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Conversational Dissonance in David Mamet's *American Buffalo*[1]

The reader of David Mamet's play *American Buffalo* may be baffled at the unusually powerful use of language characterized, as it is, by a strict rhythm, broken sentences, sputterings and collapses into silences. Mamet's play was first staged in Chicago in 1975 and it won the New York Drama Critics' Award in 1976. Although it was not unanimously praised mainly on account of its language, the essence of the play's dramatic effect lies in the way Mamet handles the dialogue. The latter is a particularly important structural element due to the lack of traditional sequential plot which would allow the characters to act out their fate. The contrast and tension between what is said and what it meant by the characters creates conversational dissonance in their verbal world, which, as I will argue in this paper, ultimately mirrors their inner world. The plot of *American Buffalo* can be summerized very briefly: three crooks — the owner of a junkshop, Don and his friends, Teach and Bob — plan to rip off a coin collection, but they fail to do it due to incompetence and lack of cooperation. Their inability top act appropriately, disregarding the fact that their actual act is a crime, is closely related to their inability to communicate effectively.

Thus my focus of interest in this paper is limited to the linguistic manifestations of the characters' beliefs and thoughts as represented in a short stretch of dialogue from Mamet's play. My intention is to demonstrate how two characters can be described relying entirely on the inferences it is possible to make based on a conversation between them.

Following Malcolm Coulthard, who argues that "drama texts, being scripts for the performing of pseudo-conversations, can be successfully approached with techniques originally developed to analyze real conversation" (Coulthard 182), first I will apply certain rules of naturally occurring conversation to study some features of the dialogue in the selected extract. Then I will discuss what insight is achieved when the Gricean maxims of Co-operative Principle are used to examine the same stretch of dialogue.

As I intend to focus on two aspects, namely the significance of pauses and the working of question-answer pairs, it will be useful to cite the relevant findings of conversational analysts with regard to the extract of Mamet's play chosen for the study. A group of sociologists (Harvey Slacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson), known as ethnomethodologists, have observed that conversation is characterized by a turn-taking system (that is, **A** talks, stops, then **B** starts, talks and stops) and it is governed by a set of rules with ordered options. A slightly simplified version of these rules is listed here as summed up by Stephen C. Levinson:
(C=current; N=next; TRP=transition relevance place, where turn change may take place)

1. I wish to thank Professor Zoltán Abádi-Nagy and Dr. Alec Gordon for their suggestions and useful comments.

(a) If C selects N in current turn, then C must stop speaking, and N must speak next, transition occurring at the first TRP after N-selection.
(b) If C does not select N, then any (other) party may self-select, first speaker gaining rights to the next turn.
(c) If C has not selected N, and no other party self-selects under option (b), then C may (but need not) continue (that is claim rights to a further turn-constructional unit). (Levinson 298)

However, turn-taking does not happen smoothly because absences of speech and delays occur. Silences are not tolerated well in Western cultures so they signal some kind of problem between speakers. Thus different meanings can be mapped on to them depending on their place of occurrence in actual conversation. The turn-taking system assigns different values to pauses within conversation and it discriminates between *gaps* (delays in the application of Rules 1(b) or 1(c), *lapses* (non-application of the rules) and the next speaker's *silence* (after application of Rule 1(a)).

The chosen extract from Mamet's play presents a 'pivotal' moment between the two main characters, Teach and Don, so it may bring out on to the surface some aspects of their relationship.

Here is the dialogue extract that will be analyzed. For easy reference, each utterance is numbered.

(1) Teach: So what is this thing with the kid?[2]
Pause.
(2) I mean, is it anything, uh...
(4) Teach: Yeah.
Pause.
(5) It's what...?
(6) Don: You know, it's just some guy we spotted.
(7) Teach: Yeah. Some *guy*.
(8) Don: Yeah.
(9) Teach: (Some guy...)
(10) Don: Yeah.
Pause.
(11) What time is it?
(12) Teach: Noon.
(13) Don: (Noon.) (Fuck.)
(14) Teach: What?
Pause.
(15) Don: You parked outside?
(16) Teach: Yeah.
(17) Don: Are you okay on the meter?
(18) Teach: Yeah. The broad came by already.
Pause.
(19) Don: Good.
Pause.
(20) Teach: Oh, yeah, she came by.
(21) Don: Good.
(22) Teach: You want to tell me what this thing is?
(23) Don (Pause): The thing?
(24) Teach: Yeah.
Pause.

2. All quotations from the play are to this edition: David Mamet, *American Buffalo*, New York: Grove Widenfield, 1976.

(25) What is it?
(26) Don: Nothing.
(27) Teach: No? What is it jewelry?
(28) Don: No. It's nothing.
(29) Teach: Oh.
(30) Don: You know?
(31) Teach: Yeah.
Pause.
(32) Yeah. No. I don't know.
Pause.
(33) Who am I, a policeman... I'm making conversation, huh?
(34) Don: Yeah.
(35) Teach: Huh?
Pause.
(36) 'Cause you know I'm just asking for talk. (Mamet 26)

Fist let us consider the absences of speech.

Teach's first utterance is addressed to Don, but it is followed by a silence attributable to Don since he refuses to answer.

(1) Teach: So what is this thing with the kid?
Pause
(2) I mean, is it anything, uh...

There are two more slightly different examples for silences attributable to Don: utterances (14) and (22) are questions posed to Don, who is willing to give some sort of an answer only after a momentary hesitation. Here he cleverly transforms the uncomfortable silences into less rude gaps, which are merely delayed responses.

(14) Teach: What?
Pause.
(15) Don: You parked outside?

The frequent occurrence of gaps after Teach's utterances clearly shows his attempt to maintain the flow of conversation by self-selecting himself. Since there is no response or comment from the other party he tries again. A typically used option occurring between utterances (4)-(5) and (24)-(25) is the following: comment - gap - question re-initiated.

(4) Teach: Yeah.
Pause.
(5) It's what...?

Don resorts to this option only once, after utterance (10):

(10) Don: Yeah.
Pause.
(11) What time is it?

Teach's final outburst (lines 31, 32, 33, 35, and 36), inserted as it is, by gaps, is both embittered and ridiculous since now he cannot control his accumulated anger but he still uses the same strategy, that is, expects responses.

The structural location of non-speeches has a double function here: firstly, it sheds light upon some aspects of the relationship between Teach and Don and, secondly, the recurrent types of pauses contribute to the dramatic and rhythmic effect of the play. As all the silences are attributable to Don, he is the one who tends to ignore Teach's questions or employs another strategy (transforms them into gaps) to avoid giving a satisfactory answer. He is unco-operative as is clearly shown in his withdrawing himself from taking an active part in the conversation. The large number of gaps in Teach's utterances also signals that no real interaction takes place between the two participants since one of them constantly has to self-select himself and make the efforts to keep the conversation going. On the other hand, the fact that Teach's longer series of utterances is broken by gaps may express a lack of coherent thought.

Judging from the significance of the pauses, not much progress is achieved in the

two-party conversation. However, an analysis of the turn-construction could show more convincingly whether the interactants have any common communicative goal to realize or not.

The ethnomethodologists isolate the fundamental units of conversation and term them adjacency pairs, such as greetings-greetings, offer-acceptance, question and answer. Their common features, as defined by Sacks and Schegloff, are the following: they are produced by different speakers, and a particular first requires a particular second, though the relevant response may be utterances apart or may not occur at all. Numerous levels of embedded sequences in the forms of insertions or side sequences are frequent between the first and the expected second; thus they effectively structure considerable stretches of conversation. The difference between the two is that insertion sequences merely hold in abeyance the answer, whereas side sequences provide clarification of some sort when the flow of speech is halted. However, both of them are orientated towards the main topic, which signals efforts made by the interactants to work to arrive at a common communicative goal.

Let us now see the turn construction in the selected extract from Mamet's play:

(1) first part of a question-answer adjacency pair
(2) *re-initiating of q (1)*
(3) reject answer
(4) confirmation
(5) *re-initiating of q (1)*
(6) vague answer
(7) - (10) repetition, confirmation
(11) - (21) diversion
(22) repetition
(24) confirmation
(25) *re-initiating of q* (1)
(26) reject answer
(27) *re-initiating of q (1)*
(28) reject answer
(29) - (32) confirmation
(33) - (36) reasoning

Two main features can be observed:

(a) It is conspicuous that question (1) is re-initiated five times (2, 5, 22, 25, 27) and the answers to them are rejections (3, 26, 28), a repetition (23) or a vague answer (6). Utterance (6) cannot be viewed as a relevant answer since no re-initiation of question (1) would then take place.

(b) 12 utterances of repetition and confirmation make up a considerable part, one third of the whole exchange. The characters seem to confirm and repeat what they both already know, so no new information is provided.

It is worth having a look at the turn construction of the sequence between utterances (11) - (21):

(11) *question A*
(12) *answer A*
(13) repetition of answer A
(14) request for clarification
(15) *question B*
(16) *answer B*
(17) *question C*
(18) *answer C*
(19) comment
(20) repetition of answer C
(21) comment

(22) re-phrasing of question (1)

The striking features of this stretch of dialogue are the following: within this relatively short stretch of dialogue three new topics are introduced and discussed very briefly; they do not relate either to each other or to the main topic; repetitions also occur (twice); a request for clarification is rudely ignored (14 and 15). It follows that this sequence cannot be regarded as either an insertion or as a side sequence because it does not sort out the preliminaries of the main topic; therefore I classify it as a diversion. In the light of this analysis the two characters' crippled worlds are characterized by a total breakdown of communication, a restricted use of language and an intention to deceive the other.

Applying selected rules of turn-taking and turn-construction has yielded some insight into the communicative strategies of the speakers, but it has failed to consider their respective motivations. Now the focus of interest is shifted on to the meanings as in the language, which can be analyzed by having a closer look at the differences between what is said and what is meant. I will draw on the Co-operative Principle as worked out by H. Paul Grice and discussed in his work entitled *Logic and Conversation* (1975). Grice's approach aims to account for meanings as they develop in conversation.

Grice defines the Co-operative Principle as follows: "make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Cole 45). He claims that people entering into conversation tacitly agree to co-operate to achieve communicative ends, thus they obey the regulative conventions of the Co-operative Principle. At least four conventions, or *maxims*, govern:

(1) *the maxim of quantity*: make your contribution as informative as is required - don't give too much or too little information;
(2) *the maxim of quality*: make your contribution one that you believe to be true;
(3) *the maxim of relation*: be relevant;
(4) *the maxim of manner*: avoid unnecessary prolixity, obscurity of expression and ambiguity, and be orderly.
(Cole 45)

However, these maxims are frequently broken because a participant "may ostentatiously violate, opt out or he may flout a maxim; that is, he may blatantly fail to fulfil it" (Cole 49). It is under the final specification that conversational implicature is generated, since the speaker does not give a direct and relevant answer, so the hearer has to work out the implicature. This is a key term coined by Grice to account for indirect context-determined meaning.

Now I will attempt to specify the characters' implicatures in the stretch of dialogue under discussion from Mamet's play. Teach's first question is entirely ignored by Don so he has to ask it again. The implicature for Teach is the Don is unwilling to talk about that topic. Don's answer in utterance (3) is a kind of paraphrase of Teach's question, that is "You don't know anything about it, that's a fact", so it is the violation of all three of the maxims of quantity, quality and relevance. Teach has to re-initiate (5) and now Don's response is the infringement of the maxim of quantity because he is not as informative as required. The use of 'some', the indefinite pronoun, and 'just' lessens the importance of his statement. The implicature for Teach is that this vague answer further arouses his suspicion about something important that Don is trying to conceal. Utterances (7) to (10) are short monosyllabic repetitions of information already known to both parties. For Don the implicature here may be that he has given just enough information so he changes the topic (11) and initiates a question on an entirely new subject. Teach gives the relevant, brief answer, and this is followed by Don repeating the same information. It is implied for Teach that Don is not particularly interested in his response because instead of clarifying what he means (14) Don introduces a new topic (15) and in so doing he again

flouts the maxims of quantity, quality and relevance. The only progression in their interaction seems to take place between utterances (15) to (18), where no infringement of maxims occurs, since Don's questions are answered in a relevant manner. However, utterances (19) and (21) are again repetitions and confirmations of knowledge already known. Teach comes up with his initial question again in utterance (22). Don's response to it is a question, whereby he again flouts all the maxims (23). Their talk continues in this manner between utterances (24) to (28): Teach re-initiates and Don refuses to answer. Utterances (29) to (31) are confirmations of the already known, whereas utterance (32) is a significant one because it shows what a confused state of mind Teach is in as he cannot work out what Don means. Utterances (33) and (36) give some reason for Teach's questions pretending that it is just a basic need for genuine talk, that is effective and meaningful communication.

The frequency of the violation of the maxims is a clear sign of an aborted relationship between the two speakers, and their attempt to mislead the other.

Relying on the foregoing interpretation of the analyses of the stretch of dialogue, the following dialogue exchange pattern typical in Mamet's play can be observed: lines (1) to (6) are the introduction of a theme, lines (7) to (10) are repetition, confirmation of the theme, lines (12) to (21) are diversion from the main theme, it is a new theme, while in lines (22) to (36) the original theme recurs in a modified way until a new theme is introduced.

Hence the schematic pattern of the dialogue is:

Introduction of topic
Diversion
Recurrence of topic
Solution

Each part contains repetitions and confirmations of the relevant topic. (This structure has some parallels with the first main part, the exposition of the classical sonata form in music, as it also has an introduction of the theme followed by transposition, which matches the 'confirmation' part here, then comes the side theme, that is the 'diversion' here and finally the closing theme, which is always the slightly modified version of the original theme.) The proportions of the parts may vary but on the whole this pattern holds whenever the characters try to converse with the desire to get some information.

Summing up, a conversational pattern of this type encapsulates an implicature which is aimed at misleading, deceiving, giving false information or no-information at all to the hearer on the one hand and, on the other, the incomplete, broken sentences in which information is transmitted mirror the speakers' inner world which seems to be devoid of thought and feelings. The rhythm of the play can be attributed to the recurrence of this pattern cyclically within it, and also to the fact that the pattern itself has its own inherent rhythm, which is maintained by the alternation of longer and shorter, frequently broken, unfinished utterances and pauses. The significance of the absences of speech lies in the fact that they are not merely 'spaces' in the text, but also in the characters' minds. They function as a kind of defensive strategy on the part of the speakers: it is better and safer not to ask or say anything to avoid getting into closer contact with each other, though this is what each character would very much like, but they are unable to do so.

It is interesting to note that both the unity of time and place (the events happen over a 24-hour period in a junkshop) and the cyclical dialogue pattern in *American Buffalo* are in contrast with the conversational dissonance occurring in the language of the characters. Thus perhaps Mamet suggests that after all harmony and consonance between them are not entirely lost.

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