

Literature

THE SEMANTICS OF LANGUAGE IN EUGÈNE IONESCO'S PLAYS

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Abstract

*The goal of this paper is to present the characteristics of Eugène Ionesco's dramatic texts, a reason why the genre of avant-garde and theatre of the absurd are also considered, with a view to revealing their major ways of functioning. By pointing out the different dimensions of dramatic language, the emphasis is on those elements that differ from current oral and written language. Starting from the times of decadentism, a crisis of character can be noted in the theater around a type of individual who, as an alienated individual, cannot find his identity in a hostile surrounding world. One of the direct consequences of this crisis will be the impossibility of interpersonal communication, which will be best demonstrated with the concept and tenets of the theater of the absurd. In this context, the study of the theater of the 20th century is done from the perspective of cognitive semantics, as an autonomous level of language. The approach is organised around two notions: dramatic conventions and the actual language of the dramatic texts. The interpretative theory rooted in semantics is applied while analysing Ionesco's short plays. The starting point is the linguistics of the text as described by Eugen Coşeriu. Capturing the meaning and the means by which it is constructed is one of the objectives in accord with the main principles of cognitive linguistics. The way of analysing the meaning in a text is given by the presence of some textual functions, as possibilities provided by language through relationships that the linguistic sign establishes in the discursive act. The specificity of the discourse comes from the combination of verbal and non-verbal elements, in order to highlight the playwright's original style. The particularities of this type of language based on an ontological representation of the actional nature in human existence are also investigated. There are two dimensions recognisable in the language of literature: one is specific to the genre and the other one is particular, giving originality and uniqueness. The textual meaning in between these dimensions needs to be reconstructed from all their constituents identifiable at different levels of analysis. Ionesco distanced himself from the conventional and traditional theatre, finding a new formula for the dramatic genre in his own vision of what drama should be like. Ionesco's dramatic work includes short plays and extensive plays in which the author expresses his adversity against totalitarian regimes. He is the representative of the theater of the absurd and anti-theater. The corpus for this research is composed mainly of the plays *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson* and *The Chairs*, the most representative plays for the avant-garde spirit, short plays on the theme of language emptied of meaning and non-communication. Language has an impact on thinking and the resulting actions, which relates it to the ontology of human existence. As dramatic language is preponderantly structured on dialogical interactions (and less on monologues, soliloquies and asides), its essence can be revealed by decomposing and recomposing them, from the angle of the conventions specific to the dramatic genre. The analysis of the selected fragments from the corpus has the role to highlight their semantic features in terms of conceptual representations.*

Keywords: semantics; linguistics of the text; theatre of the absurd; Eugène Ionesco; communication.

The theoretical framework of the research on Ionesco's plays consists in establishing the connections between concepts as knowledge of the real world and the dramatic texts. These findings may lead to the need to synthesise the contributions and theories regarding interpretation. The strategies of decomposing the elements of language that built dramatic tension orient the reflections on the plays' deep meanings, also investigated in terms of artistic representation within the limits of the norms imposed by the communication situation, as well as genre-specific conventions.

The study further aims to discover the semantic strategies by which meanings are constructs in Ionesco's dramatic texts. One of the obvious strategies is the crowding of scenes charged with truisms, the tendency towards total desemantisation and the destruction of discursive coherence characteristic of texts of this kind, which is revealed through the use of verbal and behavioral automatisms. The internal dynamics is examined in the plays, through which the meanings are manifested, with the help of strategies provided by figurative language itself, such as puns and metaphors and their chaining, respectively.

From a cognitive perspective, the investigation is based on deductive competence, which identifies the relationship cause-effect by probing the deep structure of communication and by focusing on the mental faculties that intervene in the successive reinterpretations of the dramatic texts. Their adaptations to staging, require bridging the written text with the text performed on stage such as an oral expression, with specific instructions, certain rhythms of speech, repetitions, or change of language registers. More importantly, humor and irony, even cynicism and sarcasm are built with figures of speech such as ambiguity, paradoxical irony, and ellipsis. More often than not, ridicule produces a comic effect of the farce type. Multiple meanings or polysemy render flexibility to phrases, by highlighting those meanings in an individualised language filled with the particularities of the dramatic genre such as orality, gesture, mimicry, rhythm, connotation, metaphor, and so on. For instance, in the play *The Lesson*, the phrases appear as mathematical concepts of "square root" and "cube root" in explaining the root of words. Ionesco's theatre assumes exactly this problematic of the apparent non-intentionality in absurd situations, created in the related textual worlds with different levels of linguistic contextualisation:

Language is one of the major manifestations of an Ecoian contract based on the counterbalance of two antinomic strives: to interpret Being in all its grandeur and to guard it from direct cognition and false interpretation (Korbut Salman, 2019, p. 1061).

Ionesco's characters are stylised, vaguely outlined, with an uncertain identity, and deindividualised, as they are created as types. Such typologies represent hypostases of the man Ionesco, who creates atypical heroes undergoing states of depersonalisation, at the same time unique and irrepeatable. His favorite themes are ontological emptiness, the void, death, failure, disarticulation of language, incommunicado, seclusion, grabbing automatisms and stereotypes, and all this seems to suggest the impossibility of breaking the deadlock. The major themes in the selected plays are philosophical reflections on obsessions and externalised anxieties. Moreover, a great artistic achievement of Ionesco's dramatic work is the original way in which these themes are presented, from several possible perspectives that confers complexity to a situation apparently simple. In their construction the literary motives are recurrent, becoming leitmotifs, and they support the tone of anxiety. Improving language means improving interpersonal interactions, thus avoiding mental disorders such as neuroses and depression. On the other hand, lack of precision in communication produces ambiguity and discontinuity, or imperfections, since information and consciousness are in a relationship

of isomorphism, or there should be an attempt to align them in order to clarify the content for the intended effects.

In *The Bald Soprano*, subtitled anti-play and originally written in Romanian under the title *English without a Teacher*, the playwright seems to parody colloquial language. The author revealed that the starting point was his attempt to learn English with the help of a beginner's textbook, but Ionesco went beyond the idea of teaching, beginning to show the obvious truths expressed by characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Smith through sentences.

The creative process involved freedom, play, even creative frenzy, as the playwright himself has many times confessed in his Romanian early writings being carried away by imagination, and in this way, linguistic plurality produced defamiliarisation and uniqueness of the artistic expression. The central issue is the communication process between the characters of the dramatic text and the role of language in this process. The specificity of the dramatic language comes from its performative nature in the dialogic form. The characters' lack of mutual understanding makes possible the beginning of confusion and uncertainty as in everyday life, by opening a space for free and creative uses of language. That is why multiple functions of dramatic language can be identified by scrutinising monologues and dialogues, among which the semantic and artistic ones are prominent in this approach. One of the fundamental features of dramaturgy is the writing of a text in view of its staging in front of an audience. However, in both verbal and written expressions, a precise communication requires precise language. The semantic difficulty in the comprehension of dialogues is that the speakers and listeners cannot simultaneously perceive all the levels of reality implied and they cannot be certain which reality the respective notion belongs to in the formulation of a certain idea. Decoding the meaning of a communication sequence is a process of relating a thing to its name, within a conceptual frame of thought. For instance, tragedy brings a tone of hopelessness and futility. The play *The Chairs*, subtitled *A Tragic Farce*, ties together elements of poetic meditation and realistic triviality:

OLD WOMAN: Come on then, tell your story . . . It's also mine;
what is yours is mine! Then at last we arrived . . .

OLD MAN: Then at last we arrived . . . my sweetheart . . .

OLD WOMAN: Then at last we arrived . . . my darling . . .

OLD MAN: Then at last we arrived at a big fence. We were
soaked through, frozen to the bone, for hours, for days, for
nights, for weeks (Ionesco, 1958, p. 115).

The comedy is simple in so much as the message is transmitted through the attitudes of the characters, through their language and the situations, producing hilarity of how these characters find themselves in strange situations, close to a farce.

The theater of the absurd, illustrated by *The Chairs*, appears as a revolution in the field of world dramaturgy. This type of dramatic creation produces a structure for itself in terms of the importance of scenic elements. Here, the dialogues between the characters are no longer in the foreground of attention, but they give way to nonverbal, and metalinguistic representations. In these literary texts, communication, as a fundamental way of using language, is met in the characters' plane. The constructions of characters with symbolic names, through the nuances of laconic dialogues, more often than not configure comic-tragic situations. "Thus, for Esslin, the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd are defined by an aesthetic matching a philosophy" (Bennet, 2011, p. 30).

The tonality of conversations is in harmony with lines and attitudes from lightheartedness to cynicism, in some instances emphasised by repetitions. To begin with, it is

worth noting that most dialogues take place with only two participants. The dialogues are represented in various forms and become a model of textual generation, sliding towards the depth structure of the works. The dramatic speech (of small size, both in relation to the number of lines and the number of sentences or phrases) is carried out by: question - answer, and this formula diversifies into two positions: question - acceptance, question - line disagreement, thus approaching the dialogue from the common language understanding. The easiest to determine are the question-answer pairs in a sequence, where it is clear how they are initiated and replied to. Any answer reflects the way the question has been understood. An answer not accepted by the one who requested certain information may be an indication of a deficient formulation.

The characters are sometimes engaged in a passionate dialogue, a struggle full of adventures, each one escaping into a fantasy of their own. In this sense it is possible for the reader to comprehend the stylistic nuances, while taking into account the circumstances in which the communication takes place, as well as the psychological moment. The writer achieves a gradation of tension, intended to emphasise the comic by putting the features of the characters into more stark relief. In any conversation, the so-called pauses or silence appear, signaling difficulties in understanding the message or only disagreement with the interlocutor's opinions. Such situations are well represented in Ionesco's plays. The note of absurdity is emphasised by Mr. Smith's indifference to what his wife said. The points of suspension highlight the crisis of communication, with a certain degree of tension caused by automatic type of language, which is devoid of sense. The degree of intensity of the characters' emotional states is indicated by exclamatory and interrogative statements. These can suggest: alarm, despair, horror or instead, a contemplative state in front of a real situation.

Here is a representative sequence in this sense:

MR. SMITH: Hm. [Silence.]
MRS. SMITH: Hm, hm. [Silence.]
MRS. MARTIN: Hm, hm, hm. [Silence.]
MR. MARTIN: Hm, hm, hm, hm. [Silence.]
MRS. MARTIN: Oh, but definitely. [Silence.]
MR. MARTIN: We all have colds. [Silence.]
MR. SMITH: Nevertheless, it's not chilly. [Silence.]
MRS. SMITH: There's no draft. [Silence.]
MR. MARTIN: Oh no, fortunately. [Silence.]
MR. SMITH: Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. [Silence.] (Ionesco, 1958, p. 21).

In this passage, the stage direction Silence along with the interjection "Hm" seem to function as ways of releasing thoughts in expressions that are more emotional rather than cognitive. The role of silence indicated as a stage direction points out a fragmentation of the thinking flow, but there is still no deviation from the topic, on the contrary, more details about "being cold" are added with each line. As shown in the quote below, common place truths are reiterated, which strengthens the impression of words without content or desemantised. The series of words: "cold", "chilly" and "draft" create a conceptual frame around the idea of coldness with several connotative variants: dispassion, detachment, indifference and such, even insensitivity and hearlessness. The repeated interjection "Oh, dear" relates to meanings of this sort, as an expression of commiseration but contradicts the previous adverbial "fortunately", as a positive view of the situation.

In copying the platitudinous dialogues between Mr. and Mrs. Smith and their friends the Martins, Ionesco claims, he was suddenly struck by the strangeness of surprising truths (for example, there are seven days in a week, the ceiling is above us and the floor is below) and decided to communicate these eternal verities to others (Lane, 1994, p. 27).

Within the linguistics of the text, Coșeriu defined *meaning* as an expression of “attitudes, the speaker’s opinions or intentions that come to be added to the contents of particular languages” (Coșeriu, 2013, p. 169). The objective character of meanings refers to what is considered a textual signifier, *expression* and *form* in the Humboldtian sense. The meaning or the textual content however, has a constitutive dynamic nature: it is not ready-made, pre-existing to interpretation. The surprise of what is meant by, but beyond what is actually said, is precisely the content of expressive competence. Along with the evocative functions, there are other two particularly important factors in the construction of meaning like *the framework* and *the discourse scope*.

The frame represents the totality of the circumstances of the speech, without which the discursive act would be much poorer. There are a number of frames which can be grouped into four types: situation, region, context and discourse scope, of particular interest for this research. In Ionesco’s plays the focus is on a disorganisation of communication, more than on message transmission, as an implicit level of intersubjective communication, devoid of natural continuity. His plays represent expressions for new meanings, the dramatic creation acting as a binder of experiences. The anti-climax effect like circular ending, false tracks in regarding the denouement, the text leading to false climaxes, irony and so forth, they all make up indications of multiple fractured textual realities. Meaning is not something fixed, immutable offered by the author and accurately received by the reader, so that the importance of language creativity is emphasised around the emergence of a new linguistic construct.

The word as a sign or symbol does not faithfully and naturally reflect the thing described. The absolutisation of a word often prevents consideration of the various contradictory features of a given thing, as Jacques Lacan pointed out. It is not we who speak the language, but rather, language speaks through us (Lacan, 1966, p. 138). Even though several persons use the same language, each of them may assign a different meaning to the words, so that the idea that human beings are doomed to loneliness is emphasised strongly. The author puts clichés into their mouths and thus, the alienation of the characters in a state where they are not adapted to express absurdity which is confirmed as the inability to communicate with other people. Although the heroes of the play are English petty bourgeoisie and the author certainly mocks the conformist, by the meaningless concepts and slogans they express, Ionesco exposes without a doubt the weakened human condition. In *The Lesson*, the writer metaphorically shows how language can be a weapon of crime. There are endless other examples that could be given in which words are devoid of any semantic substance. In Ionesco’s later work, the language is no longer as absurd as in *The Lesson*. In *The Chairs*, the apparent dialogue consists of numerous monologues. An old couple is waiting for the Speaker to give the message to the master of the house, conducts at its best a discussion resembling a dialogue of the deaf, as if the words they speak would fill the tragic void in which they feel stuck. The characters constantly say something in their subjective attitude to language and they cannot get the message across since the meaning is not transferred to their actions. In Ionesco’s renowned play *The Bald Singer*, there are numerous examples of clichés which, when repeated many times, become “revealed truths” in so much as they stimulate thought without moralising.

Multiplication of absurdities necessarily leads to hilarity, but when they are pronounced seriously, this is getting unusual. Ionesco draws attention to verbal insufficiency

due to semantic erasure of words, but also warns against spreading of all kinds of ideologies, that by language manipulation. This view exposes false perceptions of reality and its false expression through language as it is the case in the following example:

MRS. MARTIN: But of course, that must have been I, sir. How curious it is, how curious it is, and what a coincidence!

MR. MARTIN: How curious it is, how bizarre, what a coincidence! And well, well, it was perhaps at that moment that we came to know each other, madam?

MRS. MARTIN: How curious it is and what a coincidence! It is indeed possible, my dear sir! However, I do not believe that I recall it. [Silence.] (Ionesco, 1958, p. 17).

The repetition “How curious it is, and what a coincidence!” functions as an initiation but also as an echoed confirmation when it is responded in the same way.

[...] a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters (Esslin, 1980, p. 58).

Regarding the reception of the dramatic discourse, the relationship between the literal, denotative level and the symbolic or metaphorising aspect require some contemplation as well. This can be attributed to the respective communication in order to determine what tendencies it manifests through semantic reactivations, while a new coherence emerges from disparate elements, in a new, original formula where language plays a key role. Ionesco advocated the idea of the distortion between the signifier-signified relationship by undermining language structures through the inadequacy of phrases to the speech context. Another frequent technique the dramatist used was to push language clichés to the extreme, in order to highlight the strangeness of life, everyday occurrences, or feelings like alienation and loneliness.

The play *The Lesson*, with the subtitle *A comic drama* presents an interesting type of dialogue from the linguistic perspective in the way common knowledge is discussed, like the names of the seasons, but at the same time it has a philosophical substance in what is not expressed. The stumbling or stutter and “uh” type of conversation fillers show uncertainty even if the truth is obvious. As nonsensical as it may sound, the phrase: “we can’t be sure of anything” in correlation with the one above: “one must be ready for anything”, when contemplated philosophically, it holds a profound meaning regarding the essence of human existence.

PROFESSOR: Excuse me, miss, I was just going to say so, but as you will learn, one must be ready for anything.

PUPIL: I guess so, Professor.

PROFESSOR: We can’t be sure of anything, young lady, in this world.

PUPIL: The snow falls in the winter. Winter is one of the four seasons. The other three are . . . uh . . . spr . . .

PROFESSOR: Yes?

PUPIL: . . . ing, and then summer . . . and . . . uh . . .

PROFESSOR: It begins like “automobile,” miss (Ionesco, 1958, p. 48).

The multi-layered nature of symbols emphasises the relations between concepts and utterances, since words have different levels of abstraction. It reflects back on the function of

language not only as the basic tool of communication but also as an artistic expression. For instance, the paradox is created by the juxtaposition of states of fact that bring in discussion hypostases of opposite meaning, which oppose or mutually exclude each other, relying on surprises, on the verge of some solutions that contain a considerable dose of humor, to apparent conflicts. The quarrel between couples is a common case in Ionesco's plays, putting under question the coherent functioning of the world. Ionesco's intention to undermine conventional expressions is visible in his entire dramatic work. From this point of view, the play *The Bald Singer* is a kind of *ars poetica*. It includes all major themes and the artistic beliefs of the author. The play's subtitle foreshadows the unconventional spirit, the rejection of all principles of traditional and ideological theater and opens up many avenues of interpretation. Through the conceptual merge between the linguistics of the text and cognitive semantics, an attempt seems to have been made to reshape the notion of absurdity. Ionesco's dramatic aesthetics ranges from comic to tragic or even mixing both genres like complementary components of reality. The art of dialogue excels in Ionesco's plays, with meaning being articulated on irony and parody or such techniques as verbal tics, obsessive repetitions, clichés or stereotypes, also verbosity, prolixity, and anacolutus. All these give the impression of discontinuity and fragmentation in the presentation of ideas, defying the expected logic of communication.

Ionesco's anti-plays cultivate absurd humor to the fullest. It often takes the form of a contrast between the elements of a situation. Ionesco defines the absurd as being a state of amazement when facing existential problems, and this may be correlated with the feeling of ontological emptiness. In this sense, as surprising as it may be, the absurd is perceived as a real experience. By overcoming the drama of person's absurd condition through humor, it allows a detachment from a futile and tragic existence. No wonder the climax of the play as the total disarticulation of language coincides with the loss of all reason in the characters. This is expected to happen, since by separation from his language, an individual loses his human dimension.

Conclusions

In summary, language in the dramatic text unfolds in multiple directions, with initiatives and responses on a wide range of registers. Some terms of comic nature and aesthetic resonance and phrases around the topic of communication, gather in games or absurd whims. In these circumstances, the complexity of the language incites to reflection and contemplation. The challenging experience of reading Eugene Ionesco's work justifies the broader goal to continue the research by expanding the corpus of theatre of the absurd and also by enriching the thematic references starting from the theoretical assumptions on dramatic texts of this type.

The transformation of meanings into designations implies exercising the cognitive function of language and then their orientation towards an extralinguistic space in a determined speech situation. The relationship between language and speech is formed by binding together the external and internal world of the speaker and thus, a fundamental dimension of meaning is concretised through signification and designation, in the playwright's desire to reach a high degree of freedom of expression, towards the abstract and imaginary. In approaching the theatre of the absurd, an analysis of the ways of transgressing logical thinking in writing drama has been carried out from the semantic perspective.

The existence of a superordinate semantic order that unifies the fragmentary experience of the segments of respective texts in a discontinuous dramatic system has been demonstrated, but it is susceptible of the underlying process. The progression of connotative meaning based on reasoning contradicts traditional logic. Allusion, double meaning, paradox,

tautology, irony, sarcasm as well as the cultivation of oppositions in paradigmatic lexical items and in their syntagmatic concurrence are detectable language strategies often used in Ionesco's plays. All these ways of analysing meaning rather seem to disorganise the discourse, reducing its dynamics to stereotyped expositions. Consequently, each of the symbols in the plays carries content that anticipates their future course. Ionesco's plays are, from this angle, surrealist collages, while putting textual realities in tension with illusions of meaning, in a wide range of alternatives. The entire dramatic work of Eugène Ionesco is based on the presence of a large number of memories, fragments of dreams, lived emotions or personal experiences. The originality of his style is noticeable in the method of combining and selecting them into new forms with enriched nuances and valences. This process requires the elimination of the conventional communication style by appealing to all forms of figurative language, by removing the discursive logic and concentrating the inner reality into abstractions and images, through the removal of drama writing canons.

The linguistic study of dramatic texts and stage plays has demonstrated the relationship between denotative meanings and symbolic representations at all levels of interpersonal communication between the plays' characters. Cognitive semantics has emphasised the domains of the concepts related to the plays' themes on an ontological basis with the essential vectors of expression in Ionesco's art, stemming from the need for authenticity.

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