
The Philosophy and Functions of Verbal Violence in Harold Pinter's Mountain Language: A CDA Approach

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Abstract

The present study considers the issue of verbal violence in the language of drama. In the evaluation of verbal violence, Jeanette Malkin (2004) proposes six maxims, through which language may be considered as an arrogant element. The characters in dramatic texts (as in other literary texts) are created, developed, evolved and - in some cases - destroyed by language. In a considerable number of modern plays, language acts as an antagonist who is to destruct and demolish the personality of the other(s) in the play with violence and aggression; so, the theoretical study of dramatic verbal violence as a component of dramatic discourse is considered indispensable to critical discourse analysis of dramatic texts and the study of power relations as reflected in the dialogues.; Focusing on the patterns of dramatic verbal violence introduced by Malkin, this study aims to discuss the dominant patterns of verbal violence in *Mountain Language*, a play by Harold Pinter, and investigates the role of language in shaping, and destroying of human identities

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Introduction

Most analysts in critical discourse analysis (CDA) endorse the claim that language can be regarded as a medium of domination and social force, serving to legitimize the relations of organized power. Insofar as the legitimizations of power relations are not articulated, language is also ideological, portraying the structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in itself. Typically, CDA researchers are interested in the way discourse (re)produces social domination, that is, the power abuse of one group over others, and how dominated groups may discursively resist such abuse (Wodak, 2001: 9). In other words “texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance” (ibid. 10). Wodak believes that language indexes and expresses power, and is involved where there is contention over and challenge to power. It shall be noted that power does not necessarily derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term (ibid. 10).

The characters in dramatic texts (as in other literary texts) are created, developed, evolved and in some cases destroyed by the medium of language. Since the characterization is done through the dialogues of the characters, the theoretical

study of dramatic verbal violence as a component of dramatic discourse sounds indispensable to discourse analysis of dramatic language.

In the plays by Harold Pinter, territory is typically a room (refuge, prison, cell, trap) symbolic of its occupant’s world. Into this, and into their ritualized relationship with its rules and taboos, comes a stranger on to whom the occupants project their deepest desires, guilt and neuroses (See (Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature). The breakdown that follows may be mirrored in the breakdown of language. His preoccupation with confined spaces, with small rooms, with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a context for exploring the complexities of local pictures, the instability and indispensability of verbal interaction, the shifting status of social realities, the precariousness of attempts to establish general agreement and the riskiness of anyone’s efforts to function as leader or spokesperson for a social group (Quigley, 2009: 9). In his paper entitled “The Theatre of Harold Pinter” Dukore (1962: 43-44) notes that Pinter’s plays are frequently funny and also frequently frightening. Their meaning usually seems obscure. The characters behave in a “believable” manner, but they are shrouded in twilight of mystery. We can never be precisely sure who they are, why they are there, or what they have come to do. Their motives and backgrounds are

vague or unknown. We recognize that there is motivation but we are unsure what it is. We recognize that there is a background, but that background is clouded. Each piece of knowledge is a half-knowledge, each answer a springboard to new questions.

Verbal Violence: Some Basic Theoretical Issues

Dramatic inquiry into the relationship between man and his language is hardly a uniquely contemporary (post-World War II) phenomenon. Jarry's *King Ubu* (1896), Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), Hofmannsthal's *The Difficult Man* (*Der Schwierige*, 1921), some Dada theater evenings, the *Volksstücke* of Odon von Horvath and Marieluise Fleisser all suggest, in varying ways, a concern with this issue (Malkin, 2004: 1). The elevation of language to the central action, and actor; in the pessimistic vision of man's ability to remain free and humane in the face of verbal coercion; and in warning that man has become a prisoner of his speech are the major factors which relate to this inquiry. Verbal violence is a characteristic of recent twentieth-century drama. (Culpeper, 2002: 87). As long as any analysis of dialogue needs to be sensitive to the social dynamics of interaction, it would be concerned with critical discourse analysis, evaluating the power-based relations and the systematic operations of violence upon the human subjects.

The plays that animate these views are

varied; they vary in genre, in idiom, and in subject matter. In the works of Harold Pinter, for instance, concrete actions of language which are violent, coercive, and domineering are demonstrated. "Language is either metamorphosed into a dramatic antagonist that destroys the characters or forces them into conformity with its pre-given structures and precepts; or it is portrayed as an inescapable prison which determines the characters' fate and defines the limits of their world — conceptual and moral" (See. Malkin: 2). According to the investigations of Malkin, man speaks so far as he skillfully conforms to language and language functions upon us: closing us in within its own laws and restrictions, coercing our obedience.

This study is concerned with the issue of verbal violence in the short play *Mountain Language* (1988), one of Pinter's plays mostly involved with the matter of violence done by means of language. In this play, language gets on trial: it stands accused of usurping and molding reality, of replacing critical thought with fossilized and automatic verbiage, of violating man's autonomy, of destroying his individuality.

As an avant-garde playwright, whose plays are also classified in the category of Absurd drama, Pinter watchfully portrays man's miserable and tragic condition in the verbal world in which he has caught up. His plays involve a considerable degree of violence. The characters have aggressive

conflicts with each other, or with their surrounding world. This aggression which, in many of his plays culminates in acts of language-motivated violence, signals a disturbed and threatening relationship between contemporary man and his language.

This study aims to investigate the aggression that centers to a great extent on the dramatization of man's loss of autonomy and selfhood through the normative pressures, reductive tendencies, or pre-determination of language.

Focusing on the Malkin's patterns of verbal violence, the present study aims to explain how language becomes an autonomous element in the play; and what kind of effect the autonomous play of language has got upon the human individuals; what is the relation of human being with the language he speaks and how language becomes the ideological apparatus that exercises power upon the human subjects.

The Patterns of Verbal Violence

Malkin (2004) introduces six major maxims for the analysis of verbal violence in the language of drama. According to her, the verbal aggression demonstrates concrete actions of language which are violent, coercive, and domineering. In contemporary drama language is either metamorphosed into a dramatic antagonist that destroys the characters or forces them into conformity with its pre-given

structures and precepts; or it is portrayed as an inescapable prison which determines the characters' fate and defines the limits of their world - conceptual and moral (See. Malkin, 2). The following is the characteristic maxims of verbal violence:

- 1- Language is demonstrated as antagonistic force operating upon the individual.
- 2- Language is a tyrannical weapon of dominance and destruction.
- 3- Language imprisons and brutalizes.
- 4- Language is menacing torture interrogation.
- 5- Language embodies and controls political power.
- 6- Language as verbal cruelty defines human relations.

Verbal Violence in *Mountain Language*

Mountain Language (1988) consists of four short acts. The setting is in front of and within a prison. In the first act, a group of women who want to visit their imprisoned husbands are standing at a prison wall. They have been standing there for eight hours in the snow. They are questioned by a sergeant and an officer. One of the women is bitten by a dog. The officer tells the women that their language, namely that of the mountain people, is forbidden and that their husbands are enemies of the state. Altogether one of the women turns out not to belong to the mountain people. Act 2 is set in a visitor's room, in which an elderly woman visits a prisoner. She is told by the guard not to talk in her own language and is jabbed by him with a stick, when she

does not obey. The prisoner turns out to be a joker. Act 3 is set in a corridor, where a hooded man is led to a young woman. She has come in through the wrong door. The hooded man collapses and is dragged off. The sergeant advises the woman to ask a specific person for information. The payment can be aggression. Act 4 is again set in the visitor's room. This time the elderly woman is allowed to talk in her own language but she keeps silent. The prisoner, her son, falls from his chair, violently shaking.

The Analysis

Language is demonstrated as antagonistic force operating upon the individual.

The individual is converted from his language to the one imposed upon him. The speech in dialogue of cruelty is saturated with unrealistic verbal assault and vague phrases. The human subject silenced and emptied of his language, is reshaped by the language which destroyed him. The totalitarian style allows no space of response and self-defense for the victim of verbal aggression. These are features of the so-called interrogation: The vicious, irrational and contradictory accusations of the victim which has the power of creating an image of the impersonal web that society weaves in order to snare the individual (See. Malkin, 58).

Officer: These women, sergeant,

have yet committed no crime!

Sergeant: Sir! But you are not saying they are without sin?

Officer: Oh, no. Oh, no. I'm not saying that!

Sergeant: This one is full of it! She bounces with it! (Pinter, 8- 9)

The stubborn repetition of the same question is echoed by an equally stubborn echo of the same answer, thus ridiculing the formal procedure of questioning. Later on this formal procedure is again ridiculed, when the officer claims that the dogs do give their names before they bite - as this is the formal procedure. The assumption of moral behavior and some code of honor in dogs are so absurd:

Officer: Every dog has a name! They answer to their name! They are given a name by their parents and that is their name! That is their name! Before they bite, they state their name. It's a formal procedure!

The meaninglessness of the jargon contributes to dumbness of the mind of the individual under subjugation of the powerful.

Language is a tyrannical weapon of dominance and destruction.

The control of the subject takes place through possession of the language: The voice of the victim grows dull and dull

and he gives acquiescent responses to the opponents. His energy gradually wanes, and he repeats the words dictated to him (See. Malkin, 43). The victimized characters in the play, the elderly woman, her son and Sara all undergo the harsh verbal violence, they are being dominated and ultimately are silenced and mutilated.

3- Language imprisons and brutalizes.

The individual is a prisoner in the painfully limited, obscene and cliché-ridden verbal world. In literary texts this finds its articulation when the characters are imprisoned in the rigid system of language. This stunts the relationship between characters and the outer world, so that the individual has no way out of this harsh, rigidly rule governed system of language (Malkin, 104). He or she as the inmate of this system is prevented to think beyond the fragmented speech-world.

Elderly woman: I have bread-
The guard jabs her with a stick
She looks at him. He jabs her.

Elderly woman: I have apples-
The guard jabs her and shouts.
Silence
(Pinter, 13- 14)

4- Language is menacing torture interrogation.

When the individual is socially, politically or mentally insurgent, in a set

of sessions of interrogation he is being force-fed clichés, faked truths and so on. This happens implicitly, and affects the unconscious, so that individual is not able to get noticed of his own being brain-washed. The peaceful and friendly conversation abruptly switches to interrogation (See. Malkin, 57), and interrogation serves to reshape the individual as product of the domineering organization (party), and also extracts confession and converts belief through the force of the word the quick, gapless rhythm of speaking of the victimizers, as well as accelerating speed and rhythm of speech which take on the tone and threatening curtness of public prosecutors.

The totalitarian style, in the process of violent dialogue, allows no space of response and self-defense for the victim. These are features of the so-called interrogation: The vicious, irrational and contradictory accusations of the victim (p.58),

The case of Sara in prison exemplifies this condition. A hooded man closes her, and in a give and take of some sentences the young woman is abused, and ultimately the act is so naturalized that the woman offers another sessions of it, herself. (See. Pinter, 19)

The speech in dialogue of cruelty is saturated with unrealistic verbal assault and vague phrases. The individual silenced and emptied of his language, is reshaped

by the language which destroyed him. The peaceful and friendly conversation abruptly switches to interrogation:

Guard: I've got a wife and three kids. And you are all pile of shit.

Silence

Prisoner: I've got a wife and three kids.

Guard: You've got what?

Silence

Guard: You've what?

Silence

Guard: What did you say to me? You've what?

Silence (Pinter, 15)

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And interrogation serves to reshape the individual as product of the domineering organization (party), and also extracts confession and converts belief through the force of the word the quick, gapless rhythm of speaking of the victimizers, as well as accelerating speed and rhythm of speech which take on the tone and threatening curtness of public prosecutors.

Sergeant: Name?

Young woman: We've given our names!

Sergeant: Name?

Young woman: We've given our names.

Sergeant: Name?

Officer: Stop this shit! (Pinter, 1988: 5)

Sara (the young woman) makes

attempts to resist the authority of the officials through her questions and her silences. She meets the officials' repeated, foolish questions with silence, refusing to participate in meaningless dialogue. Yet by the end of the play, her spirit has effectively broken by the totalitarian system.

The meaningless jargon of the officer and sergeant gradually brings the men into silence and conformity. They have given every dog a name, in the case of young woman's pleading, they ask dog's name that has bitten the elderly woman's hand. According to them, dogs have human attributes and possess rights that mountain men do not.

Young woman: She's been bitten.

Officer: Who?

Young woman: She has. She has a torn hand. Look. Her hand has been bitten this is blood.

Officer: Who did this?

Young woman: A big dog.

Officer: What was his name? (Pause) every dog has a name!

They answer to their name. They are given a name by their parents and that is their name! Before they bite, they state their name. It's a formal procedure. They state their name and then they bite. What was his name? If you tell me one of our dogs bit this woman without giving his name I will have that dog shot! (Pinter, 8)

It is seen here that the interrogation serves to reshape the individual as product of the domineering organization (party), and also extracts confession and converts belief through the force of the word the quick, gapless rhythm of speaking of the victimizers, as well as accelerating speed and rhythm of speech which take on the tone and threatening curtness of public prosecutors.

Sergeant and officer are torturing the young woman, their language shifts from normal tone to threatening interrogation. The opponents who speak in the approved language, have right to accuse and blame the mountain people for unreasonable matters. Although the young woman does not speak in mountain language, she is a victim. They address her with abusive terms and accuse her of being sinful. Sara continually tries to communicate with the prison officials in order to convince them to treat her and the others humanly, but her dialogue with them continually degenerates into pointless babble. When the officials realize that Sara is not a mountain woman and so cannot control her due to her social status, they find another way to exercise power over her. After the sergeant identifies her as “f- intellectual,” he abuses her to assert his power over her.

Sergeant: What language do you speak? What language do you speak with your arse?

Officer: These women, sergeant, have as yet committed no crime.

Remember that.

Sergeant: Sir! But you’re not saying they are without sin?

Officer: Oh, no. Oh, no, I’m not saying that.

Sergeant: This one’s full of it. She bounces with it.

Officer: She doesn’t speak the mountain language.

Sergeant: So is she. She looks like a fucking intellectual to me. (Pinter, 10- 11)

5-Language embodies and controls political power.

Characters are overtaken by language and are either destroyed or converted and forced into preexisting verbal molds which, implicitly or explicitly implicate a ruling ideology. Verbal terrorism is another matter; the users of terror are the instrument of verbal power rather than autonomous speaking individuals. Verbal terror occurs when the meaning is frustrated and concealed from the audience. So, terror is conceived as the usurpation of individual’s capacity to speak, and thus think, freely.

People speaking in mountain language are to be converted from their language. For their language is not accepted in the totalitarian state. Although suddenly the rule of prohibition is changed and mountain people are allowed to speak their own language, the old woman is no longer able to utter any single word. She does not react to any word of his son who

now speaks in their mountain language. Malkin states that the purpose of mental torture is to control and shape the mind and also to gain power over the thoughts. Characters are overtaken by language and are either destroyed or converted and forced into preexisting verbal molds which, implicitly or explicitly implicate a ruling ideology (See. Malkin, 150). The users of verbal terror are the instrument of verbal power rather than autonomous speaking individuals. As we see in the play that the officer, the sergeant and the guard, although are playing violence upon the mountain people, they are apparatuses themselves. “Verbal terror occurs when the meaning is frustrated and concealed from the audience” (Malkin, 90). So, terror is conceived as the usurpation of individual’s capacity to speak, and thus think, freely:

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Sergeant: Your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouses. They are enemies of the state. They are shithouses.

Officer: Now here this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed.

You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak your mountain language in this place.

Ruth Wodak assumes that “inclusion/exclusion” of groups, people, nation states, migrant groups, and so forth changes due to different criteria of how insiders and outsiders are defined in each instance. Thus a specific migrant status (coming from a certain host country) may serve as a criterion for exclusion (See. Renkema, 2009: 315). In *Mountain Language*, the victims, as human subjects under the violence of the dominant, are called as “other”, for they are outsiders who are to be demolished in order that the dominants exercise control and power more fully.

The elderly woman has undergone verbal tortures, has been forbidden from speaking and talking to his prisoner son, and now is in complete control of the state, for her language and thinking has been manipulated. She grows weak and feeble, and at the end is totally dumb, motionless, and not able to hear and speak:

Guard: they’ve changed the rules. She can speak. She can speak in her own language until further notice.

Prisoner: mother, you can speak. (pause) mother, I’m speaking

to you. You see? We can speak.
You can speak to me in our own
language.
She is still
You can speak.
Pause
Mother, can you hear me?
(Pause) it's our language. (pause)
Can't you hear me? Do you hear
me?
She does not respond. (21)

6- Language as verbal cruelty defines human relations.

Malkin believes that language sometimes is treated as power tool, which is to be controlled and possessed. Verbal power is given through wit and creativity as conscious rebellion against the banal, in this sense verbal power is not given through linguistic control or by "knowing words," but through wit and creativity. Sara is not of mountain people, she can speak her language, and due to this she possesses a degree of power in her language, she questions, or does not reply their questions and is able to get engaged in the verbal playing with the state men. In the beginning of the play she pleads for help when the old woman is bitten. Violent actions within language destroy individuality and bring the victim to conformity.

The below cited sample corresponds with both the first and second maxim of Malkin. First, language as antagonistic

force operates upon the individual. According to Malkin, dialogue of cruelty is wounding the person through teasing, insinuation and taunting through words alone. And second, Language is a tyrannical weapon of dominance and destruction.

Verbal cruelty brings ultimately the destruction of the subject. Neither the mother nor his son (the prisoner) is able to retain their subjective selfhood. Being devoid of their language, and unable to absorb the language of the powerful, they are destructed by the totalitarian system:

Prisoner: mother?

She does not respond. She sits still.
The prisoner's trembling grows.
He falls from the chair on to his
knees, begins to gasp and shake
violently. (22)

Dialogue of cruelty is wounding the person through teasing, insinuation and taunting through words alone (p.163). Language is treated as power tool, which is to be controlled and possessed (p.171). Violent actions within language destroy individuality and bring the victim to conformity. One of the ways the prison officials oppress the characters in the play is to strip them of their cultural identity, they decree that mountain language is forbidden, that it should be considered dead, and those who speak it will be severely punished. This

censure not only denies the characters a sense of self but also serves to isolate each from the other because communication within the community becomes impossible.

The sample below also corresponds with the fifth maxim of Malkin that is language operating as power tool:

Officer: Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak your mountain language in this... (10)

Language acts as an ideological apparatus. It is bound to change at every time according to political plans. According to Malkin, when Language acts as the ideological apparatus it is the expression of values: the seamless web of sententiousness, proverbial wisdom, and social clichés (p.66), the verbal formulations of moral norms (p.59) and invocation of total and unquestioning obedience and conformity (p.91) are of its

indications. Language as the ideological apparatus has another function as well, which is the corruption of free thought.

5-Language embodies and controls political power.

And ultimately is the total destruction of the character, the prisoner, when his mother has been silenced. They declare that the rules have been changed; now the mountain language is no longer banned. They can speak. But in reality the characters are knocked down under verbal terrorism and aggression. Having lost the linguistic power, characters are destructed. This indicates that how absurdly and conventionally bound are the rules set in the society. And how miserable is the life of people subject to totalitarians:

Guard: I forgot to tell you. They've changed the rules. She can speak. She can speak in her own language. Until further notice.

Prisoner: She can speak?

Guard: Tell her she can speak in her own language. New rules. Until further notice.

Prisoner: Mother?

She does not respond. She sits still. The Prisoner's trembling grows. He falls from the chair on to his knees, begins to gasp and shake violently. The Sergeant walks into the room and studies the prisoner shaking on the floor.

The study of Pinter's *Mountain Language* within Malkin's pattern of verbal violence shows that in modern times, the relation between the characters and the outer world is stunted, since language is no longer an application in the human world, and it operates automatically. The human individuals are subjects to the tyrannical operations of language, and are being victimized by its rigid rules, although language often functions as an ideological tool to dominate and destruct the subjects, as we see in *Mountain Language*. The character as the inmate of the rigid system of language is controlled by the system and is not able to think beyond its strict rules. Language controls and sustains the power as well by its ideological functions. The verbal violence acts as an important element in defining the power relations and the usurpation of control over human subjects in social and personal contexts. The result and effect of the autonomous and aggressive play of language is the destruction and mutilation of the human voice, as represented in *Mountain Language*.

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