

## COMMUNICATION IN HAROLD PINTER'S *REQUEST STOP*

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### Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to analyse Harold Pinter's one-act play (or sketch) *Request Stop* from a structuralist-semiotic perspective, by mainly taking into account Saussure's and Jakobson's theoretical underpinnings concerning the linguistic sign and the factors necessary for all verbal communication, respectively. The paper also deals with notions of semantics (in other words, with meaning) and of pragmatics (*i.e.* the relation between signs and the effects they have on the people that use them). Pinter's sketch lends itself perfectly for such an analysis by providing enough compelling evidence in this respect. This is, decidedly, not true of all pieces of literature; more often than not, a purely linguistic discussion of a literary work may prove to be far-fetched. Hence our choice, materialised and substantiated in what follows.

### BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

**Harold Pinter** is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a prolific career spanning over 50 years. His dramas often involve strong conflicts between ambivalent characters who struggle for verbal (and often territorial) dominance; stylistically, these works are marked by theatrical pauses and silences, comedic timing, irony and menace. This is also true of *Request Stop*, as we are going to see further on.

**On the one hand**, at the **explicit** level of content and form, that is to say, based on appearances, the reader witnesses a severe breakdown in communication in the play. In other words, communication does not take place; there is no communion, no unity in spirit.

**On the other hand**, when looking closely into the text, after becoming acquainted with it, it becomes more and more obvious that some sort of message is carried on, indeed. And it is not monolithic at all; on the contrary, it is multi-faceted and extremely complex, the convergence

point of what the characters communicate to one another and to the spectator / reader, of what the text itself communicates to this third part (whose importance is outstanding in theatre), and of what the author tries to communicate to the audience. After all, theatre implies communication between the **dramatis personae** and between the actors and the audience, all this by the grace of the author.

### ARGUMENT

#### I. Explicit level

Because Pinter's sketch is so short (**a one act** – and, for that matter, a one page – **play**), the **relation** between its form and content, between its **signifier** and its **signified**, is much more transparent than in longer forms of writing. The **linguistic sign**, Saussure pointed out, is essentially an **arbitrary** thing: there is no inner relationship between **signifier** and **signified** – which is not the case for the text under discussion, considered as a whole, in its **twofold** quality (that is to say, taking into account its **form** and **content**).

**a.** Actually, it becomes apparent that the form might have been **deliberately constructed** so as to render the same meaning as the content; in other words, what the reader sees without and before going into the text is highly significant and meant to anticipate what s/he is going to find in it in terms of content.

**Visually**, we only deal with one character's words, each time followed by a "pause"; hence, what we have is *information – pause – information* (coming from the same addressee) – *pause – information – pause* – and so on and so forth. Therefore, it is *request – stop – request – stop*

– *request – stop* etc. (which brings the reader back to the **title**, that is, back from where s/he had started).

**Graphically**, it is a recurring pattern within a circular structure that suggests (or, better said, shows) – deceivingly – the breakdown in communication foregrounded by the text.

**b.** The **content** reveals about the same thing, apparently, of course: **the protagonist, an unnamed woman**, aggressive and provocative in her attitude (to the point that she seems paranoid, even mad), racist, prejudiced, scornful and far too straightforward, makes an insistent, but futile attempt at communicating with the people around her. No wonder, then, it seems, that she **fails in her struggle to communicate, to relate**.

All elements required in a normal situation of communication (according to Jakobson's theories), i.e., the six factors of any given act of verbal communication, are present in the play: **addresser** (sender/encoder/speaker) **addressee** (receiver/decoder/hearer – several of them, actually), **message, code, context, channel**. Nevertheless, the sender encodes the message in such a way that the receiver chooses **not to react verbally**. There is **no verbal feedback**, only half of the process is completed. It is a one-way process, a closed situation (no verbal exchange, no dialogue at all – paradoxical for the theatre, but again, with Pinter, we are in the realm of the theatre of the absurd).

**c.** **The title**, by means of the **polysemy** of its phrasing, is an example of the explicit level of reading the text: the woman “requests” a certain piece of information, but communication “stops” there, it doesn't take its natural course, is actually fails to continue immediately after the request is made. Thus, the title is revealing of the fact that **verbal communication will not take place** in the play.

## **II. Implicit level**

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Nonetheless, **at a deeper level**, embedded in the subtext, we find **communication taking place in more than one way**: the character communicate to one another, to the audience, the writer himself, by means of his text, communicates to his audience.

**a.** First of all, **the code need not be necessarily linguistic**; the true dimension of communication in the play, the essence of it, is represented by the reactions of the characters (**non-verbal communication** and **paralanguage**). This is highly typical of **drama**, where the verbal element need not be, and is usually not, dominant.

**b.** **Silence, pauses** are a means of communicating, they are not devoid of meaning; on the contrary, they **implicitly** point out to the would-be co-speaker's **refusal to take part in the act of communication**. Each and every attitude communicates unwillingness to communicate, except for the main character's attitude, since she aims at relating to people, but achieves the exact opposite.

**It is all communication about non-communication.**

Perhaps one of the reasons why communication in the play under discussion is not (so) obvious to the reader is the fact that, each time, no matter the addressee, **addresser and addressee use different codes for their message**: the female protagonist uses language to express herself, while the other character react non-verbally. It is communication on their part, too, of their acute need to be left alone, even of their fear of the woman. **The use of the same code is fundamental in the correct understanding of the message** – hence the misunderstandings that take place in the play.

From a different perspective, there might be another reason for the failure to communicate. **The binding interpersonal relationship between speaker and hearer is not respected** by the hearer – s/he does not answer, as s/he is expected to. It becomes self-evident, then, that **the exchange cannot take place**. Successful communication depends on cooperation and mutual trust between the interlocutors.

## **IN A NUTSHELL**

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All in all, the answer to the initial question, the basis of the current inquiry, is a definitely affirmative one. In the end, we realize **how much one can actually communicate by non-communicating**, how much can be said in very few words – which is somewhat paradoxical of

literature, if we think of it. Perhaps the play is so short and contains so many pauses because there is **so much to see** rather than hear (for the spectator), **so much to read between the lines** (for the reader). But again, most things do not pass for what they are, but for what they seem.

In the view that the play communicates unwillingness to communicate in certain circumstances, we finally see the three intentions Umberto Eco theorized – **intentio operis, intentio auctoris** and **intentio lectoris** – reconciled. Otherwise, the play is to be submitted to as many interpretations as reading minds. There are layers and layers of meaning to each text. **Semantics** is an enquiry that may well go on forever. This is hinted at in the very title of Ogden and Richards's book, *The Meaning of Meaning*.

Nonetheless, it is never as easy as it seems. Although the circle might be complete (title – story- title), food for thought has not been

exhausted. As the protagonist, the reader might need to try again, to reiterate his/her journey through the text in the quest of figuring out its meaning, of finding out if or what it communicates. After all, as **Husserl** proved (by means of the metaphor of the phenomenological cube), we never see all the facets of reality; our **perception is always limited**.

Finally, as far as communication in *Request Stop* is concerned, it is not only the "if", or rather the "yes/no" question, that deserves attention; the "what", "how", "where", "when", or "who" are also worthwhile answering, but they are not the province of the semiotician to the same extent.

### References

1. Pinter, H. (1998) *Harold Pinter: Plays IV*, London: Faber and Faber Publishing.