

# DRAMATIC ★ DISCOURSE

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## ★ DIALOGUE ★ *as* INTERACTION ◀ *in* ▶ PLAYS

VIMALA ★ HERMAN

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# Dramatic Discourse

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Dialogue as interaction in plays

Vimala Herman

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# Introduction

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## DIALOGUE AND DISCOURSE

Dialogue as discourse is characterized by a fundamental structural principle; it is interactive and interactional. It is a mode of speech *exchange* among participants, speech in relation to another's speech and not merely the verbal expression of one character or actor's 'part'. Dialogue belongs not to the sphere of the 'I' but to the sphere of the 'we', as Gadamer noted (1986a: 65). It requires, in standard cases, the agency and involvement of at least two participants who communicate through the medium of language, as the etymology of the word signifies – 'dia' – through, 'logos' – word, from 'dialegomai' – to converse. The encounter of an 'I' with a 'you' in the speech situation is itself a form of drama, as Lyons (1977) following Bühler (1934) observed, which the category of 'person' in language reflects.

The grammatical category of 'person' depends upon the notion of participant-roles and upon their grammaticalization in particular languages. The origin of the traditional terms 'first person' 'second person' and 'third person' is illuminating in this connexion. The Latin word 'persona' (meaning 'mask') was used to translate the Greek word for 'dramatic character' or 'role' and the use of this term by grammarians derives from their metaphorical conception of a language event as a drama in which the principal role is played by the first person, the role subsidiary to his, by the second person, and all other roles by the third person. It is important to note, however, that only the speaker and addressee are actually participating in the drama. The third person is negatively defined with respect to the first person and second person: it does not correlate with any positive participant role.

(Lyons 1977: 638)

In the 'drama' of speech exchange the roles of speaker and hearer are

played by actual participants and the roles are exchanged during the course of dialogue. The speaker switches role to that of listener while the erstwhile listener becomes the speaker without any necessary change in place or setting, only of 'person'. The switch from attendant non-speech to speech, the change of role from listener to that of speaker, is undertaken in response to another's speech, since response is predicated by the nature of the form. The temporal progression of such alternations and interchanges constitutes the structure and course of dialogue.

The dialogic principle has sometimes been understood in profound ways. To Martin Buber, the I-Thou relationship bespoke a fundamental condition of inter-subjectivity as the basic ground for humans in contact (Buber 1923). For Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) dialogic interactiveness is omniscient and forms the basis of understanding itself, with social inter-subjectivity taking priority over solo subjectivity in questions of meaning. In fact, *dialogism* for the Bakhtin school, even in its disparateness, transcended the face-to-face scenario to take in all forms of communication, including the written forms, and, more broadly, links to an epistemology that grapples with the interconnections between mind, language, culture and history (Voloshinov 1973); and argues for relatedness and for 'a necessary *multiplicity* in human perception' (Holquist 1990: 22). In speech, the tie with Otherness which the principle affords is manifested in the form. The production of meaning is not predicated upon univocality but is always structured under the pressure of an alternative force. An *I* addresses a *you* who responds as *I* addressing *you*, who responds as *I* addressing *you* . . . and so on. The deictic tie between addresser and target addressee – the *I* and *you* of the speech situation of dialogue – ensures that face-to-face encounter is presupposed by the form. The progress of dialogue over time is, consequently, dependent on the inputs from both poles of its structuring.

Standard definitions of the form in dictionaries link dialogue to spontaneous forms of dual interaction – conversation.

- 1 a literary work in conversational form    2a a conversation between 2 or more people or between a person and sthg else (e.g. a computer)    b an exchange of ideas and opinions    3 the conversational element of literary or dramatic composition    4 discussion or negotiation between 2 nations, factions, groups, etc. with conflicting interests . . .

(*New Penguin English Dictionary* 1986)

The link between conversation and dialogue posited above relates primarily to structure and not necessarily to content, function or verbal texture. But the alternating speech possibilities afforded by the form have



been put to varied uses which have conditioned manifestations of it accordingly. Variations can be seen in both literary and philosophical texts in which opposing points of view, competing attitudes or intellectual positions on some question have been presented in dialogic form for exegetical or pedagogical purposes. Socrates' and Plato's dialogues, as much as Hume's or Berkeley's, are cases in point. In literature, dialogues of 'Self' and 'Soul' in poetry or *Imaginary Conversations* of the kind composed by Walter Savage Landor have surfaced from time to time in other than dramatic texts. In everyday contexts, too, variation is the norm. Dialogues in courtrooms differ from those in classrooms; social chit-chat differs from parliamentary debates. All are, nevertheless, dual or multi-speech forms entailing, in one way or another or for one reason or another, the presumption of Otherness to which One relates in patterned alternations of speech.

To linguists desirous of investigating the workings of dramatic dialogue, the conflation of conversational speech with dialogue is fortuitous since there is a body of work that has studied spoken speech as 'discourse'. 'Discourse' is a term that has many uses and encompasses, broadly, units that are larger than the basic unit of the grammar, the sentence. The concept is used in this study in its relevance to spoken speech within contexts of verbal communication, the emphasis being, particularly, on the deployments of the dialogic form as situational interaction. Instances of verbal communication actually exceed conversational contexts alone, but most studies have prioritized conversation as the exemplary genre of spontaneous, spoken speech. Before we move to a consideration of the many frameworks of analysis that can contribute to our understanding of the workings of dialogue as interaction, some preliminary remarks are necessary in order to clarify the relation between conversational speech and dramatic speech. The weight of opinion, especially in literary studies, would seem to be against any such affiliation, standard dictionaries notwithstanding.

## CONVERSATION AND DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

Studies of dramatic dialogue as discourse – as a speech exchange system – are hardly in evidence, even in investigations of 'the language of drama'. The thrust of the argument has generally been to safeguard the separation of dramatic dialogue from conversation in order to preserve the latter's 'literary' quality. The relation between the two forms has been examined contrastively, as between two essences, literary and non-literary. Little attention has, therefore, been paid to connections between them, although

conversation and dramatic speech share areas of commonality in being speech exchange systems, which sets them apart from poetic genres like the ode or the lyric, or narrator language in the novel. Moreover, where the relation has been confronted it has generally been confined to the uses of naturalistic speech at a certain juncture in the history of drama. Part of the reason for this bias is to do with unexamined assumptions about conversation and these focus on content or verbal texture as the point of contrast.

The differences in verbal texture, in particular, have moved critics like Allardyce Nicoll (1968) to utter uncharacteristically extreme sentiments. To Nicoll, as to many others, a playwright is 'an artist in words' (*ibid.*: 344), in a specific sense, as a poet, first and foremost. The world of drama is a 'world of emotions' (*ibid.*: 341) and Nicoll propounds on the inability of common speech to function expressively in such a world – 'everyone knows that our common speech has no power to express our passions intimately'. Conversational language, apparently, reveals us to be tongue-tied, incoherent when our passions are aroused: we splutter with rage or are stunned with grief. Playwrights who use a realistic mode are hampered by the mismatch between the force of felt emotion and the threadbare possibilities for expression of them afforded by everyday speech. Reliance on naturalistic resources in drama can have dire consequences, since it could result in dramatists being 'made mum', or worse, rendering themselves too faithful to 'the suppressions and mutterings of ordinary conversation' (*ibid.*).

Much of this invective is directed at naturalism in general as much as at naturalistic speech in particular, but subsequent developments in drama have undermined such views. Playwrights like Pinter have not only made dramatic capital out of the dramatic figures staying 'mum' in their plays; they have also revealed the force and power of conversational resources when they are used with dramatic skill.

Yet, troubling the relationship remains. The point, if not the detail, of Nicoll's opposition has been echoed by Bernard Beckerman (1970) in more sober terms. Beckerman, more reflectively, articulates a similar underlying worry regarding the lack of possibilities for emotional eloquence in conversation, since conversation operates under social constraints which generally forbid the expression of emotion or, rather, 'passion'. To quote Beckerman:

Conversation is primarily social, that is, intended to create an atmosphere of civilization rather than reveal inner turbulence. It also resists revelation. In conversation, confidence does not readily spring forth

but must be elicited by the effort of the listener. It is not a medium for conveying passion because passion is egotistical and conversation rests on implied truce: no one is to dominate completely. . .

(1970: 123)

At first glance, there appears to be a measure of truth in this since conversation does have a social dimension and is responsive to the social norms that govern people's conduct, but it does not follow from this that norms cannot be flouted when the occasion arises. They evidently are: in quarrels, in passionate, political arguments, in expressions of grief, anger, love and so on. Beckerman appears to have in mind stereotypes of polite exchanges in 'civilized', social settings which become a prototype for all interactions. But it is hardly the case that all day-to-day interactions are always and only passionless or that for the expression of passion in any form we must have recourse to some quotation or other from a play. Moreover, the 'eliciting' of responses and the inclusion of the effort of the listener are the staples of the dialogic form. It includes a listener, who usually changes discourse role to that of speaker, which Beckerman has overlooked, as if dramatic dialogue were monologue. The efforts of both speakers and listeners are involved in the drama of 'persons' in the speech situation itself as Lyons (1977) has made clear. And as for the injunction that 'no one is to dominate completely', this is often honoured in the breach. In mixed-sex conversations, men systematically dominate women, as research has shown (Ch. 5), and inter-personal domination is more of a norm in society, at least in some contexts, for various reasons, given social stratification on grounds of sex, race, age, status, etc. than such comfortable pronouncements would have us believe.

The problem lies deeper than this, since the assumption appears to be that the relation between conversational and dramatic speech must be predicated upon reflections of surfaces and textures of the one in the other. A mirror or glass is thus inserted between the two domains without respect to the transformations that are wrought when contexts and functions of speech are taken into account. The binary divide separating the two erases the fact of commonality of underlying *interactive* processes which make both, in separate ways, instances of dialogue. It also erases the variety which characterizes speech forms in daily life which are at least as remarkable as those found in plays. For instance, an informed discussion between two academic colleagues writing a book will differ from the phatic speech produced by two recent acquaintances meeting in the street. The speech 'texts' that occur will vary accordingly. Parliamentary debates organize speech exchanges in ways ordained by convention and differ

from other conventional arrangements: a board or committee meeting differs from Parliamentary debates but it also differs from a family quarrel. 'Conversation', not as social chit-chat alone, but as spontaneous speech exchange, is not the monolith of uniformity that it is projected as being. The same could be said of dramatic speech.

It is not, therefore, a question of whether dramatic dialogue is seen to mirror faithfully some real life correlate or not, even assuming that some such exists to be mirrored. Even the most naturalistic forms of dramatic speech do not quite reproduce the real life product. The mirror is not the point of reference between the two forms. Rather, it is a question of *mechanics*, in the exploitation by dramatists of underlying speech conventions, principles and 'rules' of use, operative in speech exchanges in the many sorts, conditions and contexts of society which members are assumed to share and use in their interactions in day-to-day exchanges. The principles, norms and conventions of use which underlie spontaneous communication in everyday life are precisely those which are exploited and manipulated by dramatists in their constructions of speech types and forms in plays. Thus, 'ordinary speech' or, more accurately, the 'rules' underlying the orderly and meaningful exchange of speech in everyday contexts are the *resource* that dramatists use to construct dialogue in plays. Fabricated speech in plays, however, is under no necessity to mimic some pre-given original except as a specific dramatic strategy. Even then, it is the illusion of real-life conversation that is sought which is the product of consummate art.

As Elizabeth Burns has succinctly observed, 'Drama is not a mirror of action. It is composition. . .' (1972: 33), and the fabricated activities, including speech in drama, Burns contends, need to be 'authenticated' by an audience (or reader) as credible activity in the dramatic world in which it functions. Dramatic action, broadly defined, becomes meaningful, therefore, in relation to the 'authenticating conventions' which are invoked in a play, which are drawn from the wider, social world of affairs in which dramatic activity is embedded. They imply social norms, values, modes of conduct and action which regulate how members organize their affairs, which in turn form the basis of our understanding of the speech and action of the fictional figures in the world of a play. Such a ground of commonality links playwright, actor, director, audience, reader, in a common effort at meaning, since what we encounter in plays is interpreted action, not action in the raw. In relation to dialogue, what this signifies is that it is our *communicative competence* (Hymes 1972) as much as our *linguistic competence* which is at work in interpreting 'the language of drama'. The overall conventions and 'rules' for meaningful and appropri-

ate speech behaviour in interaction are evoked to transform the serial issue of linguistic tokens among the dramatic characters into forms of interpersonal conduct and social action as communicative activity.

The factors to be accounted for when speech is regarded as speech behaviour, exceed the limits that grammars set on it. Linguistic competence as knowledge of the grammar is obviously needed, but so are other kinds. Utterances may be perfectly grammatical but may be wholly inappropriate things to say to specific others in a context. The pressures on language in context are multiple. As communication, language needs to be sensitive to a host of contextual pressures – the role and status of participants, considerations of appropriacy of speech behaviour, setting or spatio-temporal context of speech, degrees of formality or informality, how to code-switch if necessary, how to control degrees of politeness, and expressivity, whether and to whom and when to be ironical, or sarcastic, or confidential, or reserved or passionate, and the like. In communication, linguistic tokens used are functional and sensitive to such contextual pressures. As interaction, speech takes a jointly co-ordinated and managed course along a temporal path so that understanding, misunderstanding, communication and non-communication between speaker and other become actional and dynamic matters as they materialize in their specificities, and contingencies, in time.

On the other hand, dramatic speech cannot simply be regarded as an extension of everyday speech into drama. There is interdependence but not identity between them, and although there are fundamental levels of commonality, there are also crucial points of difference. Drama, theatre and other performance genres like film, carnival, ceremonial ritual, etc. are embedded in social culture but as part of what has been termed 'expressive culture' (MacAloon 1984: 4), whose hallmark it is to provide forms of activity through which subjectively experienced values, principles and modes of conduct, which are naturalized in social culture, may be reflexively confronted by members of that culture and known as *other* as object. Such presentations may either undercut or endorse the assumptions of the dominant culture. As Victor Turner has stated:

... any society that hopes to be imperishable must carve out for itself a piece of space and a period of time in which it can look honestly at itself. This honesty is not that of the scientist, who exchanges the honesty of his ego for the objectivity of his gaze. It is rather, akin to the supreme honesty of the creative artist, who, in his presentations on the stage, in the book, on canvas, in marble, in music, or in towers and

houses, reserves to himself the privilege to see straight what all cultures build crooked.

(1984: 40)

This space of performance and the culturally endorsed reflexivity that distinguishes it Turner calls a 'liminal' (sometimes 'liminoid' for technologically advanced societies) and metasocial space, in which,

groups strive to see their own reality in new ways and to generate a language verbal or non-verbal that enables them to talk *about* what they normally talk. They are liminal in the sense that they are suspensions of daily reality, occupying privileged spaces where people are allowed to think about how they think about the terms in which they conduct their thinking or to feel about how they feel about daily life.

(*ibid.*: 23)

The imagined and imaged worlds of drama, therefore, have a complex relation to the world of existing human affairs on which they draw for their possibilities of meaning, remaining both like and yet unlike those worlds in which they are embedded and to which they speak. Dramatic worlds, like fictional worlds in general, are not transparent to our everyday worlds, or reflections of them, but opaque to some degree, since they present alternatives, possibilities, worlds in the 'subjunctive' rather than the 'indicative' mood or mode of experience (*ibid.*: 21), worlds that could or might be, in different modalities, to some operative notion of 'what is'.

Such worlds have also been characterized as *possible worlds*, counterfactual, 'as if' worlds (Elam 1980: Ch. 4), but whose logic is accessible since taken to be similar to the world in which it is represented. The creation of such worlds draws on given, existing resources – of language, action, gesture, etc. and the conventions of use underlying these – but exploits them in order to design episodes, interactive events and situations in plays into patterns of feeling and experience of a kind that may never be felt, known or encountered anywhere but in drama. Dramatic action and speech are thus bracketed out of social reality and put into quotation marks, as it were, when they become part of stage reality where they are framed and foregrounded for heightened attention. The force of the quotation marks can either emphasize difference as in avant-garde plays, or similarity as in naturalistic plays. The conventions of behaviour, action and speech in ordinary contexts of living are made operative in the creation, assessment and understanding of behaviour in the fictional world of the play. It is the evocation of these which underlies the promise of

intelligibility of the hitherto-unencountered fictional world being created through the unfolding of its interactions and actions.

The governance of convention and assumptions in questions of intelligibility and understanding cannot, however, be seen as a mechanical or compulsory mapping of a priori rules on to speech or behaviour in uniform fashion in every instance of communication or conduct either inside or outside drama. For a start, rules may be broken within the contingencies of specific situations, assumptions might have to be abandoned or the performance of our social obligations could be skilfully or clumsily executed. Social life, moreover, is not a monolith of uniformity and could involve competing conventions and norms given conflicting interests and subcultures among groups in society. A working notion of convention must allow for gaps and conflicts in interpretation, since ambiguity, bafflement or incomprehension are legitimate responses to behaviour both inside and outside drama. To quote Turner again:

if all principles and norms were consistent and if all persons obeyed them, then culture and society would be unselfconscious and innocent, untroubled by doubt. But few indeed are the human groups whose relationships are perpetually in equilibrium and who are free from agonistic strivings.

(1984: 23)

The shift of context to the 'liminal' or expressive sphere and the activation of dramatic constraints (on text and performance) which this entails brings its own set of necessities and transformations. For a start, there is the question of dramatic organization, the internal designing of the individual events and their interrelating as they unfold linearly in time. These may be overtly cohesive, cause-effect designs or they may not. Such internal designs project outwards as well, are simultaneously rhetorical designs manipulating audience involvement and response. And drama is a brief form, as Bentley noted (1965: 79), forever under the constraint of passing time – the time allotted to the whole performance. Then, there are aesthetic and expressive requirements for which, in performance, groups assume responsibility and activate the various codes of theatre as desired (Elam 1980). For this is 'framed' activity, foregrounded for attention, participation, interpretation and appreciation, with all elements in this 'bracketed' world being relevant elements in that world with multi-functions to perform.

There is, consequently, a high level of pre-formation in scripting dramatic action and speech, and pre-formation in realizing a play in its context. And if the script is pre-formed, the performance is even more so,



to the extent that analysts like David Birch have argued for the notion of a separate 'text' for performance (Birch 1991: 25–33). Drama as a hybrid form leads a double life as both literature and theatre and is responsive to different traditions, but in either case the life of the dramatic tradition realizes itself and is made material and manifest through such pre-formed activities. Nor is the tradition itself transmitted through the actions of human agents acting spontaneously, but through institutionally organized forms of activity, public, collective and social. The accumulated practices of both domains are also influential.

Drama has its own history – other performances, other texts, other contexts of performance, other theatrical conventions – and its own contemporary constraints for aesthetic, experimental or social purposes. Its indebtedness to other domains of activity has also been acknowledged from time to time – the music hall, circus, mime and so on. Dramatic performances are among those which Dell Hymes has called 'authoritative' and 'authentic' performances (1975: 18), in a very specific sense, as those which materialize the tradition from age to age, as activity, practice, and in which the tradition lives, and in which the standards appropriate and intrinsic to the tradition itself are shaped, applied, tested and revised.

As far as dramatic speech is concerned, such pressures ensure that the face-to-face interactions that inform the dialogic scene are always responsible to the audience presence – however the role of the audience is assessed, as overhearers or participants – and to the necessities of presentation. Extra explicitness or expressiveness in speech may be called for to satisfy both the informational and aesthetic demands of the audience. The flow of information about off-stage and on-stage events needs to be made available or withheld as necessary, with the explicitness, inexplicitness or irony that result being products of the dramatic context itself. Overall, rhythms must be created and modulated across and within speech transactions, each interactional event providing its own form of interest while simultaneously functioning as an element in the total design. The design itself, as noted earlier, can vary, as it has done across the history of drama. The verbal component needs to integrate with the other codes of theatre with varying degrees of interrelatedness as dramatic convention or experimentation requires (Veltrusky 1941: 94–117). Moreover, dialogue and interaction are among the most immediate and accessible levels of drama, but they mediate other, more abstract levels of the genre – plot, character, thematic issues and the like. It is through the course of interactions and their outcomes among relevant participants – that is, in what the dramatic figures say and do to each other in specific situations – cumulatively, that



we come to understand the kind of beings they are, the kind of events they are involved in and the nature of the world that makes such things possible.

Dialogue should, therefore, be seen more in the nature of a 'device' (Honzl 1940: 118–26), rather than as a 'reflector' in drama, with a world-creating, not a world-mirroring function. It is a complex device given that it is 'overdetermined' (Dodd 1981) in many ways when it is called upon to function in the dramatic context. Speech in drama is responsive to many of these simultaneously – to aesthetic, expressive, informational and interactional overdeterminations. The 'intentionalities' in the two domains differ as their goals differ. Such pressures have tempted some analysts to classify dramatic speech as 'deviant' but this brings its own dangers. In the first place, the problem of defining a norm from which dramatic speech is supposed to deviate can be as difficult as it has proved to be in similar debates regarding *poetic language* (Herman 1983: 99–122). Notions of deviance are often grammatically motivated, but there is little in the grammatical structures of dramatic speech which could be classified as deviant. Poetry may be a candidate case, but not all dramatic speech is poetry, not even in a dramatist like Shakespeare.

Manfred Pfister (1988: 104–5), in more complex mode, proposes a double deviance, one on the synchronic dimension, the other on the diachronic, as distinctive of dramatic speech which deviates from 'ordinary' language but can deviate, internally, from the tradition of dramatic language or styles which are in force. Instances of the former include neologisms, archaisms and highly stylized, metred language as in classical French tragedy or verse dramas written by a Fry or an Eliot. Examples of the latter can be found in Fry and Eliot, too, whose stylizations are departures from the argumentative or witty prose of a Shaw, Galsworthy or Coward. Pfister, however, has greater difficulty with dramatists who use the kind of conversational styles that had provoked Nicoll's ire. He sees these as stylistic reductions which still preserve 'an element of deviation – if only in the fact that in reproducing it they expose and clarify its characteristic stylistic features' (*ibid.*: 104). A cline, in fact, is posited, which weakens the argument for deviance since departures from norms become a question of degree, which only stylized, metred forms can uncontroversially support. The scope of the notion of deviance becomes less comprehensive.

Other aspects like polyfunctionality are also mobilized by Pfister, but such factors are available in day-to-day contexts. Radio interviews have to respect the fact that the audience has to be informed about relevant aspects of the interview, and hence the extra informational load to be communicated about participants, for example, is nearer to dramatic