", while on the other we have the conversational

storyteller, i.e. a narrating character in the play itself, whose task is to make an unusual event acceptably banal. As Toolan (2001: 175) points out, “to protect our stories from dismissal as outrageous fabrication, immediately dismissible, we render them as ordinary as possible”. How these opposing trajectories are reconciled in drama is at the heart of the analysis.

How the book is organised

The book is divided into two parts. The first four chapters (Part 1) deal with the methodology of defining, describing and analyzing stories, while the last four (Part 2) apply the method to narratives in plays. More specifically, Chapter 1 explores the complex nature of dramatic discourse, the definition of “narrative” and “story” and the research methods that have been used to study them. The final part of the chapter proposes an analytical method based on conversation analysis (CA) and interactional sociolinguistics. The next two chapters set out the method, explaining how CA micro-analytic techniques can be adapted to dramatic discourse (Chapter 2) and how this can be supplemented by interactional and discourse analysis (Chapter 3). Chapter 3 also distinguishes different aspects of stories (interactional mode, local function and discourse role) in order to establish an analytical framework which can be used to classify stories in terms of their interactional features. Chapter 4 describes the typical features and categories used in narrative research to mark the organization and tellability of stories, showing how they are deployed in dramatic dialogue to achieve particular effects.

The second half of the book will track the tellability of stories in plays by relating the local interactional behaviour of speakers (making the strange ordinary) to the requirements of the play as a whole (making the ordinary strange). Chapter 5 addresses the relatively unexplored area of small stories in plays. It concentrates on four types (gossip, eye-witness reports, dream telling and involuntary memories) evaluating their role in plays by looking at the way in which their affiliative properties are used to create particular dramatic effects. Chapter 6 looks at the more reflective stories produced in remembering and dreaming episodes, which are frequent in dramatic discourse. Here the focus is on how participants’ orientation to a story changes its emotional complexion (for example, from reminiscence to nostalgia or from dream to fantasy). Chapter 7 examines the negotiation of power and how the interactional dynamics of storytelling affect and are affected by the power relations that are established between participants in narrative episodes. Chapter 8 explores the question of identity, looking at the various ways in which a character can “be a narrator” and the kinds of identity that are constructed in narrative episodes. The final chapter

summarises the main themes of the book and draws conclusions regarding future research.

Stories in real-life conversation may be significant or may be incidental but a story in drama is a play within a play and has a determinate function or functions, for example as a hinge of the action, the cusp of a relationship, a revelation to the audience, a token of a disintegrating personality. The details of how the teller, the listener and the theatre audience or play-reader react and interact in these moments reflect and illuminate the action. The suggested methodology offers an interpretative framework for story tellability which may be seen as an additional tool for dramatic criticism. This book aims to interest readers in trying their hand at this kind of analysis and to invite their evaluation of its possibilities.

CHAPTER 1

Narrative and dramatic discourse

Macbeth: Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v. 24–28)

1.0 Introduction

Aston's story

Aston: You know, I was sitting in a café the other day. I happened to be sitting at the same table as this woman. Well, we started to... we started to pick up a bit of a conversation. I don't know... about her holiday, it was, where she'd been. She'd been to the South Coast. I can't remember where though. Anyway, we were just sitting there, having this bit of a conversation... then suddenly she put her hand over to mine... and she said, how would you like me to have a look at your body?

Davies: Get out of it.

(*Pause.*)

(H. Pinter, *The Caretaker*, Act 1)

The first task of a book whose aim is to outline a linguistic approach to storytelling in dramatic discourse is to define the object of analysis. What kind of text is *Aston's story*? It shows many of the characteristic features of *conversation* such as hesitancy, discourse markers and repetition (Brown and Yule 1983: 17) and is also a typical mode of informal speech – Aston is telling Davies a story about what the woman told him in the café; this kind of “talk about talk” is very frequent in everyday speech. Yet Aston's account is also a typical spoken *narrative*. He focuses on the sequencing of past events (*I happened to be sitting ...; we were just sitting there*), brings the story back to the present (*I can't remember where though*) and signals which aspects of content should receive attention (*anyway ... then suddenly*). Despite the hesitancy and repetition, the story has an internal structure – important events such as *then suddenly she put her hand over to mine* are given greater salience. The episode also has a status as *dramatic discourse*. Although the

dialogue resembles ordinary speech, it is not a transcript of a real conversation but carefully crafted comedy with stylistic features designed to fit the dramatic context. It helps to define the relationship between the speakers not only in this scene but in the play as a whole.

How, then, is the analyst to approach a text which has a triple status as conversation, narrative and drama? There are a number of candidate methods for the analysis of storytelling in plays. Do we ignore the narrative status and apply a method for analysing talk in general, such as discourse (DA) or conversation analysis (CA)? Do we apply a structural method for exploring narrative, such as the Labov/Waletzky framework (1967)? Or do we start with literary criticism?

This chapter will follow the stylistic tradition of matching analytical method(s) with the requirements of the text.¹ It will therefore look first at the discourse type (the text as dramatic discourse), then at its discourse mode (the text as narrative and as conversation), and finally at methods for analysing the latter in terms of the former. Accordingly, the chapter will be divided into three sections, addressing specific questions:

- What is dramatic discourse? What kind of text does it produce? (1.1)
- What is conversational narrative and how can it best be analysed in dramatic discourse? (1.2)
- What are the weaknesses of the chosen analytical method and what additional methodological support is available? (1.3)

1.1 Dramatic discourse

This section examines the complex discourse of drama, describes the main linguistic approaches that have been used to analyse it and explores their appropriacy. This prepares the ground for the discussion of conversational narrative in 1.2.

1.1.1 The nature of dramatic discourse

The discourse of drama, which is discussed in detail in Elam (1980, Chapter 5) and Herman (1995), is unusually complex because its oral and written forms are intertwined. The written form is scripted dialogue, i.e. a written representation of real-life speech. The oral form is the spoken interaction that takes place on stage; it is not an instance of naturally-occurring talk but a *performed version* of the

1. This might be called the “horses for (dis) courses” approach – “drawing eclectically on linguistic insights” (Carter and Simpson 1989:7).

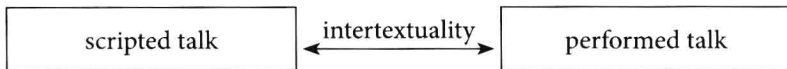
scripted dialogue. As well as being related to each other, both forms are related to naturally-occurring talk. The relationships between these forms of speech will be looked at separately:

(1) Natural and performed talk



The relationship between natural and performed talk is particularly difficult to define. Performed talk makes use of the utterances of natural speech but, vice-versa, natural talk verbalises forms of talk found in mediated contexts (film, theatre, advertising, etc.) and may in itself constitute a form of representation. Indeed, Goffman's metaphor for ordinary talk is that it is a theatrical performance of some kind (Goffman 1969: 28ff.).

(2) Performed and scripted talk



The relationship between scripted and performed talk is strongly "intertextual" (Elam 1980) because a performance will be based on a script and, vice-versa, the script will be composed with an ear for what Elam calls a "model" performance.

(3) Natural and scripted



Scripted talk is based on the writer's ear for the utterances of ordinary talk. Less obviously, the way that natural utterances are composed may also be based on written forms.

These three relationships give us the following picture of mutually dependent forms of speech in dramatic dialogue (Figure 1).

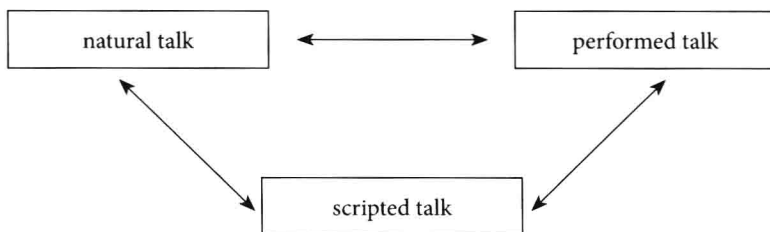


Figure 1. Forms of speech in dramatic dialogue

This interdependence raises difficult questions regarding the object and method of analysis. These will be addressed in 1.1.2 below.

A second reason for the complexity of dramatic discourse is that during dramatic performances at least two types of interaction take place simultaneously. On the one hand there is the dialogue onstage between the characters but at the same time the onstage characters also communicate with the audience. These simultaneous interactions create a structure which makes dramatic discourse more difficult to classify than face-to-face communication in real life. Short’s (1989) split-level model of live dramatic dialogue (Figure 2) shows how one level (the interaction between the characters) is embedded in the other (the interaction between dramatist and audience/reader).

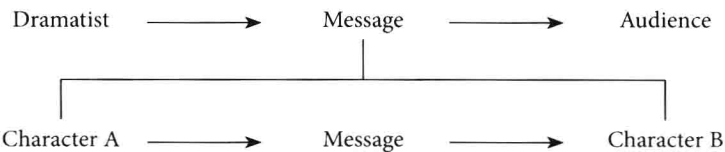


Figure 2. Short’s model of dramatic discourse (1989: 149)

The embedded structure shown in Figure 2 increases the range of possible dramatic effects; as Short (1989: 173) points out, “it is this doubled discourse which accounts for so-called dramatic irony, when the viewpoint of the audience is different from that of some character(s).” It also extends possible speaker and listener roles. Characters on stage will generally address each other directly but they can also break out of this horizontal interaction by addressing the audience directly though soliloquy or by taking on a narrator role. In this respect the audience can be both a spectator of the performance on stage and a silent participant in it, “both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the contexts of utterance entailed by the speech events of the play” (Herman 1995: 30). Short’s model can be extended to accommodate different types of narrating role and additional points of view (see also 8.1.1) by inserting further horizontal levels that mediate between the action on stage and the audience. Feng and Shen (2001) also point out the complexity of addresser-addressee relationships in stage directions: they start with the playwright as the source of the message and outline the numerous possible addressees. Although both Short’s and Feng and Shen’s models can be criticised for depicting complex dramatic communication in terms of a uniform “message”, they do highlight the difficulty of providing a unified framework for a description of dramatic discourse.

Short’s embedded discourse levels show that although the structure affords opportunities for creating certain dramatic effects, it also constrains the interaction