

# The Art of Talking about Nothing : A Study of The Phatic Function in *Waiting For Godot*

*Yi-fen Li\**

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to approach the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett from linguistic analysis. The dialogue between the main characters, Gogo and Didi, of this play is always pointless and without motivation; however, this affords a great chance for examining the linguistic phenomenon of "phatic communion." The first part of this paper defines the concept of the "phatic function" and states that it is frequently used in *Waiting for Godot*. In the second part of this paper, the structure of the phatic use of language in this play will be discussed, and in the third part, the role of time in their talking about nothing will be discussed.

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## I. Introduction

The traditional approach to a literary work (especially for a drama) always focuses upon the theme, the plot, the author's intention and characterization. And *Waiting for Godot* is generally handled by critics in this way (Abbott 1973; Rabinovitz 1984; Lewis 1971; Esslin 1969; Tindall 1966). Very few critics have noticed the phatic communion in the dialogue of this drama.

What Beckett has done in this instance is really quite clear. He has communicated concealment. Just as Godot is important not because of who he is but because he is not present, so the picture derives its importance not because of what it represents but because it can not be seen.

(Abbott, 1973: 10)

The second act is an imperfect version of the first, somewhat like Vladimir's second rendition of the round he tries to sing. ... The second act in this work is an exact repetition of the play.

(Abbott, 1973: 101)

Beckett's innovative ideas about characterization lead to another effect: when his characters become less vivid, readers are more easily

involved in the action. ... When Godot does not appear, Vladimir asks the boy about him; his questions have probably also occurred to members of the audience.

(Rabinovitz, 1984: 13)

The play (*Waiting for Godot*) lends itself to innumerable interpretations. Beckett, unlike most contemporary playwrights, has refused to discuss the definition of his symbols. ... The play is unquestionably a morality play in which not faith but doubt binds man to God.

(Lewis, 1971: 267)

The movement of the play (*Waiting for Godot*) consists of conflict between the two pairs of characters (Gogo/Didi and Pozzo/Lucky) and the conflict within each pair, intensified by successive symbols of duality.

(Lewis, 1971: 268)

Beckett's real triumph, however, came when *Waiting for Godot*, which had appeared in book form in 1952, ... And against all expectations, the strange tragic farce, in which nothing happens and which had been scorned as undramatic by a number of managements, became one of the greatest successes of the post-war theatre.

(Esslin, 1969: 20)

*Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story; it explores a static situation, 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.'

(Esslin, 1969: 25)

They (*Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*) lack both characters and plot in the conventional sense because they tackle their subject-matter at a level where neither characters nor plot exist. .. And what passes in these plays are not events with a definite beginning and a definite end, but types of situation that will forever repeat themselves.

(Esslin, 1969: 53)

The form that Beckett found for the idea of waiting is tight, strik-

ing, and so new that some critics were dismayed ... Yet to audiences who found *Godot* good theater, the setting, the characters, the the point-less talking, the tedium, the clowning, and even the hints of something-more-than-there seemed a great conspiracy in which nothing is irrelevant to something that cannot be de-termined.

(Tindall, 1966: 11)

In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a special kind of speech --phatic communion-- is employed quite often within the dialogue. This kind of language use was originally proposed by Malinowski (1936) with the definition of "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words, ... words in phatic communion fulfill a social function and that is their principal aim" (1936: 315). This notion was later interpreted by Jakobson (1960) as a means to avoid silence and prolong speech exchange in dialogue or speech, "there are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works, to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention" (1960: 37). As Wales says, phatic communion is actually "a highly redundant means of establishing social bonds between people" (1989: 350).

Sometimes the verbal communication between interlocutors is only a flow of language, purposeless expressions of preference or dislike, and narratives of irrelevant happenings, statements on what is completely obvious. It is performed in accordance with the speaker's attitude toward on-going interaction to fulfil the social function of being polite, saving face and so on. As a result, "phatic function" may be thought of as one of the basic functions in language use, which serves to establish bonds of personal union between people for the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas.

Here in this paper, how the phatic function is performed in the dialogue of *Waiting for Godot* will be specified in the second part. Through the analyses of the application of the phatic function, the speakers' attitudes will be speculated.

## II. Talking about Nothing

The dialogic form in *Waiting for Godot* is primarily a dual form between two characters--Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo). The whole set in both acts one and two is a vast and empty space and most of the time Vladimir and Estragon are the only two living creatures in this empty place. All they have to do is to wait for the coming of an unknown one -- Godot, though they are not sure whether Godot will come or not. In order to avoid a possible long silence which may lead to their loss of faith in the arrival of Godot, Gogo and Didi have to keep talking, even though most of their conversations lack motivation and become nonsensical. Their strong need of companionship in this hollow world is revealed in their intensive attention on the on-going speech exchanges. "Topic" is no longer important in their conversation as long as there are words to exchange, which forms the typical "phatic communion" as we've mentioned.

The phatic function performed in this play could be specified as follows:

A. In order to keep the conversation going, the speaker may ask the listener directly to take over the turn even when there is hardly anything to say.

	Turn
	<i>Long silence.</i>
Vladimir: Say something!	1
Estragon: I'm trying.	2
	<i>Long silence.</i>
V : ( <i>in anguish</i> ) Say anything at all !	3
E : What do we do now?	4
V : Wait for Godot.	5
E : Ah!	6

(Beckett 40-41)

In this segment, Vladimir breaks the silence and initiates talk-exchanges

by demanding Estragon to respond. This is the most direct way to keep the interaction going. However, the on-going interaction seems to be pointless, that is, without the function of conveying any information, except for turns 4 and 5. The fact is, when the interlocutors find hardly anything to talk about, they may apply this pattern of turns 4 and 5 to prolong their conversation, though they both know very well at that moment what they have to do. As a result, all through this play, this pair of dialogue occurs so often as to form a pattern of nonsensical talk. It becomes a 'filler' for filling the overwhelming silence.

B. Sometimes the conversation could be maintained by merely echoing the phrases of the former turn.

	Turn
Estragon: What am I to say?	7
Vladimir: Say, I am happy.	8
E : I am happy.	9
V : So am I.	10
E : So am I.	11
V : We are happy.	12
E : We are happy.	13

(Beckett 39)

In this segment, Estragon fulfills his turns (turn 9, 11, 13) by means of echoing phrases or the whole sentences of Vladimir's. Since their waiting is long enough for them to keep talking the whole day, it is quite reasonable for them to run out of topics. In order to avoid the uncomfortable silence between them, they have to extend the conversation whenever they can, though most of the time it appears to lack motivation.

Every turn unit of the above segment appears to be very monotonous and uninformative. This kind of turn management reinforces the 'message' conveyed in this play that there is more or less 'nothing to be done'.

C. For the purpose of filling time with conversation, a beautiful symmetrical

structure was employed in the dialogue. This is the primary technique which Beckett applies to explore the phatic function of language use.

	Turn
Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.	14
Estragon: Like leaves.	15
V : Like ashes.	16
E : Like leaves.	17

(Beckett 40)

Vladimir: We could do our exercises.	18
Estragon: Our movements.	19
V : Our elevations.	20
E : Our relaxations.	21
V : Our elongations.	22
E : Our relaxations.	23
V : To warm us up.	24
E : To calm us down.	25

(Beckett 49)

In turns 14-17, words like 'feathers', 'leaves', and 'ashes' are synonyms denoting slight noise. The only reason for Estragon and Vladimir to repeatedly use the same words or similar words is that both of them do not want to let the conversation to come to an end. By means of continuous interactions, they could ensure the presence of companionship. The same applies to turns 18-23.

The language of this play varies from common vulgarity to lyrical beauty; it is the symmetry that makes the dialogue sound like musical refrains. The motionless murmurs are transformed into beautiful melody that give the reader a respite from the dull atmosphere created by the plot.

### III. Two Different Views of Time



From the above examples, we know that Estragon and Vladimir try every mean to prolong their conversation. In order to keep talking, they even violate the Grice's (1985) four maxims of being informative, truthful, relevant, and perspicuous. As a result, their language has lost its function as a means for communication. In spite of this, Estragon and Vladimir talk incessantly. Why?

As Esslin (1969) states; the theme of this play is waiting rather than Godot. It is in the routine of waiting that Gogo and Didi experience the flow of time. If they were active enough, they would have overlooked the passage of time. However, just because they are merely waiting passively, they are inevitably encountered with the pressure of time. Therefore, they have to think up their ways to pass the time. They repeat the same pointless words or perform the same meaningless gestures while waiting for something uncertain.

As to the other two characters in this play---Pozzo and Lucky, they are in contrast to the pair of Gogo and Didi in that they always heading somewhere in a hurry. In Act one, Pozzo discloses himself with the happiness of coming across two fellows after a long journey of over six hours.

Pozzo: .....Gentlemen, I am happy to have met you, (*Before their incredulous expression.*) Yes yes, sincerely happy. (*he jerks the rope.*) Closer! (*Lucky advances.*) Stop! (*Lucky stops.*) Yes, the road seems long when one journeys all alone for ... (*he consults his watch*)... yes ... (*he calculates*) ... yes, six hours, that's right, six hours on end, never a soul in sight. ....

(Beckett 16)

In Act two, right after Gogo and Didi's helping him to get up from a falling, Pozzo heads for his journey again without a momentary stay.

Vladimir : Don't go yet.

Pozzo : I'm going.

V : What do you do when you fall far from help?

P : We wait till we can get up. Then we go on. On!

(Beckett 57)

As a result, Pozzo and Lucky could be said to be the only two characters in this play with the capacity of locomotion. Just because that they need not root themselves in a certain place and suffer the endless waiting like the other pair does, they do not have to fill the overwhelming time with meaningless talking.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

It is found in this paper that the phatic function is the primary force getting the dialogue of the main characters, Gogo and Didi, going waiting for Godot. Under the overwhelming pressure of waiting in the vast, relentless time, one must keep talking to conquer the unbearable void of silence. Such is the fate of these two characters forever waiting for the mysteries Godot who never comes in Beckett's fictional dramatic world, but in our real world, many people are confronted with the same problem of waiting impatiently for something unknown to happen. And for these people, perhaps it is equally to that phatic function is their only salvation. That is why we find so many garrulous, voluble people in this world.

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