

Dialogue and discourse :  
a sociolinguistic approach to modern  
drama dialogue and naturally occurring

Deirdre Burton.



# *Dialogue and Discourse*

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*A sociolinguistic approach to modern  
drama dialogue and naturally occurring  
conversation*

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## *Introduction*

This book is organized in two distinct but essentially complementary parts. The first is called 'Dialogue', and the second 'Discourse'. To me these represent two closely related focuses within current sociolinguistics (understanding that term in its widest sense), but then these are ideas I have been working with for some time now, and I am sure I need to spend time and space here making clear how I understand these terms, and what aspects of these areas the reader may expect to find in the following chapters.

'Dialogue' contains studies of specific modern drama texts, and is basically an exercise in a new area of literary-linguistic stylistics. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate how recent advances in the sociolinguistic description of spoken discourse, or conversational analysis, can be drawn on to account for reader and audience intuitions about the dialogue in those texts. The links between topics covered in the sociolinguistics literature and speech events in the plays are surprisingly easy to find. The results are rich, varied and temporarily satisfying, for, although much more practical work on dialogue can and should be undertaken in this way, from the point of view of linguistic-stylistics theory, this approach can only be a starting-point. It is argued in chapter 4 that a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of dialogue style must be able to draw on a rigorous and coherent theoretical and descriptive framework for the analysis of all naturally occurring conversation. It is the design of such a framework that is the focus of part 2.

'Discourse' is an attempt to expand one powerful linguistic theory of naturally occurring talk. This model (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), is only one of the many linguistic, sociolinguistic, ethnomethodological and philosophy of language frameworks available for the analysis of stretches of language more than one sentence or one utterance long. Its various advantages and shortcomings are detailed in chapter 6. In



chapter 7, another model, based on similar principles, is offered for the analysis of all conversational data. This was devised using the dialogue of the texts discussed in part 1 as a heuristic device, and the warrant for this is given in chapter 5. Suggestions for further research are given in chapter 8.

There are several standard pieces of work that I have specifically not undertaken, since they have been done so many times before: justifying a linguistic-stylistic approach to a literary text, and comparing literary-critical statements with linguistic ones; justifying the study of connected discourse; justifying the study of 'language-used-in-context'. One reason for this was purely practical, in that I was reluctant to take up valuable space with arguments already competently presented elsewhere. Another, much more important reason is to do with the state and status of these various arts. As Kuhn (1962) points out, one way of distinguishing dominant academic paradigms at any given time is to observe what kinds of concessions and apologies are made in the opening chapters of works in related subject areas. To take a simple example, in current introductions to systemic grammar, the reader can find frequent explanations of how it is that this model differs from a transformational-generative model (see Berry, 1976, for example), whereas, as far as I am aware, no work on transformational-generative grammar would carry an explanation of how its own model differed from the systemic one. Since linguists have been writing clearly-defined stylistics for some four decades now, I think it is inappropriate to continue justifying the case for this work according to the implicitly dominant literary-critical paradigm. Any reader unfamiliar with these arguments and demonstrations is directed towards the following: Halliday (1966), McIntosh (1966), Jakobson (1960), Uitti (1969), Freeman (1970), Sinclair (1966a), Fowler (1971), Widdowson (1975). Similarly, see the following works on the value of the linguist studying connected discourse: Firth (1935), Halliday (1964), Dressler (1970), Ballard *et al.* (1971), Hendricks (1972), Pike (1964), van Dijk (1970, 1972), Widdowson (1976). And again, see the following for the importance (for some linguistic goals within some theoretical frameworks) of studying language in context: Firth (1935), Weinreich (1966), Hymes (1972a and b, 1977), Labov (1970), Halliday (1971), Lakoff (1972), Haberland and Mey (1977).

Whilst it will, I imagine, be obvious that this work is not intended as literary criticism, I hope it might be useful to any critic with an appropriate theoretical framework in which to accommodate my descriptive

work. My choice of plays and playwrights is dictated entirely by their relevance to the topic of the book as given in the opening paragraphs above, and makes no concessions to literary history, movements or other such respectable literary criteria. Similarly I make no claims to have studied Pinter or Ionesco in depth, although again I hope that anyone who is engaged in such an activity might find my descriptive work useful.

To sociologists, and particularly sociologists of literature and drama, I will have produced what must appear to be a mysterious and eclectic set of cited references. I am very much aware of theoretical debates that would have been aired, and contrastive positions that would have been located, had there been world enough and time. But again, I hope that the analytical work as such might be of interest to specialists in this area too.

As this introduction suggests, I anticipate readers from various backgrounds making use of this book. Thus, whilst my primary audience has been conceptualized in terms of those already interested in language and style, stylistics and discourse analysis, I have also designed explanatory passages throughout for others with complementary background knowledge and interests. These will be over-explicit for some readers, but will, I hope, enable any reader to make sense of my discussions and arguments.



*Part One: Dialogue*

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### *The stylistic analysis of modern drama texts: some background remarks and a practical example*

It is an interesting fact that stylisticians do not write about modern dramatists or modern drama texts. By this, I do not mean to imply that they deal with them inadequately, but – much more simply – that they appear not to study them at all. There is a very clear demonstration of this fact in Bailey and Burton (1968), the only comprehensive bibliography to date. Firstly, in their index of 'Styles under scrutiny' there are no modern dramatists listed at all. Secondly, and much more significantly, in their major divisions of the book as a whole they present a large section entitled 'English stylistics in the twentieth century', which, after general theoretical studies, lists of statistical studies and entries on translation problems, is subdivided into only two substantial sections: 'Prose stylistics' and 'Style in poetry'. Drama stylistics has no place at all. In the light of this phenomenon, Halliday (1964) is worth considering:

It is part of the task of linguistics to describe texts; and all texts, including those, prose and verse, which fall within any definition of 'literature', are accessible to analysis by the existing methods of linguistics.

Since any unusual definition of literature would surely include three genres, I think the continued exclusion of dramatic language from modern stylistic analysis deserves some investigation.

The first and most obvious reason for the bipartite and not tripartite categorization, is the fact that non-poetic dramatic dialogue may sometimes be classified as merely another type of prose. Abercrombie certainly makes this point clearly enough (Abercrombie, 1959):

Most people believe that *spoken prose*, as I would call what we normally hear on the stage or screen, is at least not far removed,



when well done, from the conversation of real life. Writers of novels are sometimes praised for 'naturalistic dialogue', others such as Miss Ivy Compton Burnett, are criticized because nobody speaks like the characters in their books.

But the truth is that nobody speaks at all like the characters in any novel, play, or film. Life would be intolerable if they did; and novels, plays or films would be intolerable if the characters spoke as people do in life. Spoken prose is far more different from conversation than is normally realised.

Since this passage was intended for a linguistically naive audience, these are sound and necessary statements – making the sorts of distinctions it would be both proper and essential to make in such a pedagogical context. Page (1973), writing on speech in the novel, makes a particular point – incorporating in his text, for comparison with fictional speech, a short piece of transcript of naturally occurring conversation – complete with the hesitation-phenomena, repetitions, false starts and stammers that characterize almost any transcript of naturally occurring talk. Also, he provides actual, literary-critical examples of Abercrombie's 'most people':

A familiar kind of tribute to such mimetic writing is to praise it for its closeness to real speech. We are told, for instance, that 'dialogue...consistently echoes the speech of the day', that 'there is no line of dialogue from a novel that could not easily be imagined proceeding from the mouth of an actual person', and, of a modern novel, that 'the dialogues...could not reproduce actual speech more faithfully, and more unselectively, if they had been transcribed from a tape-recorder'. These are striking claims from impressive sources. But it seems probable that the whole concept of realism as applied to fictional speech is often based on an inadequate or inaccurate notion of what spontaneous speech is really like.

Certainly, a linguist with even minimal experience of naturally occurring speech, either on tape or in the inevitably tidied-up representation of a transcript, would have to agree. On the other hand, in the context of linguistic stylistics, the very point that Abercrombie and Page are dismissing, the fact that readers have the definite impression that fictional speech or spoken prose seems to be like or unlike naturally occurring conversation, is extremely interesting and relevant. Here, surely, is evidence of what we normally use as the starting point of a stylistic analysis;

the fact that the analyst, as reader, has certain intuitive impressions of a set of stylistic effects – intuitions which should be open to linguistic justification on a closer study of the text.

If we accept that there is an interesting relationship between play dialogue and real conversation, and if we agree that it might be linguistically interesting to consider the language used in dialogue specifically in the light of this relationship, then the stylistician has an immediate problem in deciding how to conceptualize the underlying linguistic mechanisms that are, in some way, being used and exploited by the writer of dialogue, and reacted to by the reader of dialogue. For, despite the many quibbles in aspects of stylistics writing, such as which syntactic paradigm to use, what constitutes 'style', the goals and focuses of stylistic analyses, the relevance of different linguistic features and so on, there is never any real doubt expressed about the fact that, in order to write about style in a linguistically justifiable way, we must be able to relate the language used in a text, or by an author, to the conventions of the language as a whole. All practical stylistics papers carry this assumption. For one example among many, Benamou (1963) presents a theory suggesting that style results from deviations from linguistic conventions, and analyses thus a sentence from Proust, connectives in Voltaire, adjectives in Colette and verbs in Camus. (See also Gorny, 1961; Ohmann, 1964; Greenfield, 1967; Hill, 1967; Jakobson, 1968; Enkvist, 1971; Fowler, 1972; Quirk, 1972; Widdowson, 1972).

This underlying methodological principle is explicitly reinforced in more theoretical papers too. Thus Mukařovský (1932) makes a comparatively early statement on the idea of norm and deviation with relation to poetry, 'The distortion of the norm of the standard is...of the very essence of poetry', whilst Bloch (1953) states that this comparison between the norm of the language used and the language as used in the text is a basic parameter for stylistics: 'The style of a discourse is the message carried by the frequency distributions, and transitional probabilities of its linguistic features, especially as they differ from those same features in the language as a whole.' Similarly, and more recently, Stankiewicz (1960), in his discussion of poets as innovators – in this context, writers using familiar words in unusual syntactic structures – makes a statement about stylistics procedure which is applicable to all varieties of language-in-use: 'The student of poetry is in no position to describe and explain the nature of poetic language unless he takes into account the rules of the language which determine its organisation.'



Of McIntosh's proposed four stylistic modes (1961) — normal collocations and normal grammar, unusual collocations and normal grammar, normal collocations and unusual grammar, unusual collocations and unusual grammar — it is interesting, though not perhaps surprising, that it is the more noticeably 'deviant' texts that attract the attention of most stylisticians. Thus, much of the impetus behind the transformational-generative approach to work in stylistics lies with those texts which exploit most fully potential deviance from linguistic norms of the everyday, familiar, automatized language. Levin, for example (1963, 1964, 1965), uses the grammar to define differences in poetic language, with the explicit underlying hypothesis that deviancy, in itself, is a marker of poeticalness, and the more measurably deviant a text can be shown to be, the more 'poetic' it is in its effect. Similarly Thorne's (1965) notion of constructing micro-grammars for individual poetic works assumes that there are noticeable points of similarity and dissimilarity between the grammar of the piece being studied and the grammar of the underlying language as a whole. From the latter, the poet selects some features and rules, but not others. Both Saporta (1960) and Rifaterre, the latter working in an information-theory context, would support these ideas. For example (Rifaterre, 1960), 'The stylistic context is a linguistic pattern broken by an element which was unpredictable.'

There is, of course, a symbiotic relationship between stylistic analysis and syntactic theory. The sort of reciprocal relationship between study of the text and study of the syntax of the language, where knowledge of one is enhanced by study of the other, is brought out particularly well by Franges (1961), who points out that our concept of the underlying norm can only be taken for granted in some areas, and that continual modifications must be carried out. I take it that this underlies all the statements quoted here, and the many others that could be drawn on to illustrate the arguments about the norm-deviation relationship as a focal issue for practical and theoretical stylistics:

Ainsi norme et déviation ne doivent être prises qu'en tant que termes appartenant à la stylistique descriptive ne pouvant avoir ni valeur esthétique ni critique. Il va de soi qu'il reste encore beaucoup à faire pour déterminer ce qu'est la norme. [So norm and deviation should only be taken as terms appropriate to descriptive stylistics — having neither aesthetic nor critical value. It goes without saying that there is still much work to be done in determining the norm.]

I find Halliday's (1964) brief résumé of the norm and deviation question particularly sensible — his conclusion being that the analyst needs to consider both the norm of the underlying language, in so far as he knows it, and the norm set up by patterns in the text itself.

From all this, it follows that in order to talk about style linguistically, we need to have access to an accumulation of linguistic information about the standard language (using that term in a common-sense way here), and information which is working towards theoretical coherence and is descriptively adequate at all the linguistic levels that are to be considered in any text which is to be studied. If, therefore, we are interested in the norm-deviation relationship realized in the micro-conversations of a drama dialogue, it similarly follows that we need a relevant set of linguistic materials with which to describe this relationship. Clearly, the sorts of features traditionally used in stylistic analysis (phonological, lexical, syntactical) will not, on their own, be sufficient. It is particularly interesting to consider the only linguistic analysis which is clearly related to my interests here: Page's work on speech as represented in the novel (Page, 1973). He certainly does raise some of 'the fundamental questions of the nature of fictional speech, its role as one of the elements of the novel, and its relationship to other elements and to the speech of real life.' When it comes to actual concrete analyses of text, however, he concentrates exclusively on represented speech as an element of the prose, and emphasizes its formal relationships with the other prose elements of the novel rather than its relationship with the 'speech of real life'. Accordingly, he analyses it in terms of lexis, syntax and orthographic conventions, as this very typical quotation demonstrates clearly:

There is a sense in which, in such speeches as these, lexical and syntactic features are made to correspond to qualities of moral character. The formal syntax of Fellmar, remote from the structures of spontaneous speech, suggests the artificiality and unreliability of his behaviour as well as his social status; at the other extreme, the blunt declarations of Western, who prefers short sentences and has a marked distrust of subordinate clauses, are consistent with his impetuous manner and his indifference to canons of polite behaviour. His vocabulary relies heavily on short, concrete words, in contrast to the more morally unsound characters for abstractions.

Given that Page is writing about speech as part of a novel, as opposed to



dialogue written to be spoken by real human beings in a tangible, visible theatrical set of some kind, there is some justification for this sort of approach, although I consider it a shortcoming in the study that he did not consider the fictional-real relationship more thoroughly. However, consider also this extract from John Russell Brown (1972), where the topic is indeed theatre-talk:

The short second sentence — 'Well, why don't you?' — points attention at Cliff's inability to reply, but, because it is in two phrases, it also sharpens the rhythm and so reveals a quicker attention under Jimmy's opening gambit. Then, the phrase lengthens until the unexpected 'New Economics', which is punched home with a rounder, polysyllabic and partly repetitive phrase. The growth of power is further shown by the assurance of the following, almost throw-away sentence, with neat, running alliteration, at the end: 'It's all a matter of payments and penalties'. This relaxed verbal tension is offset by a growing physical exertion as Jimmy 'Rises', and then the climax of this part of the speech can come freely in its longest and its largest single phrase, 'those apocalyptic share pushers'.

It is, I think, fairly obvious that if we want to consider play-talk and its degree of similarity to real-talk, then discussing sentences, phrases, alliteration, polysyllabic words and so on, is not going to tell us a great deal.

The only possible linguistic level to use as a basis for such analysis is *discourse*, or, even more specifically, *conversation* — as an aspect of discourse. A work by Larthomas (1972) which considers many interesting features of French classical and modern drama texts, and which is certainly aware of some of the problems of discussing drama dialogue as written language rather than as written-to-be-spoken language, justifies a purely syntactical approach by the following statement (p. 332):

L'analyse en ce domaine est difficile parce que si nous connaissons bien la langue écrite, nous connaissons très mal la langue parlé.

[Analysis in this area is difficult, because although we understand written language well, we know little about spoken language.]

As yet, of course, conversational analysis is uncollected, only partially adequate theoretically, sporadically insightful, occasionally misguided. Nevertheless, there is now a substantial body of descriptive linguistic work on conversational analysis available, and if we are ever going to

progress beyond mere intuition and assumption in this very interesting potential area for stylistic analysis, then we must surely use this type of linguistics for our information about the norm.

So, as a brief illustration of the type of stylistic work I envisage in this area, I will discuss here a short Pinter sketch: 'Last to go' (1961a). As all analysts know, analysis expands to fit the time available (see Pittenger *et al.*, 1960). The present analysis is an attempt to make clear the methodological approach to be taken up at length in chapters 2 and 3, where the main texts are discussed in lengthier detail. I find a certain sympathy with Longacre here, who, in reviewing van Dijk (1972) in the *Journal of Linguistics* (March 1976), says the following:

I have worked enough on this problem [a generative grammar of discourse] in relation to a specific text to know that (1) it can be done, and (2) the resultant formal structure is so intricate, involved and lengthy that perhaps no-one will be interested in looking it over when one is through.

This shorter piece of analysis is offered in the hope of demonstrating, quite simply and quickly, the way in which conversational analysis can and does prove useful in the stylistic analysis of drama text.

Firstly, I shall give the text of the sketch, to consider as data. Secondly, I shall articulate what I feel to be some effects created by the text. Thirdly, I shall specify some relevant rules of conversational structure, as observed and specified by analysts of naturally occurring conversations, and show how these are used and exploited in the text to create the effects that I notice intuitively. Like Sacks (1972), I feel confident that some of my intuitions about a text will be markedly similar to those of other readers of the same text. With the present text I feel secure on two counts. Firstly, having used it as a teaching text, I know that a substantial number of my students have 'read it the same way', and I have not as yet come across anyone who disagrees with the type of intuitions I state here. Secondly, by stating clearly what (some of) my impressions are, and demonstrating features of the text that ground these impressions, I assume I am 'proving the possibility' (Sacks, 1970) of my reading the text that way. Any other reader or analyst who understood the text differently would of course be free to offer and justify an alternative set of observations.



LAST TO GO

*A coffee stall. A BARMAN and an old NEWSPAPER SELLER. The BARMAN leans on his counter, the OLD MAN stands with tea. Silence.*

MAN	You was a bit busier earlier.	1
BARMAN	Ah.	2
MAN	Round about ten.	3
BARMAN	Ten, was it?	4
MAN	About then.	5
	(Pause)	
	I passed by here about then.	5a
BARMAN	Oh yes?	6
MAN	I noticed you were doing a bit of trade.	7
	(Pause)	
BARMAN	Yes, trade was very brisk here about ten.	8
MAN	Yes, I noticed.	9
	(Pause)	
	I sold my last one about then. Yes. About nine forty-five.	9a
BARMAN	Sold your last then, did you?	10
MAN	Yes, my last 'Evening News' it was. Went about twenty to ten.	11
	(Pause)	
BARMAN	'Evening News', was it?	12
MAN	Yes.	13
	(Pause)	
	Sometimes it's the 'Star' is the last to go.	13a
BARMAN	Ah.	14
MAN	Or the . . . whatsisname.	15
BARMAN	'Standard'.	16
MAN	Yes.	17
	(Pause)	
	All I had left tonight was the 'Evening News'.	17a
	(Pause)	
BARMAN	Then that went, did it?	18
MAN	Yes.	19
	(Pause)	
	Like a shot.	19a
	(Pause)	

BARMAN	You didn't have any left, eh?	20
MAN	No. Not after I sold that one.	21
	(Pause)	
BARMAN	It was after that you must have come by here then, was it?	22
MAN	Yes, I come by here after that, see, after I packed up.	23
BARMAN	You didn't stop here though, did you?	24
MAN	When?	25
BARMAN	I mean, you didn't stop here and have a cup of tea then, did you?	26
MAN	What, about ten?	27
BARMAN	Yes.	28
MAN	No, I went up to Victoria.	29
BARMAN	No, I thought I didn't see you.	30
MAN	I had to go to Victoria.	31
	(Pause)	
BARMAN	Yes, trade was very brisk here about then.	32
	(Pause)	
MAN	I went to see if I could get hold of George.	33
BARMAN	Who?	34
MAN	George.	35
	(Pause)	
BARMAN	George who?	36
MAN	George . . . whatsisname.	37
BARMAN	Oh.	38
	(Pause)	
	Did you get hold of him?	38a
MAN	No. No, I couldn't get hold of him. I couldn't locate him.	39
BARMAN	He's not much about now, is he?	40
	(Pause)	
MAN	When did you last see him then?	41
BARMAN	Oh, I haven't seen him for years.	42
MAN	No, nor me.	43
	(Pause)	
BARMAN	Used to suffer very bad from arthritis.	44
MAN	Arthritis?	45
BARMAN	Yes.	46
MAN	He never suffered from arthritis.	47



BARMAN	Suffered very bad. (Pause)	48
MAN	Not when I knew him. (Pause)	49
BARMAN	I think he must have left the area. (Pause)	50
MAN	Yes, it was the 'Evening News' was the last to go tonight.	51
BARMAN	Not always the last though, is it, though?	52
MAN	No. Oh no. I mean sometimes it's the 'News'. Other times it's one of the others. No way of telling beforehand. Until you've got your last one left, of course. Then you can tell which one it's going to be.	53
BARMAN	Yes. (Pause)	54
MAN	Oh yes. (Pause)	55
	I think he must have left the area.	55a

It seems to me that there are two different categories of 'effects' worth considering in this text. Firstly, we intuitively feel that this is very like 'real' conversation. Of course, the fact that Pinter often (though not, note, always) writes realistic-sounding dialogue is not surprising news for anyone. What would, however, be news would be to specify how a given dialogue is like a naturally occurring conversation, and to do this in ways that are not merely impressionistic, nor superficial, but which relate to specifically linguistic mechanisms discovered in use in naturalistic data, and for which there is a set of formal rules governing production, realization and structure.

Secondly, within the confines of this 'realistic conversation' we are able to make intuitive statements about the interactive characters of the conversationalists. Thus it is quite clear that they are 'making conversation'; that the Man is more eager and more competent in this than the Barman; that it is a difficult and uncomfortable situation for both of them; that they are trying to be friendly without having too much to say to one another; that all this is rather comic; that the conversation has not finished when the curtain falls; that the unseen George takes on a rather special significance, reminiscent of many other unseen people and places in Pinter plays. The interesting problem, again, for the

linguistic-stylistician is to specify how we know all this, and to specify it in a way that is linguistically interesting. Since our data is in some way an exploitation of overheard conversation, it seems feasible that conversational analysis would have something particularly relevant to contribute to this specification.

So I want to consider two problems. Firstly, why does this dialogue sound or read something like a real conversation? Secondly, how do we know so much about the interactants in the dialogue? Whilst it would be misleading to claim that discourse analysis is in any way complete in either its theoretical or descriptive adequacy, there is nevertheless a substantial body of linguistic writing that presents aspects of the rule-governed behaviour of conversationalists – some of which I shall draw on here. Three pieces which seem particularly apposite are William Labov's work on shared knowledge (Labov, 1970), Gail Jefferson's work on repetition (Jefferson, 1972) and John Laver's work on phatic communion (Laver, 1974). Whilst most of this section will be concerned with considering those works in particular, I shall indicate at the end of it how other major research papers might profitably further the analysis of the sketch in question.

Labov makes a small but crucial and exact point concerning 'shared knowledge'. He classifies, quite simply, all reported events in a two-party conversation as A-events (known to speaker A), B-events (known to speaker B) and AB-events (known to both A and B). From this he derives a simple but invariant rule of interpretation of discourse (Labov, 1970, p. 124): 'If A makes a statement about a B event, it is heard as a request for confirmation.' A recurrent feature of the Pinter text is statements that are indeed heard as requests for confirmation – in the sense that they get confirmation. It is a simple matter for the analyst to pick out two-part exchanges that follow this pattern: 1/2, 10/11, 12/13, 18/19, 20/21, 22/23, 24/side-sequence/29, 52/53. The first of these is initiated by the Man, and all others by the Barman. There are several interesting points to be made here.

Firstly, it is important to notice that the actual referents for all these paired utterances are, in fact, not B-events but AB-events. Thus the characters are continually questioning and confirming matters that they both already know, that they must surely know that they both know, and that the audience certainly knows that they know. This is made quite clear, in that all but one of the requests for confirmation are re-statements of an earlier statement easily located in the text, for example:



- MAN I sold my last one about then. Yes. About nine forty-five.
- BARMAN Sold your last then, did you?
- MAN Yes, my last 'Evening News' it was. Went about twenty to ten.  
(Pause)
- BARMAN 'Evening News', was it?
- MAN Yes.

This is surely where much of the humour of the piece lies. Here the mechanism of the talk, whilst extremely effective in continuing the talk *per se*, is incongruous in terms of our understanding of the more usual conventions of shared knowledge. As well as being humorous, though, it is important to notice that this is by no means an impossible feature to use in naturally occurring conversation. It is essential to realize that it is a very specific type of conversation that Pinter is recognized as writing. A simple verification of this is that, every now and then, it is quite acceptable for people engaged in a conversation – or listening to one – to stand back from it, in an analytic role, and remark that it is 'Pinteresque'. One noticeable feature of such noteworthy conversations is their too-frequent-to-ignore use of AB-events as items for confirmation by A to B, or vice versa.

There will be more to say about this mechanism of talk when we come to discuss phatic communion in its own right. At this stage it is worth pointing out that one way of doing phatic communion is to refer to AB-events. And one way of making phatic communion into on-going conversation is to refer to AB-events as if they were B-events for confirmation – thus ensuring a reply from your co-conversationalist. So, if the characters are willing to talk as a social activity, but have very little to talk about, it is entirely consistent that the Man should open the talk in this form. It is also, structurally at least, consistent with the rules of naturally occurring conversation.

If we also consider the intuition that the Barman is, of the two speakers, the one who is more at a loss for conversational topics, it is interesting to notice that it is he and not the Man, who, after the opening utterance, makes exclusive use of this strategy – almost as if he takes a conversational cue from the initial successful utterance. It is interesting, too, that he reinforces the interactive potential of these statements with suffixed tags – a sort of belt-and-braces security to further his desire to continue the talk and receive answers. Notice, too,

all is well as long as the Man not only confirms in the right place (which he does, reliably), but also expands his contributions sufficiently to allow more talk to be built on this simple model. When he does not, one of two things happens often enough to be worth commenting on. Either the Man is constrained to expand after an ensuing pause (5/5a, 9/9a, 17/17a, 19/19a), or the Barman breaks the pause himself with an utterance that once again repeats the statement-for-confirmation model (11 pause 12, 17a pause 18, 19a pause 20, 21 pause 22).

It is important, once we have noticed the foregrounding of this pattern through its frequent occurrence, to notice where the pattern changes. It changes significantly at utterance 33, where 'George' is introduced as a topic, and the characters orient their talk towards a third person, rather than themselves. The change in conversational pattern lends the absent George a peculiar significance in his own right – as a less obviously phatic referent. He is reminiscent of the many other people and places which Pinter characters refer to, but which are never seen by the audience, and, again, repeated reference to the Christian name of an absent person is a typical feature of real-life conversations which participants realize are Pinteresque. Notice that the pattern of AB-statement-as-request-for-confirmation returns once George and his whereabouts and arthritis are exhausted. In terms of the text, however, this promotes the George section as a particularly noticeable deviation from a norm that the text itself sets up. We are thus led to believe that this is an important piece of reference.

The repeated pattern itself lends humour to the piece – simply by virtue of its repetition. Here we see mechanical elements of the conversation strictly as formal devices, and, as Bergson (1911, p.87) suggests, points where the mechanical nature of human activity is foregrounded are always amusing:

The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life.

It is noticeable that there is usually laughter from an audience at line 55, where they are led to believe that the preceding passage was going to branch out into referentially interesting material, but which at 55 returns to the mechanistic transference of speaker-turns and AB-events as topic.

Now that we are considering repetition as a feature of the text, it is



relevant to consider what Jefferson has to say on the topic. It is a commonly stated observation in literary criticism that talk is 'repetitive' in Pinter's plays, and that in some vague, intuitive way this makes it conversation-like. Jefferson, in her work on side-sequences, offers a clarification of this rather unspecific category of 'repetition', which is useful here — particularly as she identifies 'repeats' as a strictly functional item in talk.

Firstly, she distinguishes between a repeat as a functional item — which is used to produce more talk on the referent to that item — and a 'replication', which may have a functional load, such as 'framing' or 'locating' a focus item, but which may have no prospective structural purpose in the interaction, acting instead as a cohesive device. Notice that a 'repeat' need not replicate, but may well reformulate a preceding item. Notice also that a speaker may 'repeat' on himself.

Her data makes this rather more clear. She cites a stretch of children's talk, where the youngest is supposed to be counting to ten at the start of a game of tag, but makes a formal mistake:

STEVEN One, two, three, ((pause)) four, five, six ((pause))  
eleven, eight, nine, ten.  
SUSAN 'Eleven'? — eight, nine, ten?  
STEVEN Eleven, eight, nine, ten.  
NANCY 'Eleven'?  
STEVEN Seven, eight, nine, ten.  
NANCY That's better.

From this she presents the following observations and working definitions:

A 'repeat' is differentiable from such a similar object as a 'frame' or a 'locator', which may also be replicating that which has been said before. That is to say, in 'Eleven'? — eight, nine, ten?' it is 'eleven' which is being 'repeated', and the 'repeat' is 'framed' by replications of the digits 'eight, nine, ten'.

She also indicates here the distinctive work of a repeat:

The differentiability of a 'repeat' from other replications derives from the distinctive work that they do; repeats have as a specific consequence of their occurrence and recognition that, for example, further work will be done.

This is one area where Jefferson's clarification of the function of repeats

is useful in considering the Pinter text. It is a simple matter for the analyst to go through the text and pick out repeats and replications. What is interesting is to notice just how much the repeat is used to ensure that 'further work will be done', that is, that the conversation will keep going.

Taking a few lines at random, we can mark out the pattern shown in Figure 1.1. Particular repeats are performed on the 'about ten', 'sold my last' and 'Evening News'. As an interactional resource, these items

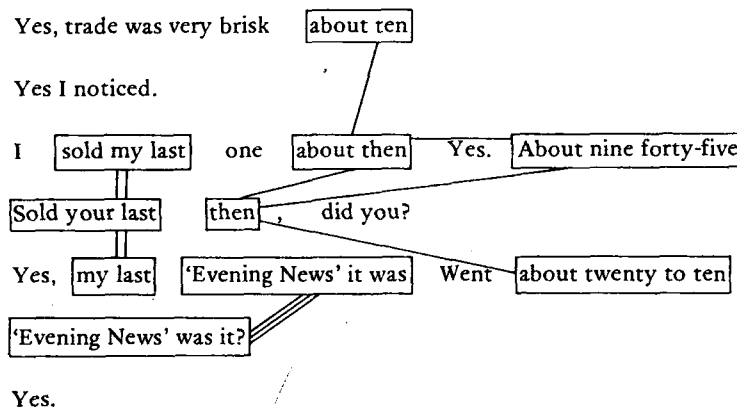


Figure 1.1

are 'repeated' right through the text. Thus, reference to the situation of the characters and their work and possessions 'about ten' are to be found in lines 1, 3, 4, 5, 5a, 8, 9, 9a, 10, 11, 18, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 32. Similarly, 'Selling my/your last' repeats are to be found in lines 9a, 10, 11, 13a, 17a, 18, 19, 19a, 20, 21, 51, 52, 53 (expanded). And references to the 'Evening News' in comparison with other papers may be found at 11, 12, 13, 13a, 15, 16, 17, 17a, 18, 19, 21, 51, 52, 53 (expanded). It is relevant to point out that these last two repeats are dropped for some thirty lines and are brought in again at line 51, towards the close of the sketch.

There are also some much more localized 'repeating' sequences, particularly lines 33–8 (about George), lines 38a–43 (getting hold of George) and 44–9 (George and his arthritis). These George-oriented sequences, whilst they alter the topic of the characters' talk, do not alter the repeating mechanism — in that the way the talk proceeds is



quite simply by using repeats for further work; either confirmation or negation by the other party. The end of the sketch presents the two topics intermeshed, though again the mechanism itself still remains intact. And, as mentioned above in the remarks on shared knowledge, this marks George out for special attention. Notice particularly the set-up joke at 37/38. Here, the ostensive purpose of the 'George' repeats, is to clarify exactly who George is. The fact that the Barman accepts George Whatsisname after all this work seldom fails to raise a laugh from the audience.

If we want to compare the conversational styles of the Man and the Barman, it is useful to observe that the Barman repeats on the other's talk (lines 4, 8, 10, 12, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 30, 34, 36, 38a, 42, 48, 52), but on his own talk only at a distance – that is, when there has been intervening talk (lines 32, 48, 50). The Man, on the other hand, frequently repeats on himself within one utterance (lines 9a, 21, 23, 39, 53), and certainly to break a silence (lines 17/17a, 19/19a). This is presumably a strong formal criterion for our intuition that the Man is the more eager and competent conversationalist of the two.

Jefferson also makes interesting comments about 'product-items' – the items in talk that precede repeats, and are the justification or reason for repeats to be produced. She points out that the product-item will occur in the utterance immediately preceding the utterance containing the repeat, and that the utterance with the product-item will be permitted to be completed. For the most part, this standard procedure is strictly followed by the conversationalists in the text. Where the juxtaposition norm is broken (lines 50, 51, 55a) at the end of the sketch, it is noticeably comic. And again, because the structure is not quite 'as it should be', the mechanism of the talk becomes particularly obtrusive, and humorous in the Bergsonian paradigm.

Much of what has already been said concerns the fact that the two characters are 'making conversation' about very little. It has frequently been observed that Pinter's characters are 'talking about nothing in particular', are 'making conversation for the sake of it' or are 'indulging in phatic communion'. Where John Laver's paper is extremely useful is in his reassessment of the term 'phatic communion' itself, and his demonstration of the different types, functions and realizations of the phenomenon. It would probably be most helpful to begin by summarizing his general points, and to continue by focusing on specific details which are relevant to the style of this Pinter sketch.

In general, then, Laver very sensibly remarks that earlier definitions

of phatic communion are useful for pointing out that there is indeed a category of talk that is not particularly important for its referential content but more for its social function, but he stresses that these definitions are vague and generally descriptive, and do not acknowledge the very precise set of parameters that may be observed in the use of phatic communion in social interaction. It is these rules which an analyst of interaction wants to specify.

He cites Malinowski (in Ogden and Richards, 1923, p.315), and his classic definition of phatic communion as 'a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words', and John Lyons (Lyons, 1968, p.417), who says that phatic communion 'serves to establish and maintain a feeling of social solidarity and well being.' Laver's argument is that we can say much more about these 'ties of union', and, indeed about 'solidarity'. Specifically, we can say more about the mechanisms for 'establishment' and the mechanisms for 'maintenance', and we can certainly be much more precise about the 'exchange of words'. Laver explains this succinctly:

Phatic communion is not a simple phenomenon . . . its function of creating ties of union, if that is indeed its principal function, is achieved by subtle and intricate means whose complexity does not deserve to be minimised by the use of such phrases as 'a mere exchange of words'

and he formulates a set of specific questions to which we need answers, and for which some answers are certainly available:

What are the actual phenomena of phatic communion? When do these phenomena occur within the scope of a given interaction and in what type of interaction? . . . What is the functional significance of a speaker's choice of indulging in one type of phatic communion rather than another?

Laver begins to clarify his material by suggesting that we consider three phases of an interaction – opening, medial, closing. In this his observations tally with writers like Goffman (1971) and Schegloff and Sacks (1973), which suggests that there is a strong warrant for regarding such phases in an interaction. Interestingly, though, these writers all concentrate more on the first and third phases, thus also suggesting that more analytical work needs to be done on the rather vague notion of 'medial'. Laver's point here is that it is in the opening and closing phases of an interaction that most phatic communion is seen to be