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THE DIVERSITY OF  
CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICAN DRAMA:

LANGUAGE AS A PERSPECTIVE



# 当代美国戏剧的 多样性：语言视角

张金良◎著

南开大学出版社

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## “导师评语”代序

张金良撰写的这篇英文论文以当代美国剧作家对语言本身的关注为切入，通过文本细读，分析和对比了白人作家大卫·马梅特、女性作家玛莎·诺曼和华裔作家赵健秀的代表作品，审视他们各自对语言的社会功能、语言与自我的丧失与重构以及语言与族裔认同之间关系的认识，指出这三位美国当代著名剧作家对语言和语言使用的认识各有鲜明特点，这既是他们戏剧创作的特色，也是当代美国戏剧多样性的一个重要标识。

论文切口小，但挖掘颇深，突出对文本的细读分析，语言通顺，紧扣论题，步步展开，层层深入，既防止脱离文本，套用理论，也避免了只有文本分析，而没有议题的不足。

尽管海外有人分析过剧作家对语言的关注，但此论文并不就语言论语言，而是较好选择了代表不同身份的剧作家，从多元语境来考察作家对语言的关切，反之又把三位作家、六部代表作反映出来对语言关切的倾向和重心作为标识，来思考当代美国戏剧的多元特征，这是论文的创新所在。另外，论文中一些细读分析剧本的章节，读来也很精彩。

张金良写作用心。在撰写论文中表现出严谨的学风，引用资料，

注释详尽。我和他近四年的相处中深感他为人正直正派，文如其人。他还积极参与导师和其他老师的学术活动，帮助我编辑学术会议论文集，其间也体现出他的认真细致、实事求是的作风。

刘海平

## 中文摘要

关注语言是现代美国戏剧的特点之一，这一点在奥尼尔、怀尔德、威廉斯、米勒和阿尔比等人的作品中都有所反映。自 20 世纪 70 年代以来，美国戏剧舞台呈现出较前更为鲜明的多样性。男性与女性、边缘与主流、白人与少数族裔剧作家对语言的关注似乎也更加执著。本论文深入分析了白人剧作家大卫·马梅特、女性剧作家玛莎·诺曼和华裔剧作家赵健秀剧作中语言的社会功能、语言与自我的丧失与重构以及语言与族裔认同之间的关系。研究他们的剧作能够有效地建构多元语境下当代美国戏剧的这一重要标识。

本论文第一章探讨了马梅特的两部剧作《拜金一族》和《奥利安娜》中所反映出的语言与权力的关系。马梅特的作品多数探讨美国梦的消极层面和美国资本主义商业运作中的无耻与贪婪，以及它们对人性 and 人与人之间关系的损害。对语言的独特思考和运用既是马梅特作品的主题之一，又为他探讨其他主题提供了与众不同的视角。语言与权力的关系贯穿了马梅特的多部剧作。在《拜金一族》中，为了生存和利益，地产推销员们操纵语言，控制和支配他人；编造谎言，设置陷阱；满嘴脏话，贬低对手。在《奥利安娜》中，语言既是权利和地位的象征，又是实施、强化和争夺权利的方式和武器。为了彰显自己的地位，教授约翰坚持使用包含大量复杂句式和艰深词语的学术语言。而女学生则操起女权主义的话语进行反击，控告教授性骚扰，使其身败名裂。

第二章讨论诺曼的《出离》和《晚安，妈妈！》中沉默这一特殊的语言形式与女性自我之间的关系。玛莎·诺曼是美国当代女剧作家中的佼佼者。在继承传统南方戏剧主题的基础上，她更加关注那些以前鲜有人注意的下层女性。这些人多数要么外表沉默寡言，内心冲突激烈，要么口若悬河，内心落寞孤独。在《出离》中，经过 8 年的监狱

生活，原本滔滔不绝的女主人公阿琳变得沉默寡言。当在出狱归来的24小时意识到现实的残酷时，阿琳不得不放弃沉默，努力在昔日的自我中寻回生存的勇气和力量。在《晚安，妈妈！》中，理想自我追求的失败和现实自我的破碎，使杰茜多年来将自我深埋在沉默背后。在告诉妈妈她将自杀的这个晚上，她一改往日的缄默，努力在言说中斩断世间的羁绊，还自己一个真实的自我。本章探讨了造成两位女性沉默和自我受到扭曲或压抑的原因以及她们打破沉默的必要性。诺曼在《出离》中将批判的矛头直指男权社会，而在《晚安，妈妈！》中杰茜的沉默归因于家庭、社会、个人以及与他人关系等多个方面。虽然诺曼很少公开论述自己对语言的看法，但她在作品中对语言与女性之间关系的关注之深、之切、之久在当代女性剧作家中少有出其右者。

第三章探讨了赵健秀的两部剧作《鸡笼唐人》和《龙年》中语言与少数族裔身份的关系。受美国民权运动和亚裔运动的影响，赵健秀反对主流社会对华人形象的歪曲，批评一些华裔在谋求主流认同中对华人文化的误现和对华人历史的背弃。在他的剧作中，人物身份认同的冲突经常体现在他们对语言的认识上。《鸡笼唐人》揭露了白人语言的霸权，揭示了华人在美国社会失语、失根、失真的生存状态，再现了20世纪60年代华裔在拒绝白人同化过程中的身份迷失和对美国黑人言行的效仿。《龙年》里的一家人代表了美国华裔历史上的各种典型身份：在英语面前失语的初到美国者，既讲粤语又讲陈查理式英语的老移民，对中国和美国都爱恨交织、既厌恶粤语和陈查理式英语又反对白人种族歧视话语的第二代，出生在美国、接受美国教育、积极认同白人语言、同化白人社会的华裔女性，以及受60年代民权运动影响反抗主流、拒绝同化、在讲中国话中获得满足与安慰的华裔少年。语言既象征着他们的身份，又是他们因不同的身份诉求而造成的相互冲突之一。

马梅特、诺曼和赵健秀对语言的关注带有自己的鲜明特色。他们从各自的身份和创作诉求出发，探讨语言与权力、语言与女性自我、语言与少数族裔身份之间的关系。对语言的思索既是他们的创作主题之一，又为他们的其他主题提供了便利而有效的视角。这既是他们戏剧创作的特点之一，也构成了当代美国戏剧多样性的一个重要标识。

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· Last but not least, I thank life, for its grace, and its favor!

## Abstract

Many American dramatists such as O'Neill, Williams, and Albee include in their plays a theme on the nature or function of language. Since the 1970s, this playwrights' concern over language has become even more conscious and taken on new dimensions. David Mamet, Marsha Norman, and Frank Chin are established dramatists who represent distinct groups of the diversified stage: man and woman, Caucasian and minority, mainstream and marginal. Though their plays are largely different in terms of plot, character, and style, the dramatists seem to share a common interest in exploring the relationship between language and human beings in a consistent manner. This study makes a close examination of this concern in the major works of the three dramatists so as to reflect the larger scene of the diversified contemporary American theatre.

The main body of this study consists of three chapters. Chapter One discusses the relationship between language and power in two representative plays of Mamet: *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) and *Oleanna* (1992). Mamet commits himself to the exploration of the function of language in the formation of man's power and the interpersonal relationship between men. The two plays focus respectively on how language is used by the real estate salesmen to obtain and maintain power over each other and over customers, and how understanding fails between male and female in academia owing to the abuse of language by a professor and his feminist student. To Mamet, the perversion of language corresponds with and personifies the perversion of the effect of American Dream.

Chapter Two examines the dynamics between a woman's self and her

silence, a special form of language in Norman's *Getting Out* (1977) and *'night, Mother* (1983). In both plays, the two heroines suffer from the near loss of language and the distortion of their selves. To reintegrate or reassert their selves, both of them choose to break out of silence. Norman ingeniously dramatizes the reasons that lead to the women's muteness and to their final choice to speak up. While in the former play Norman levels her criticism directly at a patriarchal society, in the latter she treats the protagonist more as an individual suffering pressures from varied sources — familial, social, personal, and interpersonal, etc., than solely as men's victim. Their silence is the upshot of disparate reasons, but is loud in the same degree.

The third chapter focuses on how Chin uses language to negotiate with the Chinese American identity in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974). According to Chin, a language of one's own is symbolic of a distinctive identity, for in a specific language is inscribed the culture, history, masculinity, and sensibility unique to a specific group. In the first play, Chin primarily addresses issues Chinese Americans encounter in inter-racial negotiations: the hegemony of white English, the aphasia of Chinese Americans, the misidentification with the black Americans, etc. In the second work, Chin deals mainly with the intra-racial and intra-generational conflicts among members of a Chinese American family. Every one of them deploys their identity appeal in its relation to language. To Chin, language is a perspective and a tactic with which to address his other critical matters.

Mamet, Norman, and Chin distinguish themselves from each other in their common concern over language. This shared but varied concern makes one of the recurring themes in their dramatic works, and meanwhile provides them with a convenient and effective perspective through which to explore other themes. It characterizes their plays and presents itself as one of the hallmarks of the diversity of contemporary American drama.

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## Introduction

American drama<sup>①</sup> after 1970 is on the whole characterized by diversity, where women and minorities compete for hearing with Caucasian male writers. What Mark Fearnow refers to as the “formerly silenced groups” (423) — feminist, gay and lesbian,<sup>②</sup> African American, Latino, and Asian American playwrights — claim a strong presence on American stage. Wendy Wasserstein, Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, Maria Irene Fornes, August Wilson, Frank Chin, David Henry Hwang, Ping Chong, among others, all contribute a singular hue to the magnificent theatrical scene. Following the tradition of Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee, newly rising playwrights debuting in the sixties and seventies began to present more mature works before the audience. Frequent awardees of various honors are Sam Shepard, David Mamet, David Rabe, Lanford Wilson, Neil Simon, etc. The varieties of authorial identities constitute the diversity of contemporary American drama. Voices of all kinds — new and old, male and female, mainstream and marginal, central and local, white, black and yellow, create a colorful theatrical landscape.

It is significant to note that different as these playwrights are, they

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① The research focus of this study primarily rests on the last three decades of the 20th century.

② The most prominent gay playwright of the 20<sup>th</sup> century America is identified as Tennessee Williams. However, Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America* (1992) is unarguably noted for its profound treatment of the homosexual relationship. Among the lesbian playwrights, Paula Vogel gathers vast fame with her *How I Learn to Drive* including an Obie in 1997 and a Pulitzer Prize in 1998. However, the best-known play that “offers an amusing account of the problems, private and public, encountered by Lesbians” should be *Dos Lesbos* by Terry Baum and Caroline Myers, ironically subtitled *A Play by, for, and about Perverts*. See Christopher Bigsby, *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 343.

share one interest in common, that is, the concern over language. This concern claims a tangible presence in the history of modern American drama. A number of dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee have included this theme in their plays. Noticeably, since the 1970s this concern has become more diversified and taken on new dimensions. Many playwrights of disparate identities are consistently concerned with certain distinct and oftentimes contrasting aspects of language. However, so far no study has been done to bring this phenomenon into relief. The present study is intended to map out this conspicuous feature of contemporary American drama through a study of the dramatic works of David Mamet (1947-), Marsha Norman (1947-), and Frank Chin (1940-).

The reasons why these three dramatists are singled out for study are as follows. First, belonging to different groups: man and woman, mainstream and margin, white and ethnic minority, they aptly represent the contemporary American stage. Secondly, though their contemporaries such as Sam Shepard, David Rabe, Langford Wilson, August Wilson, have all expressed the same concern, in terms of the extent to which they commit themselves to this exploration and of the persistence of their commitment, Mamet, Norman, and Chin no doubt stand out. Thirdly, it is a fact that in addition to Chinese Americans, ethnic minorities subsume black Americans, Chicanos, etc., and that black Americans claim greater accomplishments and a longer drama history than other minorities. However, as a Chinese scholar, the present author thinks it more natural for him to take up a Chinese American dramatist as his subject for study.

Mamet, Norman, and Chin distinguish themselves from each other in a variety of ways. A widely acknowledged misogynist<sup>①</sup> (Bigsby, 1985, 2),

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<sup>①</sup> Susan Smith Harris points out, "The very fact of the commercial success of these three writers (Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and David Rabe) points to a domination of a patriarchal, phallogocentric theatre system" (127; qtd. in Burke 144). See Sally Burke, *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).

Mamet “is perhaps the most quintessentially American of contemporary playwrights” (Haedicke, 2005, 407). He takes as his explicit subject America and its mythic American dream, and explores the potency of America’s national myth through the multiple media of American culture. As Matthew Roudané remarks, if Mamet’s plays tend to “focus on a largely masculine world, often to the exclusion of female characters, the reverse could be said of the world of Marsha Norman” (2000, 373). Norman is acclaimed as “perhaps the most successful author of serious feminist drama working in the U.S. today” (J. Brown 60), consigning to paper and voice her concerns with “the emotional needs and anxieties” (Biggsby, 1999, 210) of the weak sex. In contrast, Chin stands out in his own way as “the conscience and ‘godfather’ of Asian American writing” (Wong, 1993, 165), who addresses both ontological and epistemological issues essential to the Chinese/Asian Americans.<sup>①</sup>

For all their striking differences, they seem to share a common concern over language in their dramatic works. Language, as *Oxford English Dictionary* defines, denotes “The whole body of words and of methods of combination of words used by a nation, people, or race; the act of speaking or talking; the use of speech; that which is said, words, talk, report” (634-35). With the linguistic turn of Western philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of various theories and movements, language is then seen as functional “to maintain and change power relations in contemporary society,”<sup>②</sup> as “a significant cultural marker of a particular ethnic group” (May 129), and as “sexist” or “sex stereotyping” (Goddard and Patterson 3).

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① In a telephone interview, Frank Chin made clear his life-long commitment: “What are we? What holds us together? How do we define our culture, our work? What is the nature and content of Asian-American integrity? It isn’t for the whites to sort out. It’s for *us* to sort out. Asian-American artists have failed to assert any Asian-American integrity. It remains dependent on white racism. We’ve simply not addressed the question of what *is* Asian American?”(qtd. in Vena 945).

② Description of the book *Language and Power*. See <<http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/Bookshop/detail.asp?item=100000000005772>>. (2007-8-9)

Language has as much bearing on drama as on any other literary genres. Aristotle ranks language as one of six elements of drama. Mamet contends that “the theater is a place where language dominates” (Bigsby, 2004, 2). The playwrights’ concern over language marks a conspicuous characteristic of contemporary American drama, but this phenomenon is not unique to drama. Historian Donald Ross observes that in the last thirty years of the twentieth-century, the polemical focus of philosophy, aesthetics, and politics is oftentimes the relationship between language and the world (qtd. in Tao Jie 39).

If the concern over language is what integrates Mamet, Norman, and Chin into this book-length meticulous study, it is also the key element that separates them. In Mamet’s plays, the “main dramatic power comes from his language, ... spare, oblique, inferential and catching the everyday cadences and vocabulary of desperate people” (Bryer and Hartig 300). Everybody in his plays “uses language for his or her own purpose to get what he or she wants ... No one ever talks except to accomplish an objective” (ibid. 5). To his characters, language closely concerns power, action, existence, and the like. Chin, the “loudmouth godfather” (Lei 309) in Asian American literature, maintains that “Language is the medium of culture and the people’s sensibility, including the style of manhood ...” (1991a, 33-34). In his negotiations with the Chinese/Asian American identity, almost all major issues that find their way into his plays are treated from the perspective of language. Although Marsha Norman is never as articulate as Mamet and Chin in this probing, most of the female protagonists of her dramatic works register problems with speaking. Two rivalrous tendencies can be charted in her plays: the women are either inarticulate and reserved or talkative and voluble. The great extent to which the relationship between language and women is highlighted both distinguishes Norman from other female playwrights and contrasts her with Mamet and Chin.



Though few critics have conducted a study on Marsha Norman's concern over language, much critical attention in this regard can be found in studies on Frank Chin and, particularly, David Mamet, from which this present research much benefits. A "mainstay of American theatre" (Biggsby, 1985, 13), David Mamet is acquiring more and more critical attention in the English-speaking world, though in China Mamet study still exists in its initial stage<sup>①</sup>. The three book-length studies on David Mamet that had come out up to 1990: Christopher Biggsby's *David Mamet* (1985), a namesake by Dennis Carroll in 1987, and Anne Dean's *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action* (1990), both summarize and foreshadow most of the issues about the playwright and his plays that draw critical attention. Biggsby thus recapitulates the essence of Mamet's art in his monograph: "Beyond his central concern with the craft of theatre and its power to shape experience, language and thought, his plays stand as a consistent critique of a country whose public myths he regards as destructive, and whose deep lack of communality he finds disturbing" (14). In his *David Mamet*, Dennis Carroll conducts an all-inclusive study, involving themes of Mamet's major plays, the context he negotiates with, his other genres, and the interactions with his peers, particularly Sam Shepard and David Rabe, and his forerunners. Carroll concludes that "Mamet's importance, apart from the dialogue, lies in his unsentimental sense of personal and social morality, his wry but sharp sense of dialectic, and the vigor of his characters' intent" (155).

Mamet's language has always been a focus of critique. Previous to the publication of Anne Dean's thorough dissection, critics like Guido Almansi, Robert Storey, William Herman, Jack V. Barbera, June Schueter

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① In addition to some introductory remarks in books on the history of American literature or drama written by Chinese scholars, only one article has been published in journals of consequence and one case study of fifteen pages approached from the perspective of stylistics: 力勇,《话语场中的权力之争:〈奥利安娜〉主题解读》,《国外文学》2006 年第一期) and 王虹,《戏剧文体分析——话语分析的方法》(上海教育出版社,2006 年)。