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Turn-taking Analysis of Harold Pinter's *The Room*

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Abstract:

*In the words of H. G. Widdowson, 'We may know what the language means but still not understand what is meant by its use in a particular text' (Widdowson 4). This is exactly true as far as a Pinterian text is concerned. The plays of Harold Pinter are very disturbing and enigmatic in nature. It is a tenuous task to decipher the meaning of the plays written by Pinter. Pinter's departure from the conventional style of dramatic dialogue and his experiment with a new language of drama endow him with great novelty. The current study examines and analyses the different extracts from Pinter's one-act play *The Room* by using the various variables of the turn-taking system, which the ambivalent dramatic dialogue projects. The research paper aims at describing the systematic properties involved in turn-taking in the dialogues of the play, taking into consideration both the aspects – turn-allocational component and turn-constructive component – proposed by the Conversation Analysts in order to facilitate better understanding of this absurd drama.*

Keywords: Absurd drama, turn-taking, conversation analysis, menace, ambiguity

1. Introduction: Turn-Taking in Dramatic Dialogue

Dialogue is an integral part of drama, and dialogue consists of turns and interactions between participants. It is through the dramatic dialogue that the different characters in a play are portrayed and shaped. The management of turn-patterns in a text is an important aspect of the dramatic art. Turn-taking analysis and the framework of conversation analysis can be useful in the study of this literary genre, since they help in a better interpretation of different aspects of drama. The concept of the turn is pivotal to the dynamics of dramatic interaction in a text. When a speaker in a play speaks, he or she takes turn, and as the turns alternate, the dramatic dialogue among the interactants takes shape in a text. In order to have a dialogue in a play, there must be an exchange of turns, at least between two participants. This turn sequence is called adjacency pair. The turns in dramatic dialogue has to be well-managed and distributed among different characters in a play. An ill-managed turn-taking pattern would only create a chaotic situation in the play and would obstruct the plot development. Turn-taking patterns are a useful tool to understand the complex dramatic situation and character in dramas. This study of turn-taking pattern as an analytical tool was developed by the literary-linguist, Vimala Herman. In the essay "Turn management in drama" Herman explores the insights that Conversation Analysis, developed by the ethno methodologists, might provide to the study of dramatic dialogue in a play. Herman considers turn-taking patterns to be a useful framework for textual analysis of a play. The current study attempts to analyse the play, *The Room* by the British dramatist Harold Pinter, by adopting Herman's analytic tool and theatrical model from the perspective of Conversation Analysis.

2. About the Play: *The Room*

The Room (1957) is Harold Pinter's first play. This one-act play is about a reclusive sixty year old lady, Rose Hudd, whose personal space is invaded by a series of visitors climaxing in a mysterious blind black man named Riley, who begs her to return home. In this play, beneath the mundane and ordinary situations of day-to-day life at the surface level, lurks hidden violence, menace and threat. The dramatic dialogue and setting is typically Pinterian, as there is an unusual combination of comic and absurd situations and an atmosphere of mystery and menace in the play.

The play *The Room* begins with a very long turn by Rose. Rose's turn is highly repetitious and interspersed with lengthy pauses. She tries to engage in a conversation with her husband, Bert, but her questions are not answered. Hence, her lengthy turn is in the form of a monologue. There is a constant reference to her room and the basement in her talk. Rose constantly compares her secure world inside the room to the cold and hostile world outside. A stylistic analysis of the linguistic texture of Rose's opening turn in the play *The Room* enables us to understand its symbolic implications. The opening line sets the tone for this play:

ROSE: It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder.

(Pinter, *The Room* 91)

The use of the negative word 'murder' in Rose's turn creates an aura of mystery and menace.

3. Lengthy Turns

In the long opening monologue, Rose mostly refers to the cold weather outside, and constantly compares her warm, cosy room to the dark and damp basement and to the cold weather outside:

ROSE: ... Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway.

...

I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cosy.

...

I wouldn't like to live in that basement. Did you ever see the walls? They were running. This is all right for me ... No, this room's all right for me.

...

It's good you were up here, I can tell you. It's good you weren't down there, in the basement ... I don't know who lives down there now. Whoever it is, they're taking a big chance. May be they're foreigners.

...

This is a good room ... Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off ... I wonder who has got it now. I've never seen them, or heard of them. But I think someone's down there.

(Pinter, *The Room* 91-95)

A conversation analysis of this long turn of Rose reveals varied hidden meanings about her character and the dramatic situation. Rose's monologue is interspersed with pauses and she keeps repeating the same thing over and over again. There is a mention of her cosy room and the dark basement over ten times in her long monologue. Her repetitious monologue projects her preoccupations as well as her irrational and restless behavior. There is a sense of uneasiness in the manner in which she talks and acts. Mark Taylor-Batty opines that by constantly reaffirming her contentment with the room in her long uninterrupted opening monologue, Rose is already an ingrained fear of eviction (Taylor-Batty 13). Rose dominates the conversational floor by engaging in her repetitious and gibberish talk. There is a stark contrast between Rose's loquacity and Bert's silence. The 'one-speaker-speaks-at-a-time' requirement in the turn-taking model privileges the lone speaker and its turn, which assumes centrality, and becomes the focus of others' attention (Culpeper, Short & Verdonk 23). Being the lone speaker, Rose captures the attention of the readers through her very first lengthy turn in the play.

4. Turn-Lapses

Consistent turn-lapses on the part of a targeted other who is addressed by a speaker can signal indifference, boredom, hostility, the desire to be left in peace, opting out, etc. and import negative tones into the interaction, even in silence (Culpeper, Short & Verdonk 25). There is a consistent turn-lapse on the part of Rose's husband, Bert, which signals indifference and hostility:

ROSE: ... Just now I looked out of the window. It was enough for me. There wasn't a soul about. Can you hear the wind?

She sits in the rocking-chair.

I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cosy.

Pause.

... I wouldn't like to live in that basement. Did you ever see the walls? They were running. This is all right for me.

...

You looked out today? It's got ice on the roads ... This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this. I look after you, don't I, Bert?

(Pinter, *The Room* 91-95)

The silence of the husband creates a frightening and awful atmosphere in the play. Martin Esslin mentions that Bert never speaks to Rose although he is pampered and fed with overwhelming motherliness (Esslin 235). Bert's turn-lapse reveals the fact that he has nothing to say or is unwilling to reply to her gibberish. Whereas, Rose's bouts of verbosity project her desperate desire to communicate, in which she fails miserably. Rose asks her husband a number of questions, yet answers them all herself. Her mind is as restless as her actions on the stage. She tries to engage in dialogue with her husband, but even fails in it. Bert does not respond to her queries and prefers remaining silent instead. Thus the opening turn of Rose shows Bert's reticence, whereas Rose's interest in jostling for communication.

The unequal distribution of turns in the opening monologue of *The Room* also throws light on the relationship between Rose and Bert. They seem to live in two different worlds. Bert has lapsed into silence; Rose is herself isolated within the emotional world of her own creation that conforms to her needs. The above mentioned speech of Rose vividly projects a discord in the relationship between the husband and the wife. Bert's refusal to respond to the series of questions by Rose reveals his disinterestedness in the marital relationship. It is evident that Bert no longer desires Rose's presence in his life.

5. Turn-Grabs

Turn-lapse on the part of a targeted speaker may either lead to a gap or a turn-grab by another speaker. Rose's turn-grabs in the one-act play during her conversation with Mr. Kidd, the landlord, reveals interesting facts about her character:

MR. KIDD: Hallo, Mr. Hudd, how are you, all right? I've been looking at the pipes.

ROSE: Are they all right?

...

MR. KIDD: You going out today, Mr. Hudd? I went out. I came straight in again. Only to the corner, of course.

ROSE: Not many people about today, Mr. Kidd.

...

MR. KIDD: ... You're going out then, Mr. Hudd? I was just looking at your van. She's a very nice little van, that. I notice you wrap her up well for the cold. I don't blame you. Yes, I was hearing you go off, when was it, the other morning, yes. Very smooth. I can tell a good gear-change.

ROSE: I thought your bedroom was at the back, Mr. Kidd.

...

MR. KIDD: Mr. Hudd? Oh, Mr. Hudd can drive all right. I've seen him bowl down the road all right. Oh yes.

ROSE: Well, Mr. Kidd, I must say this is a very nice room. It's a very comfortable room.

...

MR. KIDD: ... (*Rising*) You'll be going out soon then, Mr. Hudd? Well, be careful how you go. Those roads'll be no joke. Still, you know how to manipulate your van all right, don't you? Where you going? Far? Be long?

ROSE: He won't be long.

...

MR. KIDD: Well then, I'll pop off. Have a good run, Mr. Hudd. Mind how you go. It'll be dark soon too. But not for a good while yet. Arivederci.

He exits.

(Pinter, *The Room* 95-100)

Rose's turn-grabs or self-selections in the above dialogue reveal her anxiety and an ingrained and undefined fear of eviction. She quickly responds to the questions asked by Mr. Kidd to her husband. Such turn-grabs on her part also shows her restless behaviour and her eagerness to access the conversational floor. On the other hand, Bert fails to provide the appropriate second part of the adjacency pair in the above turn-sequence, by not responding to Mr. Kidd's greetings and other queries

6. Topic-Shifts

Rose's conversation with Mr. Kidd, the landlord is filled with quick topic-shifts, another important aspect of discourse analysis. She changes the topic or subject in a very disorderly way:

ROSE: Why don't you sit down, Mr. Kidd?

MR. KIDD: No, no, that's all right.

ROSE: Well, it's a shame you have to go out in this weather, Mr. Kidd. Don't you have a help?

MR. KIDD: Eh?

...

ROSE: I thought your bedroom was at the back, Mr. Kidd.

MR. KIDD: My bedroom?

...

ROSE: I don't get up early in this weather. I can take my time. I take my time.

Pause.

MR. KIDD: This was my bedroom.

...

ROSE: I was telling Bert I was telling you how he could drive.

MR. KIDD: Mr. Hudd? Oh, Mr. Hudd can drive all right ...

ROSE: Well, Mr. Kidd, I must say this is a very nice room. It's a very comfortable room.

...

ROSE: How many floors you got in this house?

MR. KIDD: Floors. (*He laughs*)...

...

ROSE: What about your sister, Mr. Kidd?

MR. KIDD: What about her?

ROSE: Did she have any babies?

...

ROSE: When did she die then, your sister?

...

ROSE: What did she die of?

MR. KIDD: Who?

ROSE: Your sister.

Pause.

(Pinter, *The Room* 96-99)

Rose's frequent topic-shifts in the above conversation with Mr. Kidd show her fear and anxiety. Her absurd queries in the form of a series of non-sequiturs point to the lurking menace in the play and adds to the mysterious atmosphere that envelops it. Her deliberate access to the conversational floor projects her restless and unbalanced state of mind as well as generates tension in the play. The disorderly conversational behaviour of Rose is clearly indicated in her constant initiation and immediate withdrawal of conversational topics.

7. Adjacency Pairs

The intrusion of the Sands couple in the secure world of Rose further heightened her fears. A turn-taking analysis of the irrational dialogue in the adjacency pairs of this Sands couple also highlights interesting facts about their relationship:

ROSE: Come over by the fire, Mr. Sands.

MR. SANDS: No, it's all right. I'll just stretch my legs.

MRS. SANDS: Why? You haven't been sitting down?

MR. SANDS: Why should I?

MRS. SANDS: You must be cold.

MR. SANDS: I'm not.

MRS. SANDS: You must be. Bring over a chair and sit down.

MR. SANDS: I'm quite all right, Clarissa.

...

MRS. SANDS: You're sitting down!

MR. SANDS: (*jumping up*). Who is?

MRS. SANDS: You were.

MR. SANDS: Don't be silly. I perched.

MRS. SANDS: I saw you sit down.

MR. SANDS: You did not see me sit down because I did not sit bloody well down. I perched!

MRS. SANDS: Do you think I can't perceive when someone's sitting down?

MR. SANDS: Perceive! That's all you do. Perceive.

MRS. SANDS: You could do with a bit more of that instead of all that tripe you get up to.

MR. SANDS: You don't mind some of that tripe!

MRS. SANDS: You take after your uncle, that's who you take after!

MR. SANDS: And who do you take after?

MRS. SANDS: (*rising*). I didn't bring you into the world.

MR. SANDS: You didn't what?

MRS. SANDS: I said, I didn't bring you into the world.

MR. SANDS: Well, who did then? That's what I want to know. Who did? Who did bring me into the world?

She sits, muttering. He stands, muttering.

(Pinter, *The Room* 102-106)

A close examination of the adjacency pairs between Mr. Sands and Mrs. Sands shows a sense of discomfort and tension in their marital relationship as well as a feeling of existential angst and universal suffering.

8. Ambiguous Turn Exchanges

The series of questions asked by Mr. Sands to Rose regarding the landlord of the house, points to a sense of ambiguity, uncertainty and disbelief in the play *The Room*:

MR. SANDS: He lives here, does he?

ROSE: Of course he lives here.

MR. SANDS: And you say he's the landlord, is he?

ROSE: Of course he is.

MR. SANDS: Well, say I wanted to get hold of him, where would I find him?

ROSE: Well – I'm not sure.

MR. SANDS: He lives here, does he?

ROSE: Yes, but I don't know –

MR. SANDS: You don't know exactly where he hangs out?

ROSE: No, not exactly.

MR. SANDS: But he does live here, doesn't he?

Pause.

(Pinter, *The Room* 104-105)

A linguistic analysis of the structure of Mr. Sands' turns highlights his use of a series of question tags after his statements. These questions show his anxiety and also create a sense of mystery regarding the actual identity of the landlord.

In the play *The Room*, the basement as well as its occupant creates a menacing and mysterious atmosphere. The reference to the basement by the Sands couple in their conversation with Rose unsettles her completely:

MRS. SANDS: Yes, I felt a bit of damp when we were in the basement just now.

ROSE: You were in the basement?
 MRS. SANDS: Yes, we went down there when we came in.
 ROSE: Why?
 MRS. SANDS: We were looking for the landlord.
 ROSE: What was it like down there?
 MR. SANDS: Couldn't see a thing.
 ROSE: Why not?
 MR. SANDS: There wasn't any light.
 ROSE: But what was – you said it was damp?
 ...
 ROSE: I was just wondering whether anyone was living down there now.
 MRS. SANDS: Yes. A man.
 ROSE: A man?
 MRS. SANDS: Yes.
 ROSE: One man?
 (Pinter, *The Room* 105-106)

The above turn-exchanges between Rose and the Sands couple clearly show Rose's anxiety and her fear of the basement. Her continual absorption in the person who stayed in the basement may be a symbolic indication of her fear of the past. A close analysis of her turns clearly shows that there must be something sinister about the basement. The series of questions asked by Rose to the Sands couple exposes her deep willingness to know about the occupant.

9. Quick Short Turns

Rose's quick short turns during her interaction with the blind black man, Riley, towards the end of the one-act play *The Room*, provides useful clues with regard to her behaviour and portray her character in a new light:

RILEY: I have a message for you.
 ROSE: You've got what? ...
Pause.
 What message? Who have you got a message from? Who?
 RILEY: Your father wants you to come home.
 ROSE: Home?
 RILEY: Yes.
 ROSE: Home? Go now. Come on. It's late. It's late.
 RILEY: To come home.
 ROSE: Stop it. I can't take it. What do you want? What do you want?
 RILEY: Come home, Sal.
Pause.
 ROSE: What did you call me?
 RILEY: Come home, Sal.
 ROSE: Don't call me that.
 RILEY: Come, now.
 ROSE: Don't call me that.
 RILEY: So now you're here.
 ROSE: Not Sal.
 RILEY: Now I touch you.
 ROSE: Don't touch me.
 RILEY: Sal.
 ROSE: I can't.
 RILEY: I want you to come home.
 ROSE: No.
 RILEY: With me.
 ROSE: I can't.
 RILEY: I waited to see you.
 ROSE: Yes.
 RILEY: Now I see you.
 ROSE: Yes.
 RILEY: Sal.
 ROSE: Not that.
 RILEY: So, now.
Pause.
 So, now.

ROSE: I've been here.

RILEY: Yes.

ROSE: Long.

RILEY: Yes.

ROSE: The day is a hump. I never go out.

RILEY: No.

ROSE: I've been here.

RILEY: Come home now, Sal.

She touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands. Enter

BERT.

(Pinter, *The Room* 114-115)

The final entry of Riley, the blind black man in Rose's room, unsettles the warm and cosy world of Rose. There is an intense use of repetition in the turns of both Rose and Riley. The use of repetition, short turns and quick turn-exchanges between the two characters clearly exhibits an earlier yet unknown bond between them in the past. This also indicates an eagerness and restlessness on their part in order to communicate with each other. A further close examination of their turn-exchanges exposes the fact that Rose and Riley are not strangers, but on the other hand, they are well-acquainted with each other. Thus, it can be interpreted that the above turn-exchanges between Rose and Riley is a progression or a journey from Rose's negation of any relationship with Riley to her surrender before this hitherto enigmatic stranger.

10. Long Elliptical Turn

In the final moments of the play *The Room*, Rose's husband, Bert, returns to discover his wife alone with the blind black man, Riley. At this point of the play, Bert finally breaks his long silence by reacting firmly:

BERT: I got back all right.

...

I got back all right.

...

I had a good bowl down there.

Pause.

I drove her down, hard. They got it very icy out.

...

But I drove her.

Pause.

I sped her.

Pause.

I caned her along. She was good. Then I got back. I could see the road all right.

There were no cars. One there was. He wouldn't move. I bumped him. I got my road. I had all my way. There again and back. They shoved out of it. I kept on the straight. There was no mixing it.

Not with her. She was good. She went with me. She doesn't mix it with me. I use my hand. Like that. I got hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back.

Pause.

I got back all right.

(Pinter, *The Room* 115-116)

This significant turn of Bert is his first and only turn in the play *The Room*. He describes his ferocious and violent handling of his van through this sexually suggestive long and elliptical turn. A linguistic analysis of this turn texture reveals his use of sexual terms while describing his control of the van. It also suggests the suppressed rage of Bert since the beginning of the play. The climax of the play is the brutal murder of the blind black man by the apparently silent husband of Rose. Bert is finally successful in articulating his dominance over his lady as well as the household. Pinter's absurd play *The Room* ends with Rose's turn:

ROSE: Can't see. I can't see. I can't see.

(Pinter, *The Room* 116)

The entry of the blind black man not only shatters the balance of the peaceful and secure world of Rose inside the room, but also brings about her mental deterioration as well as her final disintegration. Her loss of identity and eventual collapse in the play is externally manifested by her loss of sight. It can also be interpreted that Rose's blindness towards the end of the play is a symbolic manifestation of her relationship with the blind man in the past.

11. Conclusion

Turn-taking analyses of the various extracts from Pinter's *The Room* have enabled us to understand the absurd dramatic situations and the intentions of the enigmatic characters in a better light. The judicious use of the different variables of turn-allocational component and turn-constructive component has given cues for better interpretation of this menacing play. Rose's inner fear of eviction, her sense of insecurity and her final disintegration in the one-act play *The Room*, are revealed through the close examination of Pinter's dramatic dialogue by using different turn-taking techniques.

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