

Absurdity of Dialogues in the Theater of the Absurd from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

-- A Case Study of Waiting for Godot and The Zoo Story

Luyuan Geng

School of Foreign Languages, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

Abstract

This study examines the commonalities and differences in the absurdity of dialogues in two representative the Theatre of the Absurd plays, Waiting for Godot and The Zoo Story, from a pragmatic perspective. The violations of Cooperative Principle in two plays were evaluated and categorized with quantitative and qualitative methods. The results indicate two plays preferring the Quantity and Manner maxim violation and similar absurd effects generated by maxim violation. Nevertheless, their submaxim violations differ in their violation of the submaxims and the context, and the context should be considered to explain their unique absurdities. Thus, the absurdity of relevant talks is intimately related to their pragmatic features.

Keywords

The Absurdity of Dialogues; Waiting for Godot; The Zoo Story; The Cooperative Principle.

1. Introduction

In 1962, The Theater of the Absurd written by Martin Esslin was published. By the term, Theater of the Absurd, coined by himself, Esslin discussed a category of unconventional dramas emerging in France during the 1950s. "Absurd", originally used in a musical context, means "out of harmony" or "inharmonious". When it comes to "absurd" in The Theater of the Absurd, Esslin cites Ionesco's definition: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" [1]. As the term implies, these dramas deviate from traditional drama's norms and are unconventional in plots, vocabulary, characters, and stage design in order to depict the reality of our world — sadness and human insignificance through unpredictable material in ridiculous drama. Dialogues in these dramas are nonsensical, and language as a medium of communication is losing its regular nature as a media of communication.

Previous research has focused on the ludicrous storylines, narrative techniques, and philosophical meaning of the absurd theatre. The traditional foci of literary studies include plots, aesthetic styles, character behavior and thinking. Meanwhile, the amazing aspects of bizarre play dialogues are repeatedly explored. According to Esslin [1], the vocabulary utilized in the Theater of the Absurd is satirical and destructive. These literary interpretations are subjective, ambiguous, and shallow, relying on intuition and emotion. Jiang [2], for example, utilizes emotive and abstract terms like "obscure", "disorderly", "irrelevant", and "unpredictable" to depict the dialogues in absurd plays (p. 1463). Illustrating absurdity in the Theater of the Absurd requires more objectivity and delicacy. Literary Pragmatics or Pragmastylistics blends linguistics and literature to investigate a new technique of interpreting literature. Pragmatics investigates the language used and the social norms that underpin it. "The language of the Absurd plays is rich for the Pragmatic analysis as it is abundant in deviations from formal rules of communication" [3]. The Cooperative Principle (CP) of Herbert

Paul Grice is commonly used in Literary Pragmatics. According to Grice (2012), persons in discussion endeavor to follow a set of cooperative guidelines to have a successful conversation. Characters in absurd drama are not always cooperative, resulting in bizarre conversations. Previous studies have demonstrated the feasibility of the application of the CP to studying absurd plays [4].

To explain how absurdity is realized in the Theater of the Absurd, this research investigated two representatives of absurd drama: *Waiting for Godot* written by Samuel Beckett and *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is an Irish writer and “*Waiting for Godot*” has brought him world fame. In a country road, two tramps Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) are waiting for a man named Godot who would never come. During their waiting time, Pozzo with a grip in his hand and his servant Lucky with a rope tied around his neck passed by. In this two act play, Act Two is similar to the repetition of Act One. Edward Albee (1928-2016) is an American playwright, and he wrote his first one-act duologue --- *The Zoo Story* in 1959. It's generally acknowledged that this short play is the first absurd drama in the history of American literature. This story depicts the process of a first meeting between two middle-aged men --- Jerry and Peter. Jerry loses his parents in his childhood and now lives alone but his neighbors are very strange. Peter is a middle class having an executive position in a publishing house. This play ends with the death of Jerry and the escape of panic-stricken Peter. *The Zoo Story* came out ten years later after *Waiting for Godot*, and two plays have similarly simple characters, plots and stage settings, both plays reveal the dissimilation of mankind by the “animalization” of humans [5,6]. Their differences are also heated topics among scholars. Yan [7] compares *The Zoo Story* to *Waiting for Godot* and concludes that the language of the former doesn't go to as extreme as the latter. However, scholars haven't compared the commonalities and differences in pragmatics between two plays.

By adopting the CP to analyze conversations in these two typical absurd dramas, this paper will classify the dialogues in them according to characters' flouting of different cooperative maxims to find the relation between the absurdity and the violation of the CP. In contrast with previous analyses which just focus on some extracts, this research examined the entire text. In the meantime, qualitative and quantitative analysis can provide a better explanation for the differences and similarities between the absurdity of two plays. Moreover, pragmatic analysis will enrich studies of absurd plays and compensate for the weakness of pure literary research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Grice's Cooperative Principle

In 1962, Herbert Paul Grice (1913-1988), an American linguistic philosopher, made a speech at Harvard University. In his speech, he pointed out that humans' talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks. In fact, each participant recognizes a common purpose or a mutually accepted direction. He formulated a rough general principle which participants would be expected to observe: “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” [8]. He labels this the Cooperative Principle which includes four categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Under these four categories, there are also submaxims.

The Maxim of Quantity:

- (1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
- (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The Maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- (1) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

The Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous.

- (1) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- (2) Avoid ambiguity.
- (3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- (4) Be orderly. [8]

2.2. Flouting of the Maxims

Grice [8] pointed out that in a talk exchange a participant may flout a maxim in the following situations. The speaker may lie or make deceits, refuse to cooperate with other people or he or she is unwilling to continue their conversation, and he or she may implicate something.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Qualitative Analysis

The frequency and percentage of violations of the maxims and submaxims are listed in Table 1 and Table 2. Based on Table 1, we can find that (1) the most frequent violations in the two plays are the same: the violation of the Quantity Maxim; (2) the percentage of their violations of the Manner Maxims is similar for two plays, and they prefer to violate the third submaxims in this category. The statistics also demonstrate the differences between the two plays. They claimed different priorities for the Quality Maxim and the Relation Maxim. Characters tended to violate the former one in *The Zoo Story*, while the latter one in *Waiting for Godot*. Moreover, the first submaxim in the Quantity Maxim are more frequently violated than the second one in *Waiting for Godot*, but there is no obvious preference for two submaxims in *The Zoo Story*.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Violations of the CP in *Waiting for Godot*

Violation of Maxims	Waiting for Godot		The Zoo Story	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Quantity Maxim	79	47.0%	24	52.0%
Quality Maxim	18	10.7%	12	24.0%
Relation Maxim	48	28.6%	4	8.0%
Manner Maxim	23	13.7%	7	14.0%
Total	168	100%	42	100%

3.2. Qualitative Analysis

The Violation of Quantity Maxim

The maxim of Quantity refers to the quantity of information provided by participants in a talk exchange. It requires information no more or no less than is needed. However, in Example One, When Pozzo asks Gogo and Didi who is Godot, they cannot explain clearly the identity of Godot. The “nonexistent” Godot is set as an enigma, which puzzles readers. It’s very confusing that day and day they keep waiting for a person they even don’t know. Characters’ violation of this type appears many times. There are a lot of things they cannot explain: characters say “I don’t know” 31 times in this play. Most strangely, Lucky almost kept silent all the time. The lack of information which stems from their refusal to answer and things they cannot explain increases the degree of absurdity in *Waiting for Godot*.

Example One:

POZZO: Who is he?

VLADIMIR: Oh he's a . . . he's a kind of acquaintance.

ESTRAGON: Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him.

VLADIMIR: True . . . we don't know him very well . . . but all the same . . .

ESTRAGON: Personally, I wouldn't even know him if I saw him. [9]

The Violation of Quality Maxim

The Quality maxim emphasizes the authenticity of information. In Example Two, Jerry wanted to occupy the whole bench and claimed that his ownership of this bench. His rude and overbearing attitude irritated Peter who threatened Jerry that he would call

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Violations of the Submaxims of the CP in The Zoo Story

Violation of Maxims	Violation of Submaxims	Waiting for Godot		The Zoo Story	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Quantity Maxim	First Submaxim	52	31.0%	13	26.0%
	Second Submaxim	27	16.1%	13	26.0%
Quality Maxim	First Submaxim	11	6.5%	6	12.0%
	Second Submaxim	7	4.2%	6	12.0%
Relation Maxim	Relation Maxim	48	28.6%	4	8.0%
	First Submaxim	3	1.8%	1	2.0%
	Second Submaxim	1	0.6%	0	0.0%
Manner Maxim	Third Submaxim	18	10.7%	7	14.0%
	Fourth Submaxim	1	0.6%	0	0.0%
Total		168	100%	42	100%

a policeman. Clearly, Jerry's response violated Quality Maxim in the way of irony. He certainly knew policemen' function was not chasing fairies. By saying so, he implicated his disappointment on the phenomenon that the policemen in the city failed to perform their duties, which also demonstrated the absurdity the real world in which citizens could not receive the help from government.

Example Two:

PETER: [Regaining his position] God da ...mn you. ... I warn you, I'll call a policeman.

JERRY: [Softly] You won't find a policeman around here; they're all over on the west side of the park chasing fairies down from trees or out of the bushes. That's all they do. That's their function. So scream your head off; it won't do you any good. [10]

The Violation of Relation Maxim

The category of Relation guarantees that information always surrounds the topic of conversation. In Example Three, obviously, Vladimir here flouted the Relation Maxim. When Estragon was troubled with his boots and asked for help, Vladimir didn't respond, and instead he talked about irrelevant things. After a while, he seemed to notice Estragon's painful foot and asks how his foot was. However, Vladimir said nothing when receiving Gogo's answer, and he continued his story of thieves. On one hand, Vladimir's violation suggests his coldness when he

ignored Gogo's pain. On the other hand, absurdity could be recognized when characters changed the topic which was irrelevant with their conversation. Estragon also discussed irrelevant things in their talk exchange, but his extreme expression was "I am going". When Vladimir fell on the ground and asked for help, he insisted on leaving. Being repeated 11 times by Estragon, this sentence helps to enhance a strange image of Estragon --- cold and erratic.

Example Three:

ESTRAGON: Why don't you help me?

VLADIMIR: Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. (He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again.) How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time . . . (he searches for the word) . . . appalled. (With emphasis.) AP-PALLED. ...

...

Silence.

VLADIMIR: Where was I . . . How's your foot?

ESTRAGON: Swelling visibly.

VLADIMIR: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story? [9]

The Violation of Manner Maxim

The Manner Maxim pays attention to how the information is expressed. In Example Four, Jerry violated this maxim. He spelled the word "homosexual" rather than saying it directly. He also repeated the word "queer" many times. His indirect expression showed his shame of his homosexual identity which in his time was not accepted and tolerated. He used such a prolix expression, which would definitely display his loneliness and unsociability.

Example Four:

PETER: The girls?

JERRY: No. I wonder if it's sad that I never see the little ladies more than once. I've never been able to have sex with, or, how is it put? ... make love to anybody more than once. Once; that's it ... Oh, wait; for a week and a half, when I was fifteen ... and I hang my head in shame that puberty was late ... I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l. I mean, I was queer ... [Very fast] ...queer, queer, queer ... with bells ringing, banners snapping in the wind. ... [10]

4. Discussion

Based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis, the realization of absurdity in *Waiting for Godot* can be explained. Characters' violation of the CP displayed their personalities and absurdity in this story. Estragon's ignorance for surroundings, his ambiguous words and his unexpected intention to leave all created an unconscious role. His uncooperativeness makes readers doubt the authenticity of his words and hard to predict his inconstant disposition. Vladimir seemed to be soberer than Gogo, but he was also strange due to his coldness toward Gogo and his superfluous information about the time, stories from the Bible, and his expressions about life. Pozzo often showed off himself by violating the conversational maxims. The servant Lucky only spoke once, but his long speech without observing semantic and grammatical rules contributed much to the absurdity. The Boy's showing up in the end of each act answered every question from Vladimir. However, when it came to essential questions, he had no answers. Their violation reveals their abnormal characteristics and their unharmonious relationship. As the subject of waiting, Estragon and Vladimir's uncooperativeness added to the suffering of the process of absurd waiting. Their irrelevant, massive and obscure information generates superfluous questions for readers and audiences. Their repetitive words result in a boring and dead atmosphere among them. The absurdity emerged and deepened in their talk exchange especially in their uncooperativeness with each other.

In *The Zoo Story*, characters frequently flout the CP, which shapes two characters different in appearance but similar in essence. Jerry's violation displays his terrible life: a low-class man with an unhappy childhood and broken family. As for Peter with a decent job and sufficient income, he felt lonely and upset for he was constrained by a perfect model who was a successful gentleman with a family and particularly with a son. In his conversations with Jerry, his violation reveals that he was hypocritical but also lamentable. Two pitiful characters' unsuccessful talk exchanges generated the absurdity of this play. One character tended to lie and was unwilling to give information, while the other often changed the topics arbitrarily and gave too much more information than his listener could understand and accept. They failed to achieve this explicit and obvious conversational goal: the story of the zoo. Their illogical and uncooperative conversation suggests their depressed inner world, the unsatisfying society, and their distance and isolation from each other. The sudden ending of the conversation demonstrates the failure of their talk exchange, which is also the climax of the absurdity.

The investigations above demonstrate the similarities of two plays: (1) the violation in the two plays is very common; (2) the violation of Quantity Maxim is the most in both dramas; (3) their violation of the Manner Maxim keeps in a moderate amount; (4) their conversations are vapid in content and broken in logic; (5) characters are often hypocritical and self-centered. Under such circumstances the same absurdity takes its form in the frequent violation of the CP which shows the boring and illogic talk exchange and the arrogant personalities of characters. Meanwhile, the differences between them can also be revealed: (1) when it comes to specific examples, the same violation generates different absurd effects; (2) in terms of the reasons why characters violate the CP, characters in *Waiting for Godot* tend to flout the maxims due to their unwillingness to observe this set of social rules.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of pragmatics, the absurdity of the conversations in the two plays has been revealed on the basis of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the violation of the CP. The violation of maxims and submaxims has revealed the boredom and strangeness of the dialogues both in two dramas, while the violation of the same maxim doesn't always produce the same absurd effects in two plays and they have different preferences for violation of some submaxims. The in-depth analysis in this research suggests the applicability of pragmatic methods in the observation of the Theater of the Absurd. However, this research has its limitations. The quantitative analysis doesn't include situations in which two or more maxims are violated at the same time. The reliability of corpus analysis should be evaluated. Further investigation is required to give a full explanation of the absurdity generated in *The Theatre of the Absurd* with combined analysis of language, plots, characters and even stage settings.

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