

# The Use of language in Selected Plays by Eugene Ionesco

## Abstract

This paper examines the use of language in selected plays by Ionesco. The disintegration of language is the most significant hallmark of the Theatre of Ionesco. The paper also highlights the difference between the language of traditional theatre and that of absurd theatre. Absurdist dramatists have gone too far to the degree that they have created a new language for the theatre. In his plays, Ionesco dislocates and disarticulates language in a way that makes it a clear manifestation of the absurdity of human condition. The language of the Theatre of the Absurd consists of out-worn clichés and empty dialogues. Ionesco uses many techniques in which he destroys language and fathoms its emptiness. Moreover, absurd language fails to be a means of real communication. As a result, absurd characters utter irrelevant sentences and fail to form real human relationships. They use language as a medium to kill time and to fill the void of their inner life.

**key words:** absurd, language, disintegration, manifestation, clichés.

## استخدام اللغة في مسرحيات مختارة لأوجين

### يونسكو

طالبة الماجستير: ميري نجا

جامعة البعث - كلية الآداب - قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

المشرف: د. الياس خلف

#### الملخص

يدرس هذا البحث استخدام اللغة في مسرحيات مختارة لأوجين يونسكو حيث يعتبر تفكك اللغة أهم سمة مميزة لمسرح يونسكو. كما يسلط الضوء على الفرق بين لغة المسرح التقليدي ولغة مسرح العبث. فقد عبث كتاب مسرح العبث باللغة لدرجة أنهم خلقوا لغة جديدة للمسرح. يعبث يونسكو باللغة ويفككها في مسرحياته بطريقة تجعلها تجسيدا حقيقياً لعبثية الوضع البشري. تتكون لغة مسرح العبث من كليشيهات بالية وحوارات فارغة. يستخدم يونسكو العديد من التقنيات التي يدمر من خلالها اللغة ويستكشف فراغها. وبالإضافة الى ذلك تفشل لغة مسرح العبث بأن تكون وسيلة للتواصل الحقيقي، لذلك تتفوه شخصيات مسرح العبث بعبارات غير متعلقة ببعضها وتفشل بتشكيل علاقات إنسانية حقيقية. فنجدهم يستعملون اللغة كوسيلة لقتل الوقت وملئ الفراغ النفسي بداخلهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عبثي، اللغة، تفكك، تجسيد، الكليشيهات.

## **The Use of Language in Selected Plays by Eugene Ionesco**

This paper explores the use of language in some of Eugene Ionesco's plays. One of the most significant characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd is its peculiar use of language. In traditional drama, language is celebrated as the dominant element in the play. The playwright uses language as a tool to express the characters' psychological states and their motivations which lead the action of the play and bring the plot into an end. He translates such states of mind into written words or spoken ones so that they can be understood by readers as well as spectators. Moreover, the dramatist uses clear language which demonstrates the setting of the play and his own main concerns. In order to achieve such an end, the playwright uses what is called the language of the

public. In this case, the language of the text becomes more important than what this text tries to reflect.

However, as the Theatre of the Absurd is marked with its wish to turn things upside down, it is worth noting that its madness has a great deal to do with language. Ionesco is totally involved in expressing his own experience or what is called a private sense of being. This is the main purpose of writing his plays. While trying to do so in the so-called rational systems of thought, Ionesco discovers that such a language is futile. That is to say, the feelings he is trying to express cannot be translated in discursive speeches. Moreover, the rule-governed words seem to distort the reality he is trying to reach. This reality is not that of appearances; rather, it is a metaphysical one. In other words, it is an inner reality which every viewer seeks to explore.

Consequently, the modern Man finds himself caught up in a world of chaos and mystery. What distinguishes Man from other creatures is reason and his ability to reflect upon things. However,

when trying to find answers for the main questions about the world, Man becomes aware of the fact that there are no reasons or explanations for what is happening. Sartre makes it clear that “the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence” (*Nausea* 121). Here the absurd emerges as a result of disharmony between the rational Man and his irrational world. Thus, Man’s endeavor to seek solutions or reasons seems totally absurd.

In this respect, philosophers and writers take different stances toward the absurd. To start with, existential writers such as Camus and Sartre choose to express this sense of senselessness by adhering to the conventional style of writing. They express their thought by using logical devices. Here lies the difference between existentialist writers and absurdist ones. While the existentialist writers, mainly Camus and Sartre, aim to express the “absurd experience” and strive to find solutions for it, absurdist dramatists show this absurdity without trying to search for

solutions. In his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin states, "It is the striving for an integration between the subject matter and the form in which it is expressed that separates the Theatre of the Absurd from Existential Theatre" (xx).

Thus, the main concern of this paper is to analyze the language used by Eugene Ionesco in some of his plays. Moreover, it takes into consideration the philosophical thinking during that period and its effect upon absurdist dramatists' style of writing. It is worth mentioning that language in Ionesco's theatre is not a tool for articulating themes. Instead, like the plot and characters, language becomes a concrete manifestation of absurdity. It can be considered one of the consequences of the Second World War.

While striving to communicate their sense of being, absurdist dramatists "find a key to the devaluation and disintegration of language in the Theatre of the Absurd" (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 296). Words are not enough to

express our real experience. Here arises a challenge: writers are trying to say something unsayable. Ionesco himself makes it clear that “a work of art is the expression of incommunicable reality that one tries to communicate\_ and which sometimes can be communicated. That is its paradox and its truth” (qtd. in Esslin 81).

As a result, Ionesco treats language as one element of theatre. What matters more is the fundamental experience he is trying to express. This experience extends the potentials of theatre and creates a special or new language for it. This is the pure theatre that Ionesco and other dramatists seek to rediscover. Martin Esslin refers to such a kind of theatre whose main characteristic is its “turning away from language as an instrument of the deepest levels of meaning” (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 328).

However, this turning away from language and destroying its mastery cannot be easily achieved for language has always

governed our existence. "In the beginning was the Word," says Saint John (*Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, 43.1). Thus, the Theatre of the Absurd poses a great challenge in its devaluation of language. However, when we say that language is devalued in Ionesco's theatre, this does not mean that it is meaningless or merely nonsensical. Moreover, this breakdown of language goes hand in hand with the philosophical thinking and the trends during that period of time. Gradually, language starts to lose its dominance in many ways.

I am going to take George Steiner's theory on language as a starting point. In a journal article titled "The Retreat from the Word", Steiner claims that many aspects of reality can be reached outside language. He wants to bring attention to the fact that we should not limit our perceptions to the linguistic or verbal discourse. "There are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language, but on other communicative energies



such as the icon or the musical note. And there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence” (“The Retreat from the Word” 187).

He starts his discussion by talking about the supremacy of language which can be regarded as a characteristic of the Greek period. Since then, all fields of life \_ literature, science, politics, religion\_ have been enclosed or articulated in clear verbal discourse. The whole human experience \_ “its recorded past, its present condition and future expectation” \_ is summed in language (189). However, Steiner continues his debate and starts explaining how the primacy of words starts to fall down. One of the reasons is the development in mathematics and natural sciences. It is no longer possible to articulate mathematical realities in descriptive language. Such developments have increased the gap between language and reality. Thus, “it is no paradox to assert that in cardinal respects reality now begins outside verbal language” (Steiner 193). The mathematical reality, as he explains, is related to the non-verbal language

Moreover, Steiner talks about other realities which belong to issue of anti-language such as the abstract art (non-objective art) and the atonal music. The paintings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries have been an attempt to articulate certain concepts in verbal language. The painter gives his/her painting a title which narrows the limits of the perception of such a painting. The spectator sees the painting and gives a descriptive explanation about it. The modern art reacted against the traditional concepts of the previous period. Here is a clear similarity between non-objective art and absurd drama. Ionesco refers to the fact that modern painters have been trying to return or to rediscover a fundamental truth in painting. This truth is higher than the objective one for it addresses the senses not the minds. Vincent Van Gogh, in drawing a painting, makes it clear that he paints what he feels not what he sees. In this case, he addresses the senses of the spectators and plays on their nerves. Thus, reality here stands outside words.

Similarly, Ionesco and other absurdist dramatists aim to shock spectators and arouse their feelings. This goal cannot be achieved by the use of traditional language. The play entails a “reality expressed pictorially, in a language as revealing as that of words or sounds,” and that is why “it is after having disarticulated theatrical elements, after having rejected false theatre language, that we must try, as the painters have done, to rearticulate them, purified and reduced to their essences” (Ionesco, “Discovering the Theatre” 16). The same thing is done in atonal music that it becomes impossible to articulate sounds in words. Consequently, to use Steiner’s words, “The World of the word has shrunk” (“The Retreat from the Word” 201).

As far as Eugene Ionesco is concerned, I am going to shed light on his deliberate devaluation of language in some of his major plays. Ionesco, more than any other absurdist dramatist, likes to comment on his plays and theorize ideas about his theatre. He expounds his attitude toward language:

But to attack a worn-out language, to try to make  
fun of  
it in order to show its limitations, its inadequacies; to  
try  
to burst it asunder, for all language wear out,  
coagulate,  
become empty; to try to renew it, to reinvent it, or  
simply  
to amplify it, it is the function of every “creator,” who  
by  
that very act reaches the heart of things, of a living,  
moving reality which is always different and yet  
always the  
same. (“Notes on My Theatre” 133)

Ionesco writes about the incapability of language to express  
this old and permanent truth. That is why he deliberately devalues  
and misuses words in an attempt to show us their emptiness.  
Essentially, Ionesco uses language as a tool to criticize language  
itself. Language becomes a manifestation of its own absurdity; it

shows us its emptiness. Stephen Halloran, in “Language and the Absurd”, states that language is not used for what it might say. Rather, it is used for what it might show. He adds, “language is used to satirize language, to show the hopelessness of using language to deal with serious human problems” (99). As a result, all writers make language disintegrated from reality, using their own special techniques.

Ionesco’s first play, *The Bald Soprano*, was born as a result of Ionesco’s attempt to learn English. However, learning English does not lead to writing plays, Ionesco says. Rather, the dramatist explains that the English–French Primer he used to memorize certain sentences reminded him of some fundamental truths. Ionesco, then, changes his mind and, in an article titled “The Tragedy of Language: How an English Primer Became My First Play”, declares that “my ambition had become greater: to communicate to my contemporaries the essential truths of which the French–English Primer had made me aware” (11). Thus, he

creates his characters based on the characters of the primer. He explains that “the dialogues of the Smiths, the Martins... were really theatre, theatre and dialogue being one and the same thing. I had only to put it in a play” (11).

*The Bald Soprano* starts in a familial atmosphere: Mr. Smith and Mrs. Smith are having a conversation. Then Mr. Martin and Mrs. Martin arrive to have dinner with the Smiths. They converse about trivial topics, showing the banality of their own life. The Fire Chief arrives and tells some illogical stories. The characters utter irrelevant sentences and their words lose their meanings. The end of the play is like its beginning: the Martins are in the place of the Smiths and the play starts again.

Ionesco’s main concern in all of his plays is to criticize what he calls the petty bourgeois language. Such a language is full of fossilized clichés and slogans. That is why when people speak, they do not reflect something true. This empty language fails to express the inner life of people. Thus, we have to break its

limitations and free ourselves from it in order to free ourselves from the systems of thought celebrated by such a language. Ionesco uses various techniques which all tend to confirm the absurdity of language.

*The Bald Soprano* is made up of sentence fragments attached to each other in a non-relevant way. The play starts with Mrs. Smith mouthing some axioms and frozen clichés in an exaggerated way. However, Mr. Smith is reading a newspaper and does not engage in the conversation:

Mrs. Smith: There, it's nine o'clock. We've drunk the soup, and eaten the fish and chips and the English salad. The English 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...I prefer not to tell them that their oil is bad.

Mr. Smith: [ continues to read, clicks his tongue].

(*The*

*Bald Soprano* 9)

This continues for two pages, and then Mr. Smith engages in the dialogue. It is worth mentioning that Ionesco deliberately violates the maxims of conversation. Mrs. Smith, here, violates the maxim of quantity. Too much is being said without telling us anything important or even leading the action of the play forward. However, language starts to break itself gradually. The Martins arrive and the conversation is more distorted than before. Spectators become confused and not able to grasp what is taking place on the stage. The characters speak as each one of them is



talking alone. Sentences are not related to one another. The following extract from the play accentuates the situation:

Mr. Smith: Hm. [Silence]

Mrs. Smith: Hm, hm. [Silence]

Mrs. Martin: Hm, hm, hm. [Silence]

Mr. Martin: Hm, hm, hm, hm. [Silence]

Mrs. Martin: Oh, but definitely. [Silence]

Mr. Martin: We all have colds. [Silence]

Mr. Smith: Nevertheless, it is not chilly. [Silence]

Mrs. Smith: There is no draft. [Silence.] (20)

In this respect, it is important to highlight the value of silence in Ionesco's plays. The significance of silence as a means of non-verbal communication was dramatically increasing in the twentieth century in response to the devaluation of language. Ludwig Wittgenstein ends his *Tractatus* by saying that "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (qtd. in Kane). Likewise, Ionesco gives up speaking at the end of his plays. In his striving to show us the hollowness of language, Ionesco makes us

closer to silence. Characters speak in order to break silence, yet their attempts fail.

By making silence dominate the ending of all his plays, Ionesco refers to the inability of real communication between human beings. In other words, silence is used as a symbol of estrangement and entrapment. The silent characters remain isolated and imprisoned. In *The language of Silence on the Unspoken and Unspeakable in Modern Drama*, Leslie Kane states: "In plays of inaction, when non progression in language and non–progression in time, combined with confined settings, underscore the sensation of entrapment, silent response and muteness reinforce the portrait of man as not merely estranged from his world, but entrapped in the hell of the self" (24). Moreover, as a phenomenon of the Second World War, the silence of Ionesco's drama stands for the silence of humanity toward the horrors of the war. Ionesco normalizes the death scenes at the end of his plays.

The characters, then, narrate ordinary events as unusual ones. For instance, they comment on the scene in which a man ties his shoes up as if it were something extraordinary. By contrast, the clock's indicating the wrong time and moving in the opposite direction are treated as ordinary happenings. These are the modern people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here Ionesco shows how people become accustomed to the horrible events of the war. Moreover, the contradiction between words and reality is common in absurd drama. Again, the maxim of relevance and quality are violated here. We may ask ourselves about the effect of such violations in speech acts. The answer is that such violations create a comic or a tragic effect upon the spectator. In most cases, the words of characters become laughable objects as anything funny introduced on the stage.

This point leads us to one of the prominent techniques used by Ionesco and other absurdist dramatists: language as an object. We have made it clear that language is used to show us

its emptiness. writers achieve this by making a spectacle out of language. Here, language is like the masks or the clowns of a play. It is being exposed on the stage. In an article titled "A Theatre of Language", Jean Vannier states that "The character's language will therefore find itself for the first time literally exposed upon the stage, prompted to the dignity of a theatrical object, it becomes at the same time a material for possible tragedy or mockery for the spectator" (182). That is why in the avant-garde appears "a theatre of language where man's words are held up to us as a spectacle" (182). What is more shocking is that this object destroys itself by itself and encloses us in the circle of absurdity.

Moreover, Ionesco uses the technique of misapplying the concept of probability. This technique is used by absurdist dramatists in order to make the spectator more confused. It also adds to the comic effect of the play. The doorbell rings and the couples expect that someone is coming. When Mrs. Smith opens the door, she finds that there is no one there. This happens for

many times and characters start arguing about the chances of having someone at the door when the doorbell rings:

Mrs. Smith: I'm not going to open the door again.

Mr. Smith: Yes, but there must be someone there!

Mrs. Smith: The first time there was no one. The second

time, no one. Why do you think that there is someone

there now?

Mr. Smith: Because someone has rung!

Mrs. Martin: That's no reason.

Mr. Martin: What? When one hears the doorbell ring,

that means someone is at the door ringing to have the

door opened.

Mrs. Martin: Not always. You've just seen otherwise!

Mr. Martin: In most cases. Yes.

Mrs. Smith: That is true in theory. But in reality things

happen differently. You have just seen otherwise.  
(23)

The last sentences said by Mrs. Smith are highly significant. Ionesco indicates that words are not always in accord with meaning. What is being said contradicts what is happening on the stage. That is why we should free words from their rules and go beyond them. This idea can be linked to the words of political speeches. They are true in theory but when it comes to reality, there is no concord between them and reality. People have become sick of what they were being exposed to during the times of war and even after it. They have discovered that nothing has come true in real life or changed their terrible situation.

The next time the doorbell rings, The Fire Chief appears on the stage. The couples implore him to stay with them. The characters are too bored; nothing new happens in their life. The Fire Chief agrees and starts telling them some stories. Again,

language is used here to kill time. This is true of most absurdist plays: the stories are awkward and contradictory, yet the characters seem amused and entertained by them. Time becomes a burden when life has no meaning. It does not even matter whether it is day or night; it is all the same. One of the ways invented by characters to kill time is telling stories in which words are not even related to reality. For example, The Fire Chief tells the story of a mouse which gives birth to a mountain.

However, The Fire Chief leaves and the two couples continue their conversation. Now, what is being said goes wild and characters start uttering sentences that cannot be related to each other in any way. The words are not even sentence fragments or clichés. It seems that each character is alone and mouths any sentence in order not to be silent:

Mr. Martin: Paper is for writing, the cats for the rat.

Cheese is for scratching.

Mrs. Smith: The car goes very fast, but the cook  
beats

better.

Mr. Smith: Don't be turkeys; rather kiss the  
conspirator.

Mr. Martin: Charity begins at home.

Mrs. Smith: I'm waiting for the aqueduct to come  
and

see me at my windmill.

Mr. Martin: One can prove that social progress is  
definitely better with sugar.

Mr. Smith: To hell with polishing! (39)

What happens next is even more shocking. Characters do not even say complete sentences. They start shouting words at each other; words are broken and disintegrated in a way that they become totally absurd. Then characters start uttering syllables, consonants and even the letters of the alphabet:

Mrs. Martin: Bazaar, Balzac, Bazooka.

Mr. Martin: Bizarre, beaux-arts, brassieres!



Mr. Smith: A, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, e, i, o, u, i!

Mrs. Martin: B, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, x, z!

Mrs. Smith: Choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo,  
choo!

Mr. Smith: It's!

Mrs. Martin: Not!

Mr. Martin: That!

Mrs. Martin: Way! (41)

Meanwhile, the lights are off and spectators can only hear the screaming of characters. Then the lights go on to see that the Martins are in the place of the Smiths and the play ends where it started. Thus, the total destruction of language leads to a total collapse of reality. While writing the dialogue of the play, Ionesco discovers the mechanical aspect of human life. The playwright, in "Discovering the Theatre", explains that he did so by "sinking into the banal, by pushing to their utmost limits the most outworn clichés of everyday language" (12). In this respect, he "tried to achieve the expression of strangeness in which all human

existence seems to be bathed” (12). After he had finished writing the play, Ionesco was very proud of himself. He was able to write “something like the tragedy of language,” yet he was astonished when spectators laughed while watching the play. Again, Ionesco refers to the stupidity that contaminates all human behavior. People have lost their senses to the degree in which they become merely machines; their words and actions are automatic. However, he talks about some sensitive spectators who have been able to sense the uneasiness in the play.

In “The Tragedy of Language: How an English Primer Became My First Play”, Ionesco comments on the text of his play:

The text of *The Bald Soprano* or of the English (or Russian or Portuguese) primer, composed of ready-made expressions and the most tired clichés, made me aware of the automatic quality of language and human

behavior, “empty talk,” speaking because there is nothing

personal to say, the absence of inner life, the mechanical

aspect of daily existence, man bathing in his social environment, becoming an indistinguishable part of it. The

Smiths, The Martins can no longer talk because they can

no longer think... (13).

It is worth mentioning that the writings of the Dadaist playwright, Tristan Tzara, foreshadows Ionesco’s use of clichés.

Tzara is a French avant-garde poet and one of the founders of Dadaism. Dadaist writings consist mainly of nonsensical dialogue.

The same technique of using clichés in the bourgeois conversation is applied by Ionesco in many of his plays. Another influence is

that of the German Expressionist, Yvan Goll. In *Methusalem*, the dialogue of the bourgeois conversation consists of clichés and this,

again, anticipates Ionesco's use of this technique which becomes, later, a significant characteristic of absurd writings.

Moreover, the most important influence on Ionesco's writings is that of the Surrealist writers. In one of his interviews, Ionesco admits that he has been largely influenced by Surrealism. Ionesco says: "None of us would have written as we do without Surrealism and Dadaism. By liberating the language, those movements paved the way for us...I was bowled over [by Tristan Tzara] ...Then I read all the other surrealists – André Breton, Robert Desnos" (qtd. in Bennet, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* 32). As far as language is concerned, Roger Vitrac's writings exemplify the problem of language. Two elements, as Esslin mentions in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, anticipate Ionesco's work: "the banality of a cliché-laden language" and "a similar mixture of the parody of the conventional theatre and pure theatre" (277). Ionesco asserts that *The Bald*

*Soprano* is a parody of theatre as well as a parody of the human behavior.

Eugene Ionesco's second play *The Lesson* is also concerned with language. In writing such a play, Ionesco amazingly challenges conventional linguistic elements and devalues the role of language as a true medium to communicate human relations. When Ronald Hayman asks Ionesco whether it is possible to read the play as an attack on the traditional systems of education, the latter makes it clear that the play is a "game of words" in which "language is empty. It no longer corresponds to anything. A sort of emptiness of language and a refusal of its call to culture" (8). *The Lesson*, written in 1950 and performed in 1951, is a one-act play in which Ionesco offers a shock to those who have expected that there would be no lesson at all. Unlike *The Bald Soprano*, which contains no soprano and no bald person, *The Lesson* is totally a lesson but an unusual one.

The play opens with the Maid receiving an eighteen-year-old Pupil at the apartment of the Professor. A self-confident pupil is being taught by a timid professor about geography, mathematics and philology. However, as the play proceeds, the Pupil becomes less confident and hesitant to answer the Professor's questions. Meanwhile, the Professor starts to agitate and gains control over the Pupil from the sound of his words. The action culminates when the Professor murders his Pupil with an invisible knife manifested by words. The enthusiastic girl falls a victim to the Professor, who gradually turns into an aggressive person. The Maid, who has warned the Professor not to go too far, helps him to get rid of the body. She places a swastika on his arm and announces that this is a daily routine. The Pupil is the Professor's fortieth victim during that day. Another pupil arrives and the opening dialogue of the play starts again.

The limits of language as a tool of communication and its futility to create real human relations are a hallmark of all absurdist

drama and especially of Ionesco. In *The Lesson*, language is the heart of the professor's lecture. He teaches the Pupil about the "fundamental principles of the comparative and linguistic philology of the neo-Spanish Languages" (58). The Professor tells his Pupil that all languages are the same; the distinctions made between them are arbitrary. The Professor says: "The differences are scarcely perceptible to anyone not experienced in detecting them. Thus all words in all languages...are always the same" (62). For example, the word "my country" can have different meanings in different contexts. When an Italian says "my country," s/he means Italy. "My country" in the French language means France, and France in the Oriental becomes the Orient and so on. Here, Ionesco demonstrates that the same word can signify completely different meanings. The problem, to use Esslin's words, is that "words cannot convey meanings because they leave out of account the personal associations they carry for each individual" (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 95).

However, what is more important than the impossibility of communication is the use of language as an instrument of power. The Professor turns from a timid person into an aggressive one. At the beginning of the play, he cannot even utter one sentence without pauses. By contrast, the Pupil speaks confidently and without hesitation:

Professor: Good morning, good morning...You  
are...er...I suppose you really are...re...the new  
pupil?

Pupil: Yes, sir. Good morning, Sir. You see I came  
at the  
right time. I didn't want to be late.

Professor: Good. Yes, that's very good...I don't  
know  
quite how to apologize to you for having kept you  
waiting...I was just finishing...You understand, I was  
just...er...I do beg your pardon...I hope you will  
forgive



me... (*The Lesson* 46)

Gradually, the Professor controls language and gains his power from it. In other words, he is the giver of information and the one who assigns meanings to his words. He starts to get nervous and shouts at the pupil: "Silence! What's all this for?" (59). He even becomes more furious and orders the pupil to be quiet and not to talk at all: "Don't show off, airing your knowledge! you'd better just listen" (60). The self-confident Pupil turns into a timid one. She is not able to follow the professor's instructions and says, "I've got a toothache" (61). This scene is of high significance: having a toothache means that the Pupil has lost the ability to speak. Essentially, she has lost the gift of language. In fact, the Pupil has lost her power which she derives from language. In this respect, Ionesco criticizes the use of language as a tool to dominate people.

The Professor does not care about the Pupil's situation which starts to deteriorate and continues his lecture. The pupil

utters the same sentence from time to time and shows her inability to follow the Professor's instructions. Nevertheless, the Professor gets more and more agitated, taking the wrist of the Pupil and twisting it. Then he asks her to pronounce the word "knife". In this passage, Ionesco translates Saussure's concept of the signified and the signifier:

Professor: Ah! [ He goes quickly to the drawer and finds

a big imaginary knife; he takes hold of it and brandishes it

exultantly. Here's one, Mademoiselle, here's a knife! It's

a pity this is the only one; but we'll try to make it serve for

all the languages! All you need to do is to pronounce the

word knife in each language, while you stare closely at the

object and imagine it belongs to the language you are

using.

Pupil: I've got the toothache.

Professor: [almost chanting, melodiously]: Come  
along

then: Say Kni, like Kni, Fff, like Fff...and watch it  
carefully...don't take your eyes off it...

Pupil: Kni.

Professor: Fff...Watch it. [He moves the knife in the  
pupil's face.]

Pupil: Fff... (70)

This continues for a while and the pupil is in total pain:

Pupil: No! No! No more! That's enough! I've had  
enough!

Besides, my teeth ache and my feet ache and my  
headaches...

Professor: Knife...Watch it...Knife...Watch  
it...Knife...Watch it...

Pupil: You make my ears ache, too. What a voice  
you've

got! How piercing it is! (70)

The Pupil is aching while the Professor is abusing her. The sexual connotations of the discourse are made very clear. The Professor rapes the Pupil and kills her. The Maid comes and shouts at him, saying that this is his fortieth victim. The Professor tries to strike her, but she flies into a fury and attacks him. In doing so, the Maid reminds him that she is not one of his students. Rather, she acquires power over him as she is an archetype, that of a mother. She has warned him that “Arithmetic leads to philology, and philology leads to Crime...” (73). This shows us how language is used as a weapon.

Later, the Maid calms the Professor, telling him that no one will notice the crime. She says that “no one will ask any questions. They’re used to it” (74). In this respect, it is important to note that the play is a post-war production. Emerging from the destruction of war, *The Lesson* tries to “break the silence imposed through slavery, colonial exploitation, totalitarianism and genocide

while exhibiting an ambivalent attitude toward language” (Patterson 2). While the themes of totalitarianism and violence are recurrent in Ionesco’s plays, *The lesson* deals with such issues in a more complex way.

Ionesco has always been against ideological theatre whose manipulative language is used as a means to enforce a certain ideology. He states: “The theatre is not the language of ideas. When it tries to become the vehicle of ideologies, it can only become their popularizer. It simplifies them dangerously” (“Discovering the Theater” 9). Ionesco has witnessed the German occupation of both Romania and France. He reacts to the Nazi speeches which are used not to communicate reality but to conceal it. The Maid places a Swastika on the professor’s arm and says, “Here you are! Put this on, if you’re frightened, then you won’t have anything to be afraid of. [She puts it round his arm.] ...It’s political” (74). The ideological armband is used to justify the number of coffins.

The professor–pupil relationship stands for the aggressor–victim relationship. From the beginning of the play, the aggressor is teaching the victim his own language. In the colonial and post-colonial contexts, the language of the colonizer stands for superiority and that of the colonized stands for submission. Ionesco reveals the dangers inherent in language. The Professor’s lesson is about comparative linguistics, telling his pupil that all languages are the same. Yet, the only example he gives to make a difference between them is about nations. He uses the word “my country” which, in fact, refers to a national identity. Why does Ionesco choose a word which has national and political connotations?

Ionesco makes it clear that each language stands for a nation and becomes its most powerful weapon. Moreover, each nation has its specific national identity which can be expressed and defended by words. That is why the word “knife” symbolizes a weapon used by the aggressor to kill his victim. The Maid’s

claiming, at the beginning of the play, that “of all things, not philology, Monsieur, philology is the worst of all...” (58) summarizes the whole story. This individual rape stands for all the murders committed in the Second World War. What gives Ionesco’s theatre its magic is the way in which he manipulates the semantic qualities of the words and makes them fall down in front of the audience. Words, as the Professor tells his pupil, become mere “sounds arranged in a purely irrational way, devoid of all sense” (60).

The theatre of Ionesco achieves a unity between its content and form. Ionesco succeeds in creating such a unity by adopting a new language. He believes that “to renew language is to renew our conception, our vision of the world” and when there is a new expression, there is originality (“Notes on My Theatre” 134). This is the task and the responsibility of every writer. In his striving to reach a higher truth and living a mystical experience, which exceeds the boundaries of traditional language, Ionesco pushes

the theatre into an extreme. By showing us that language is limited, Ionesco destroys words and makes language explode. From the beginning of his career, Ionesco feels that there must be a special language for theatre and he succeeded in discovering it in his absurdist plays.



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