

# Wittgenstein's Notion of Language Games in Harold Pinter's 'the Birthday Party'

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Language games are related to specific circumstances. According to this theory, an utterance is made under certain circumstances and follows a particular purpose. This study intends to approach Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* through Wittgenstein's theory of language games in order to probe into the language of this drama. Since *The Birthday Party* belongs to the theatre of the absurd, the language serves a particular purpose. The framework that Wittgenstein developed fundamentally ruined the traditional picture of the language and transformed the way theorists analysed the language in the twentieth century. Through application of his theory, this research will uncover how language can be thought of as a social practice.

**Key words:** *Theatre of the Absurd, Language Games, The Birthday Party, Harold Pinter, Language Game.*

## Introduction

*The Birthday Party* (1957) is regarded as the second full-length play by Harold Pinter and was published in London for the very first time. This play is also one of his most recurrently performed dramatic pieces. *The Birthday Party* is set in an old coastal boarding house in which a birthday party is turned into a dreadful incident as the result of two ominous guests' unwelcome entrance.

This play belongs to the theatre of absurd because of its concentration on the concepts of chaos and turmoil. This disorder is particularly observed through the obscurities of the play's main characters. As an example, when Stanley talks about his past to Meg in Act I, there is the sense that he himself is muddled about its details, and Meg persuades herself to believe things about her life that are undoubtedly not true. When Goldberg and McCann arrive, the audience can see that the straightforwardness of the boarding-house is likely to be conceded, and the chaos at the end of Act II approves of it.

Martin Esslin was regarded as a theatre critic. His reputation is mainly due to the fact that he coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd” in order to refer to works which were produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This movement involved some of the best dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and of course, Harold Pinter. The word "absurd" was initially employed by Albert Camus in his 1942 essay “Myth of Sisyphus”. In this study, he described the human circumstance as “meaningless and absurd.”

As soon as the First World War ended, like any Englishmen and women, Pinter also felt disheartened. He was excessively irritated with the world, and found it hard to talk about his feelings. Actually, the traditional methods of storytelling were of no use since the modern man's condition was extremely multifaceted and split, and the old practices of language proved unfitting to express these feelings. Thus, the writers of the Absurdist Theatre like Pinter decided to surprise their audiences with such features as dreamlike images, unusual settings, or disjointed language. Language within the Absurdist Theatre often surpassed its usual meaning. As in *The Birthday Party* which is this article's subject of analysis, everything is different from what is shown and no one utters the truth. The other element in plays like *The Birthday Party* is silence which is of great importance.

In order to discuss a more profound meaning, the absurdist dramatists attempted to use imagery, subtext, mythology, and allegory. In his 1962 speech “Writing for the Theatre,” Pinter said, “I suggest there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false.” The slight line between truth and lies is possibly the distinguishing feature of the Theatre of the Absurd. This study intends to analyse *The Birthday Party* through Wittgenstein's theory of language games in order to see how the language applied by an absurd dramatist like Pinter can reveal the meaning and themes which he wanted to disclose through the language of different characters.

### **Background of the Study**

*The Birthday Party* is actually a representative of the power relations between different characters; in this play, language plays an important role because it is evaluated as a measurement of saying who is lower and who is higher. In other words, in *The Birthday Party*, all the characters are depicted in continuous oral fight for endurance and dominion. The theory of language games is going to prove that language is regarded as a game and those who can play better are more successful and powerful.

### **Methodology**

The present article will probe into Pinter's *The Birthday Party* through Wittgenstein's theory of language games. Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was an Austrian theorist whose works embrace different fields such as logic, the philosophy of mathematics,

the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language. Language is in fact regarded as a means of communication. As mentioned already, the first person who came up with the theory of language games is Ludwig Wittgenstein, the author of *Philosophical Surveys*, who is thought to have "no predecessor in philosophy" (Wright, 1955, p. 35). Wittgenstein supposed that the chief nature of language is in relation to competition. He said: "to speak is to fight". The subordinate nature of the language is assumed by some theorists to be a multi-game which contains many language games with diverse instructions. Wittgenstein believed that every word we speak is all part of a language game. Regarding the importance of language in postmodern era, Ludwig Wittgenstein once declared: "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (Wittgenstein, 1986, p. 65).

Language was produced by human beings in order to interconnect in society. Before postmodernism, thinkers and investigators concentrated on the inner arrangements of language and measured it as an important feature. It is postmodernists who think of language as the system of philosophy. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein wrote: "The world is my world" (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 110). That kind of "my world" is tested through language. Without language, no one can claim what is mine and what is not mine. The philosopher advises us: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 112).

A language game is thus related to the simple instances of language use. According to Wittgenstein, a word or even a sentence has meaning only as a result of the "rule" of the "game" being played. He also believed that any word or sentence depends on the context. He believed that, for example, in one language-game, a word might be the symbol of an object, but in another the same word may represent orders or questions. Moreover, Wittgenstein tried not to restrict the theory of language games only to words and also applied it to sentence-meaning. For Wittgenstein, language is regarded as an activity and a way of life and this is what makes language meaningful.

### **Review of the Related Literature**

In his work, *Wittgenstein's Theory of Language Games and the Freshman Composition Class*, Kobler (1976) has declared that Wittgenstein's theory of language games can be a suitable method for the analysis of the correspondence between the composition procedure and the playing of a game. Furthermore, teachers can stimulate students to write by turning the composition class to a language game. In *Wittgenstein's Concept of Language Game: The Case of A Manipuri Play*, Singh has investigated Moirangthem Inao's (Manipuri) drama through the theory of Wittgenstein's language games. Singh has noted that Wittgensteinian theory is like a game. He believes that every character in a drama is involved by taking a position as in a game and trying to score a point at the cost of others.

As another important study which has used this theory, Timmons' *Wittgenstein's Language Games as a Theory of Learning Disabilities* (2006) attempts to discuss the issue that learning disabilities are conceivably not as completely advanced as they may be. Wittgenstein's idea of the language game is explicated, and its significance in the analysis of learning disabilities as a social phenomenon is clarified. There are also a number of other studies which have applied this approach as the subject of their analysis; however, there remains a gap, regarding the use of this theory in the analysis of literary works. As a result, the current study is going to fill this gap.

## **Discussion**

### **Language Games in *the Birthday Party***

The present article is going to analyse the language games in Pinter's play. Language plays an important role in this play because of the accuracy that Pinter has used in creating his recurring silences. Each character manipulates words in order to signify profounder implications. In fact, the audience will observe language in order to know more about the characters. When Stanley affronts Meg, he is in fact articulating his self-dislike.

Wittgenstein believed that the words lack any essential facet. He also noted that all the differences and similarities one can notice are not indispensable and don't originate from the exterior reality, but are developed through usage in society. According to this approach, it is in the discourse that social resolutions are linked to each other, because the discourse change is associated with both the change in societal pacts and the change in human insight. Wittgenstein stressed that the meaning of a word was highly connected to the relationship between the word and the reality of the object in the world, one-to-one association between the word and the object. With the idea of language-game, the meaning of a word was introduced in an infinitely different way: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 25). Language is thus interlaced into the activity and without knowing how people in a society complete the activities or without knowing the language-game of that community, it is impossible to understand the meaning of the words they employ.

He maintained that the meaning of a word is indigenous to the language-game at play; for example, the meaning of the word, "slab" was different for children who played the game of "I call it, you point it" in comparison with those who played the game called "I call it, you fetch it." Since different societies obey different language-games, the meaning of a word for members of the communities can be different. Also, as the language-game is not stable and changes over time, a word's meaning alters over time. There is no right use of a word for all language games. The same word, therefore, can be used inversely with a different meaning in different language-games.

It is alleged that Wittgenstein's theory can also be employed in the analysis of literature. In other words, literature is like games because of lots of similarities. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein said that language is as multifaceted as a living creature. Therefore, in order to understand the significance and spirit of language one must make it articulate. A dominant subject of Wittgenstein's theory is related to the perception of meaning because Wittgenstein proclaimed that using the same word does not mean to have the same implication.

*The Birthday Party* (1958) has got different characters whose language reflects his/her ideology and the current state of the world. Pinter very well knew how to form his characters in an absurd and realistic way that the audience was left in bewilderment and muddle. Stanley as one of the main characters used to be a qualified piano player who was one way or another fooled when he thought he had a job at a concert hall. Now he lives in Meg's and Petey's boarding house, where he is the only tenant until Goldberg and McCann arrive. Stanley seems to be connected to those two men. They appear to be from the same area near London. Stanley is a character who is difficult to understand. On the other hand, he is a very insensitive character in the way he behaves towards Meg and Petey as well as Lulu who are really nice to him.

As two other important characters, Goldberg and McCann are unreliable. What makes them even more doubtful is that they have a car with which they take Stanley away. Goldberg appears to be Jewish and he is called by different names during the play. He used to be married and had a girlfriend at the same time. What we know about McCann is that he is an Irishman. Goldberg is in charge. Besides, he has a good notion of people. McCann seems to be more withdrawn and reclusive. These three characters signify the black side of the play while Meg, Petey and Lulu embody the simple and guiltless side.

Petey seems to be the most blameless character in this play. He seems not to truly love his wife, because Meg is rather hard to deal with and pays more attention to Stanley than her husband. These two characters are not very important for the progress of the plot, and this is shown through the characteristic of Petey who does not like to be in the centre. He sometimes ignores his wife but with an intricate character like Meg, it is an operative policy to be quiet. Setting also has a pivotal role in this play of Pinter. *The Birthday Party* is set in the living-dining room of a coastal boarding house in England. Its obscurity adds to the sense of symbolic elucidations of the play. The only room in this play is secluded from the external world. There are also windows that let characters see into the room. The play suggests that the world outside that room is intimidating. Mystery and fear are recurrently produced, and there is a frightening sense of the remoteness of people.

Goldberg has a great ability in language manipulation because he uses language so as to bounce others' questions or to recall the past events. His words are seldom missed. Meg, on

the other hand, repeats herself, asking the same questions over and over again in a bid for attention. Even though she often speaks without affectation, her words mask a deep neurosis and insecurity. These are just a few examples of instances in which language is used not to tell the story, but to suggest that the story is hidden. In essence, language in *The Birthday Party* is a dangerous lie. This suspicion is typical of any absurd drama. *The Birthday Party* has highlighted the perils of communication. In this play, the characters use the language not to communicate but to deceive others:

GOLDBERG: When did you come to this place?

STANLEY: Last year.

GOLDBERG: Where did you come from?

STANLEY: Somewhere else.

GOLDBERG: Why did you come here?

STANLEY: My feet hurt!

GOLDBERG: Why did you stay?

STANLEY: I had a headache!

GOLDBERG: Did you take anything for it?

STANLEY: Yes,

GOLDBERG: What?

STANLEY: Fruit salts!

GOLDBERG: Enos or Andrews? (Pinter, 1960, p. 58).

Pinter has been always obsessed with the way how language and words are often used intentionally to deter communication and hide the truth. Thus, language can be considered as a tool to elude the reality. As a Jewish boy in London, Pinter underwent different experiences including anxiety, segregation and uncertainty which form his main themes, influencing his characters' language, too. In the melancholy years after the war, many writers started writing about its horrifying results on people's outlook. The advent of the Theatre of the Absurd was one of the significant effects which thrived in the literary world and its most central distinguishing was its infrequent use of language (Esslin, 1968, p. 51).

The Theatre of the Absurd attempted to show life as worthless and inadequate. The language of this theatre was also informal, short of continuity and full of confusions. Pinter was one of the well-known dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd whose style was exceedingly individual. Pinter probed into such themes as indefinite jeopardy, oral agony, tussle for authority, family abhorrence, and mental ailment that were constantly used in his plays (Gale, 1977, p. 36). The hollow, unimportant, irrelevant conversation of Meg and Petey in the opening parts of the first and the third act of the play shows the bleakness of their life and barrenness of their world:

MEG: [...] What time did you go out this morning, Petey?

PETEY: Same time as usual.

MEG: Was it dark?

PETEY: No, it was light.

MEG: (beginning to darn). But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.

PETEY: That's in the winter.

MEG: Oh, in winter.

PETEY: Yes, it gets light later in winter (Pinter, 1960, pp. 20-21).

This conversation can be regarded as a metaphor which exquisitely represents the ridiculousness and existentialism of human life. The absurdist plays do not represent a meaning. They attempt to depict human life as it really is and not as it should be. So, an absurd play like *The Birthday Party* can have different analyses.

As another example, the writer intends to refer to the dialogue between Petey and Meg which is more like avoidance than communiqué; for instance, Pinter uses replication as a way to generate laughter and also to decrease the rigidity and amuse the audience. In the first Act, Meg constantly asks a question to create laughter:

MEG: Is that you,

PETEY: Pause

PETEY: Is that you? Pause Petey?

PETEY: what?

MEG: Is that you?

PETEY: Yes, it's me (Pinter, 1960, p. 24).

As well as the emptiness and absurdity which has been represented through the statements of the characters, one can notice the ferocity and pressure that is present throughout the whole play. The relationship between Meg and Stanley is strange and leads him into treating her very unkindly. The viciousness of his behaviour is ricocheted when Goldberg addresses him with a number of bad words which suggest that Stanley's unidentified debauchery encompasses his abusive behaviour towards women. Violence is also very well noticed in the play. In this play, most characters have the ability to be fierce, exclusively when triggered.

### **Dark Humour in *the Birthday Party***

Dark humour is a modern occurrence in literature. It is a mixture of tragedy and comedy in the same context. In this situation, the more we laugh, the deeper is the feeling of agony and sorrow. It can be regarded as a feature of the Absurd Theatre. The plays which belong to this genre mostly manifest social problems and characters which make the audience laugh; however, they also unveil some kind of pain. Pinter is one of this genre's playwrights whose plays replicate the internal struggles of his characters, their ethical crisis, the influence of situations on their personality and also their purposelessness and powerlessness to improve

their lives. In general, Absurd dramatists are obsessed with articulating a sense of emptiness and the ridiculousness of life.

If we want to compare Pinter with such dramatists as Becket or Albee, Pinter's style is more realistic and social issues are more detectible in his plays. His early plays belong to the "Comedy of Menace". These plays begin with an unplanned method with every day events and the circumstances are humble and real. They show a room which represents refuge. His characters like the protagonist of *The Birthday Party* are normally isolated people demanding to interconnect with civilisation but they are disallowed. Then they attempt to find a convenient place like a boarding house for themselves which will offer them safety. Pinter delivers his thoughts successfully through the use of verbal violence and pauses, silences, repetitions and incongruous explanations. He expresses his ideas very obviously and then denies it, leading to hesitation.

Pinter's characters are either reluctant to interconnect or use language as a means to hide the truth. *The Birthday Party* starts with Petey sitting at breakfast table, reading the newspaper and Meg as asking pointless questions. They talk about their tenant, Stanley Webber. Meg considers him as an immature man although he is in his late thirties. Through the dialogue, we come to know that he was a pianist who once performed a concert at Lower Edmonton and was booked for another but when he got there he found the gates closed. And now he is in this boarding house and avoids going out. The play opens in a realistic and usual way and the dialogue is like the everyday conversation. Why this play is an absurd one is due to the fact that it is chiefly about the theme of death; although the play is called *The Birthday Party*, it is about the death day of Stanley.

### **Conclusion**

The current article was an investigation of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* through the theory of language games. It was mentioned that Pinter was regarded as one of the renowned Absurd Theatre playwrights, who was mostly obsessed with such themes as menace, unease, struggles, and ferocity between people in his works (Esslin, 1968, p. 65). Many thinkers believed that Pinter had invented a drama of "human relations at the level of language itself" (Kennedy, 1975, p. 91). The language of Pinter's plays exemplified the intrinsic terror of people, not as an intellection, but as something real, commonplace and usual as an everyday incidence (Esslin, 1968, p. 66). Pinter's characters frequently made use of unmannerly language and their communications were full of power struggles. In order to probe into this issue, Wittgenstein's theory proved to be a fitting theory according to which, any word or sentence in this play could be the symbol of an ideology. In fact, Wittgenstein thought of words and sentences as pictures of the world. He later remarked that language is a series of games that are played, each with its own procedures.



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