Teaching absurd literature – a pragmatic approach to Ionesco’s transgressive dramatic discourse: the conversational maxims

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Abstract

This paper aims to present a rhetorical-pragmatic approach to Eugène Ionesco’s plays in order to be used when teaching a theatre of the absurd course at university level. Students often feel confused when studying absurd literature as they find it hard to understand the authors’ message thoroughly. We discovered that if we approached the absurd dramatic discourse from a transgressive point of view with regard to Grice’s conversational maxims, the literature course proved to be more productive and entertaining at the same time.

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1. Introduction

When teaching a theatre of the absurd course at university level, one may come across some issues caused by the fact that students find it hard to understand the authors’ message thoroughly. The theatre can bet on entertaining its readers. Ionesco won this bet. The most interesting fact is that the dramatist managed to get his message through in spite of a broken communication, and his plays, based on a routed dialogue, touched his readers but aroused strong and often contradictory reactions. To help students feel less confused when studying Ionesco’s plays, this paper gives one possible solution: approaching Ionesco’s discourse from a pragmatic point of view with a stress on the transgressions to Grice’s conversational maxims [1].

The linguistic and rhetorical-pragmatic studies in the field of verbal communication give a better understanding of its complexity. This progressive complexity is translated by two models: the model of the code and the inferential model. With the so called model of the code, introduced in linguistics by R. Jakobson [2], the production and comprehension of utterances are considered suggestive for a fundamentally and exclusively

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linguistic competence. This corresponds to the rules governing the production and comprehension of utterances and should be shared by all the members of a linguistic community. Pragmatists have rapidly denounced the notion of competence as being too restrictive, and they have expanded its field of study for it to become “a complex system of skills where linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge are inextricably linked.” [3] Therefore, the inferential model develops the notion of competence and gives more complexity to the comprehension of the message, which they find difficult to reduce to a simple process of decoding. In the mechanism of verbal interactions, all participants make use of codifications and adaptations at the same time. Thus, the linguistic meaning “under-determines the intended meaning of the speaker” [4] in the way that it is only an incomplete indication of the respective meaning. To do that in verbal communication, the implicit is a constant and “all discourse is built up on the basis of the silent assumptions” [5] triggered by the encyclopaedic competence. In order to explain how this mechanism of inference works, Kerbrat-Orecchioni gives a description based on five competences: the linguistic competence, the encyclopedic competence (or cultural and ideological), the logical competence and the rhetorical-pragmatic one which refers to the laws of speech, the conversational maxims, and to the interactional and dialogical realities. Our paper focuses on the rhetorical-pragmatic competence which consists of “all the knowledge that a speaker has on the functioning of the discursive ‘principles’, which (...) have to be noticed by those who want to honestly play the game of verbal interaction, and which we call, respectively, conversational ‘maxims’ or ‘principles’ (Grice), ‘laws of discourse’ (Ducrot) or ‘conversational postulates’ (Gordon and Lakoff).” [6]

On several occasions, researchers have mentioned the idea that the literary text was a crossroad where and through which two individuals met and imagined themselves as actors in a discursive process. In literary studies, this implied that the relationship between the two of them is seen as a contract or a pact of reading and it refers, more generally, to what in pragmatics and semiotics is called, following H. P. Grice, ‘cooperation’ (The Cooperative principle). The cooperation is performed on the basis of the discursive laws, or conversational maxims, which have to be met for the communication to take place. In one of his most appreciated articles, the English philosopher H. P. Grice [7] introduces the idea that all speakers engaged in conversational exchanges comply with a general principle of cooperation, following some basic rules of quantity, quality, relation and modality. This principle assumes that participants in a verbal exchange expect that each of them contributes to an ordinary conversation in a rational and cooperative way, in order to facilitate the interpretation of the message. When applied to literary communication, the cooperative principle retranslates in the following way: the author should say enough about the world he/she creates, to make it work, but not too much. The speaker will talk a propos and build a relationship of relevance between the information given and the information requested by the interlocutor. Therefore, the author must postulate a certain type of reader who will be able to decode the clues (indices) which guide the decoding of the meaning but also to fill in the blanks of the text on its own responsibility. Finally, the author must remain legible for the reader. The reader, meanwhile, is entitled to expect all the above mentioned from the author of the text. He/she knows, a priori, that he/she must respect the author’s indications but he/she also knows that he/she is not given everything and that the completeness of the fictional world is for him/her to find through research. The reader presumes, always a priori, that the author’s message is available in a language that is not hermetic. Grice’s conversational maxims do not represent only some rules that the interlocutors need to follow, but also their expectations in the process of communication. They are rather principles of interpretation than rules of conduct. Grice did not assume that all people should constantly follow his maxims. Instead, he found it interesting when these were not respected, namely either ‘flouted’ - the listener being expected to be able to understand the message - or ‘violated’ - the listener being expected to not note this. In conversation, every rule may find its counter-rule.

2. Analysis of Ionesco’s plays

There have been many studies on the topic of language crisis – “la crise du langage” – when talking about the theatre of the absurd. Generally speaking, in theatre, the speech is a communication tool between the characters, and it conveys the information addressed by the author to the reader/the audience through the double
enunciation. As in everyday life, speech is both content and action. On the one hand, it represents content since every discourse refers to a referent and complies with certain rules of discourse; on the other hand it represents action because it has to persuade, defend or accuse, give orders or expose feelings, etc. This double function of language is constantly questioned by the authors of the absurd as they realise that the speech is no longer able to convey real communication between people. Valéry’s ‘holy language’, which represented the basis of the classical drama, is now reduced to a kind of verbiage, devoid of any meaning. The characters, instead of speaking to convey information, now speak for saying nothing. There is neither dialogue, nor verbal exchange, only a logorrhea which reduces each character to a cruel isolation. When analysing a literary text, these conversational principles become meaningful as soon as they are violated, and contemporary literature has often done that. The conversational maxims formulated by Grice rule the function of the speech and express a set of behavioural standards that the interlocutors have to keep in mind while formulating their interventions in the process of communication. Most of these maxims are only mentioned in order to be obviously violated, often with a comic effect. “The theatre exhibits the thousand and one ways to violate the laws of conversation”, writes A. Ubersfeld [8]. With Ionesco, the transgressions of the maxims of conversation are able to trigger laughter, to ridicule and offend the readers/viewers’ logic.

2.1. Quantity: informativity / exhaustivity

The maxim of quantity refers to the informative character of the conversational interventions and forbids insignificant contributions. The theatre does not comply with this rule which can only guide the viewer through indiscreet characters and by holding his/her interest in the news; the information flows either too much or too little. The low of informativity postulates that we do not usually state something that our interlocutor already knows or takes for granted; instead, we say something to bring new information. Transgressions to this law lead to truisms, tautologies and redundancies. On the contrary, the law of exhaustivity requires that the speaker provides the maximum of relevant information on the subjects of which he/she speaks. A transgression to this law would be that of withholding the information likely to produce contextual implications. When studying this kind of transgressions in Ionesco’s plays we should take into account the double destination – a common feature of the dramatic discourse. On one hand, there is the receiver-character and on the other, there is the receiver-viewer/reader who does not get enough information or the information he/she receives is too elliptical to be easily interpreted. In the theatre of the absurd, the dialogue often tries to offer the viewer/reader an enigma and thus violating the maxim of quantity, which leads to a constant frustration of the viewer/reader.

Characters talk, in The Bald Soprano [9], but the contents of their statements are disarmingly banal and their logic is quite puzzling. Everything is a pretext to words and all subjects are good. The dramatic situations are often reduced to the conversational exchanges but what goes around does not inform the viewer/reader about the plot or place him/her in the action of the play. All they do is talking on and on about obvious and uninteresting things like what to do or what to see – that is the mobile of the conversation, that is the only way to make it last forever. In the First Scene, when Mrs. Smith describes daily actions, she seems to drain the resources of culinary vocabulary and comparative and superlative phrases. Her lines are superfluous, unnecessary and void of content. She describes things she has already done with such a precision and an attention to detail which generate laughter. Her words are emptied of any relevant information. Mr. Smith, her interlocutor, doesn’t seem to be interested in engaging the verbal exchanges as he already knows everything about his wife’s daily routine – therefore, there is no dialogue. The viewer/reader does not receive any relevant information that could provide the necessary pieces to build up the plot: “Mrs. Smith: There, it’s nine o’clock. We’ve drunk the soup, and eaten the fish and chips, and the English salad. The children have drunk English water. We’ve eaten well this evening. That’s because we live in the suburbs of London and because our name is Smith. / Mr. Smith [continues to read, clicks his tongue.] / Mrs. Smith: Potatoes are very good fried in fat; the salad oil was not rancid. The oil from the grocer at the corner is better quality than the oil from the grocer across the street. (...)” And the dialogue, or, better to say, the monologue, goes on in this manner. In this anti-play, the care for speaking seems to be very strong in each character, but, in fact, there is no real communication. The dramatic dialogue unfolds on ordinary topics and
the ordinary conversation is enriched with the attributes of the dramatic dialogue. What we hear is the impossibility to speak and the incapacity to do so. If we feel the need to talk, if the eager to speak is frequent, as in the VIIth Scene, where the Smiths encourage and invite the Fireman to tell stories, one may wonder how to place the exchange between the characters. They seem to fear the silence, but do they actually listen to each other? And is everyone taking the floor? We can easily observe that it is sometimes difficult to know who they are talking to, or whether they are talking to anyone at all. They often give the impression of soliloquizing, as we have seen in the Ith Scene. The words reveal the ambiguity of the communication and we talk here about communication in the absence of communication. In fact, it seems that the characters fake listening to each others as they are only interested in their own words. There are numerous examples of violations to the maxim of quantity in many of Ionesco’s plays and students really enjoyed looking for them and pointing out their meaning throughout the course.

2.2. Quality / sincerity

This low can be stated almost like a moral rule: your contribution should be truthful. The characters, in The Bald Soprano, seem to be afraid of telling lies and they are quite worried of not being believed, no matter the banality of their stories: “Mrs. Martin: Well, today, when I went shopping to buy some vegetables, which are getting to be dearer and dearer... (...)Well, I’m sure you’ll say that I’m making it up--he was down on one knee and he was bent over. (...) He was tying his shoe lace which had come undone.” / “Mr. Smith: If someone else had told me this, I’d not believe it.” They exculpate themselves as if they were literally honouring the maxim of quantity – do not assert something you cannot prove. The interlocutors, always cooperative, rush to certify the other’s stories: “It happened away from here.” At the beginning of The Lesson, the Professor accepts the Pupil’s responses as being relevant, although he knows that she does not understand and that she is never going to pass her “total doctorate”. He accepts her wrong answers only to successfully bring her to the outcome of the lesson: the murder. At the end of the play, the Maid accuses the Professor who is trying to exculpate himself: “Professor : It isn’t my fault! She wouldn’t learn anything! She was disobedient. She was a bad pupil! She didn’t want to learn! / Maid : Liar !...” [10]. In The Chairs, when the old couple welcome their quests, they begin to speak on the topic of their children: the Old Woman claims having children while the Old Man invalidates this information: “Old Woman: (to the Photographer) We’ve had one son… still alive, of course... he went away... it’s the usual story… a little strange, maybe … he abandoned his parents… he had a golden heart.... It happened a long time ago... My husband and I tried to keep the strength… he was seven, the age of reason, we yelled at him: « My son, my child, my son, my child... », he didn’t turn his head... / Old Man : Alas, no... no... We had no child... I would have liked to have a son... Semiramis tried, too ... we have done everything... (...)” [10]The contradiction between the discourse of the Old Man and the Old Woman illustrates both the senility of the characters and the uncertainty of the reality. It also demonstrates, from the part of the author, the rejection of all realism or logic. The viewer/reader is thus confused as he/she does not know what the truth is anymore.

2.3. Relation / relevance

When someone starts talking, he/she should take into account what has already been said, what he/she or the others have said, otherwise we risk repeating or being incoherent. It is this shared memory of the conversation which forms the context of all interventions. If we consider this kind of context, it means we are relevant in a conversation. In The Bald Soprano, the task of the progressive or relational constitution of the text is no longer accomplished in the last scene. Although each enounce, taken separately, is normally interlinked – at least from a grammatical point of view, if not semantically) and intelligible, the whole is meaningless. The interventions are completely incoherent, the lines follow one another but they do not link to one another, despite the “Yes” of congruency which opens the second line: “Mr. Martin : One does not polish spectacles with black wax. / Mrs. Smith : Yes, but with money one can buy anything. / Mr. Martin : I’d rather kill a rabbit than sing in the garden.” (1958:39) There is obviously no question of progression since the words do not seem to go anywhere, the topics
once initiated will never be resumed. There is no conversational cooperation. The same incoherence may be found in almost all the plays of the absurd theatre. The characters are usually unable to establish relations between their lines. They often accumulate as if they weren’t able to organise their thoughts. In the rare case where their words have a meaning, we notice a frail construction. Thus, in the First Scene of *The Bald Soprano*, Mrs. Smith collects details about the evening meals without using a transition. The sentences in her first line, which are independent, follow without real logical connections. The constancy of the topic is insufficient to create cohesion relations between different pieces of information. From one sentence to another, the progression proves to be questionable.

### 2.4. Modality/ambiguity

The maxim of modality postulates that participants in the verbal exchange should be clear and avoid any ambiguity. By transgressing this law, one makes use of multiple types of obscure expressions: complex or elliptical phrases, unintelligible vocabulary, etc. The verbal incoherencies in the associations of words are constantly used in the end of *The Bald Soprano* with paradigmatic errors that lead to nonsense. Mr. Martin: “Bread is a staff, whereas bread is also a staff, and an oak springs from another oak every morning at dawn.” [9] In *The Lesson*, the Professor cannot make himself understood by the Pupil. He strives to explain as clearly as possible but his words end up being too ambiguous for the Pupil: “Professor: I can’t have made myself understood properly. It’s doubtless my own fault. I haven’t been clear enough.” [9] “Professor: Come now. Think a little. It’s not easy, I admit. And yet you’re clever enough to make the intellectual effort required and succeed understanding. Well then? / Pupil: I don’t seem to, Sir. I really don’t know, Sir.” [9] After having given only incorrect answers, the Pupil who does not understand anything, gets exhausted and eventually gives up. She repeats her lines in resignation: “Yes, sir.”, “I have a toothache.”.

### 3. Conclusion

The present paper addresses the problem of approaching Ionesco’s plays from the angle of observing the numerous transgressions to the conversational maxims postulated by Grice. Violating these laws is a common feature of the dramatic dialogue and dramatists use them voluntary in order to be grasped by the viewers/readers and produce an effect on them, be it comic or tragic. Therefore, it is the task of the actors to give meaning to the dramatic dialogue, by emphasizing or erasing the incongruities. The readers will also be delighted to read Ionesco’s absurds play, for example, as far as they agree to expand their inventory of reading habits. Thus, they will be able to value the systematic transgressions to the conversational maxims and the hilarious thematic drift of their dialogues. In everyday life, it is also hard not to violate the maxims and principles postulated by Grice. In practice, deviations from this ideal standard represent common elements, which are quite frequent and natural in the oral communication. Through this approach to Ionesco’s plays, students came to the conclusion that all these transgressions led to an *ionescien* model. The dominants of this model would be: the means of construction, the abandonment of the traditional paradigm of the dramatic writings, the fragmentation of the dramatic structure, the use of shock, emphasis and counterpoint, the recalibration of the language, the puzzling construction of the characters as empty frames and the relation to the aesthetic categories.

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