



Samuel Beckett's Experiments with the English Language in Writing for Godot (1952)

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1952) has lent itself to numerous interpretations foregrounding its status as the defining piece of Absurdist Theatre. This paper picks up this play to analyze the role of English language in articulating its central theme of alienation and existential crisis faced by its protagonists. The essay shows how Beckett makes a creative experimentation with the English language and pushes it to its limits in order to foreground the main theme of the play. In particular, this essay will undertake a semantic and syntactic analysis of the dialogues of the play, with a special focus on Lucky's speech to demonstrate how the elliptical language structures, disjointed and non-sequential words, and gibberish have been especially used by the author to mimic the mental states of the characters. Finally, Beckett's experimentation with the form of English language to the point of its ultimate breakdown is meant to be read as a comment about the deeply fractured sensibility of the society post the second World War.

Keywords: semantics, semantics, English language, experimentation.

Introduction

The twentieth century is considered as an eponymous moment in the history of world literature as the waves of modernist movement swept all across Europe. Along with path breaking innovations and experimentations with the use of language in literature, the selection of themes that articulated the crisis rooted in the modern society became the hallmarks of modernist fiction, poetry and drama. It was also the time when writers dared to play with language while also speculating about its nature and role in one's existence. In this context, Samuel Beckett emerged as a key figure of the Theatre of the Absurd whose literary creations, especially *Waiting for Godot* ushered new paradigms for innovations with English language in order to

portray the theme of alienation and existentialism faced by the characters, Vladimir and Estragon.

Waiting for Godot is a unique play where “nothing happens”, “nobody comes and nobody goes”. Two tramps while away their time under a tree, waiting for the arrival of Godot. In their perennial wait for the unidentified Godot, they keep inventing activities, sing songs, and also talk about issues in illogical manner. Two other characters join them in the play, namely Pozzo and Lucky, with the latter making a long speech that is gibberish and nonsensical. Studied from a semantic point of view, Lucky’s speech is disjointed and talks about unconnected random things that do not add up. If seen from the syntactical viewpoint too, the speech follows no particular order leading to a loss of meaning. This breakdown of the language in the play is analyzed in the essay as a technique on the part of the author to convey the theme of his play in a more impactful manner.

Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course on General Linguistics* (1916) had argued that a linguistic sign is made up of a signifier (sound pattern) and signified (concept) and there is no inherent relationship between a linguistic sign and its meaning. He further elaborated that the meaning of any linguistic sign functions on two levels, namely the denotative and the connotative. Using Saussure’s sociolinguistic theory, this study aims to show how the play obliterates the denotative meaning of the words to reflect the jeopardized mental states of the play’s protagonists. By focusing the attention towards the unconventional use of English language in *Waiting for Godot*, this essay reviews the role of language in *Waiting for Godot* to ask the following research questions.

Research Questions:

- Does English language in the play lead to meaningful communication?
- What linguistic strategies does Beckett deploy to experiment with language?
- What is the role of elliptical structures, meaningless jokes and gibberish in the semantics of the play?
- Is the breakdown of English language linked to the deterioration of self in the Modernist period?