

**Eloquent Silences in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*****Rawiya Kouachi**Department of English Language and Literature  
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Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University, Setif 2, Algeria**Abstract**

This paper analyzes Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (2003) by focusing on their affinities and differences. It is an analytical literary study from a linguistic standpoint using Kenny's (2011) ideas. In addition to focusing on differences, the aim of this study is to scrutinize silence and its different meanings inasmuch as silence is a distinctive feature that groups and differentiates both plays. The study sheds light on a different aspect of research. Hence, besides focusing on interpreting speeches, this paper analyzes silences in both plays. It vindicates that silences are as important in literary interpretation as speeches. While Beckett's silences indicate the void of modern life, Pinter's silences convey threats and violence. Albeit much attention is given to verbal utterances and silences are generally neglected in terms of literary analysis, they are a sine qua non in terms of understanding Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* and most importantly understanding the different languages of silence that greatly contribute to the whole meaning of both plays. Consequently, silences deserve much attention in literary interpretation as speeches and they are highly eloquent.

**Keywords:** Beckett's silence, differences, eloquence, Pinter's violent silence, void of modern life

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## Introduction

Among the outstanding and influential playwrights of the twentieth century that their works have been a vast puzzle for audience are Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. They have vital contributions to the Theatre of the Absurd. The “Beckettian” characteristics are echoed in many modern and postmodern plays, especially the characteristics of his extraordinary play *Waiting for Godot* which is undoubtedly a milestone in the Theatre of the Absurd. In fact, many playwrights exhibit traces of Beckett's influence in their works, particularly Harold Pinter. He is strongly influenced by Beckett and he adopts many of his techniques in different plays and Beckett's influence in Pinter's early works is immense and evident. Pinter's famous play *The Dumb Waiter* resembles too much Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Hence, the research paper seeks to draw affinities and differences between the two plays. Most importantly, it sheds light on the most distinctive feature of both plays which is the extensive use of silences and pauses. Although the plays are short, they are filled with pauses and silences. Albeit silences are generally marginalized and considered useless and meaningless, this paper demonstrates that silences speak and convey a message to the audience by relying on linguistic views by Kenny (2011). Of paramount importance, the research focuses on the different embedded meanings behind the silences in both plays despite the fact that they ostensibly seem similar.

## Theoretical Framework

In traditional theories, silence is associated with passiveness, negativity and absence of speech. It is regarded as an opposite to speech and it is a mere absence of sounds. Saville-Troike (2003) ascertains: “within linguistics, silence has traditionally been ignored for its boundary-marking function, delimiting the beginning and the end of utterances. The tradition, has been to define it negatively- as merely the absence of speech” (p. 117). However, it is a complex and ambiguous phenomenon of communication.

It is as important as speech. Actually, as there is meaningful speech, there is meaningful silence and sometimes there is meaningless speech and meaningful silence. It is absence as well as presence. “Acts of silence within discourse which is considered meaningful. Here, silence functions as an indirect speech act” (Schmitz, 1994, p. 346). Silence has different forms for example pauses, non-participation or lack of participation in conversation and mime.

Concerning the function of silence, it helps to differentiate between the units of speech and most importantly it embeds essential messages that have different interpretations. A myriad of theories tackle the virtues and power of silence mainly from a linguistic point of view. Picard (1952) states that silence is meaningful and it leads to creativity. For him, there is a difficulty living in a world full of language and speech and there is a great possibility to live in a world full of silence (p. 70). Speech sometimes cannot express the right idea, but silence can be the best answer and convey many ideas without uttering a single word. Other works also highlight the importance of silence for example Hall's work (1959), the collection of essays by Steiner (1998) and the most recent one is Kenny's book (2011). The latter identifies different types of silence including wise or virtuous, modest, cunning or calculating, eloquent, dumbfounded, culpable, strong, weak, ceremonial, satisfied, idle and dead. According to Kenny (2011), eloquent silence is very

expressive and symbolic. It is also known as pregnant silence and it is “used to refer to complete silence that is filled with the brooding presence of thoughts or feelings that one has not expressed” (p.22). Unlike traditional theories, silence is given too much importance in modern disciplines apart from linguistics.

### **Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*: Affinities and Differences**

Before dealing with silence in relation to both plays, it is important to shed light on other affinities and differences inasmuch as they pave the way to understand the nature of silence which is at the same time one feature that groups and differentiates both plays. In terms of their plot, *The Dumb Waiter* is strikingly similar to *Waiting for Godot*. In fact, both plays do not follow a linear, conventional and classical structure which begins in a specific point with a developing conflict to end in another point to reach a certain resolution. They consist of two characters waiting for another mysterious and obscure person who never comes. Like *Waiting for Godot*, in which two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, spend time on a country road waiting for a person called Godot, Pinter's characters Ben and Gus, two killers, wait in a basement room for orders from their boss Wilson. Actually, the characters of both plays astonish the audience because they are all waiting for nothing. Not only does the audience wait for the events of the plays, the characters also wait in vain for the coming of other persons to contribute to the plays' events and this waiting causes a queer situation. The two plays turn around the same point waiting which hinders characters' ability to act. In fact, nothing happens in both plays, especially *Waiting for Godot* in which nothing happens twice. While the characters in *The Dumb Waiter* and *Waiting for Godot* are waiting, they pass their time with recurrent discussions, pointless conversations and aimless talking and many actions are repeated throughout the plays.

Although *The Dumb Waiter*'s plot seems similar to the plot of *Waiting for Godot*, there are certain dissimilarities between the two plots. It is generally acknowledged that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a prototype for an absurdist play which implies that the plot is loose and unrealistic. Although the play takes place over two days and is divided into two acts, nothing happens and Vladimir and Estragon come back to the same conclusion which is the first sentence of the play “Nothing to be done” (Beckett, 1954, p. 7). *Waiting for Godot* has a circular and static plot and the end is a repetition of the beginning. Unlike Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* mingles absurdism with realism and this mixture is one innovative aspect of his plays. At first glance, Pinter's plot seems absurd like Beckett's plot; however, there are realistic elements in *The Dumb Waiter*. Binyan, (2007) states:

On the whole the play is progressive. The plot of *The Dumb Waiter* is well structured, though does not necessarily follow a traditional format of exposition, development, climax and denouement. It provides not much about exposition and ends soon after the arrival of the climax (p. 38).

Ben and Gus are waiting for orders from their employer whom they seem to know. Gus “find[s] [Wilson] hard to talk to” (Pinter, 2003, p. 2408). Yet, their waiting is not waiting forever like

Vladimir and Estragon. The audience is aware what Ben and Gus' mission is; they are waiting to kill and their waiting comes to an end and resolution when Ben gets orders to kill Gus. However, Vladimir and Estragon's waiting is endless and they do not have any idea about Godot. In addition, throughout the play, Vladimir and Estragon are visited by Pozzo, Lucky and the boy, but they did not help in the progression of the plot. It remains static. However, in *The Dumb Waiter*, there are only two characters and Ben succeeds in breaking the long waiting by acting at the end.

Regardless of the plot, *The Dumb Waiter* exhibits some traces of Beckettian characteristics in terms of characters. Ben and Gus are another version of Vladimir and Estragon because Beckett and Pinter choose two characters from the bottom of the society. Tramps and hired killers that represent the little man. Both Beckett and Pinter do not provide clear personal data about their characters, past lives and the relationship between them is vague and obscure. Instead of waiting for Godot, Ben and Gus are waiting for Wilson. So, Ben stands for Vladimir, Gus is another version of Estragon and Wilson resembles Godot. At the beginning of *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus struggles with his shoelaces as Estragon struggles with his boot. Both of them are submissive and dependent on their mates. They are inferior and child-like characters in the sense that their major concern is food, struggling with their shoes and for Gus, he has an additional characteristic which is his recurrent going to the lavatory. In addition, Gus and Estragon have poor memories and they depend on their friends to remember things. Unlike Gus and Estragon, Ben and Vladimir are dominant, mature, superior and responsible characters and they are much more rational than Gus and Estragon. Ben spends his time reading the newspaper and Vladimir is much concerned with philosophical and rational matters. Apart from on-stage characters, Wilson and Godot are similar because they are off-stage characters and the other characters spend time waiting for their coming. They are unseen and symbols of unknown and uncertainty. In addition, both playwrights exclude female characters from their plays to show the sterility of modern life.

Although Pinter and Beckett's characters seem identical, there are certain differences between them. One of the most apparent differences is the characters' ability to take actions. Beckett's characters are passive, stagnant, paralyzed and immobilized by waiting. They are always postponing and never act. They talk about leaving the place but they never did. ESTRAGON. Well, shall we go? VLADIMIR. Yes, let's go. They do not move (Beckett 1954, p. 36). Vladimir and Estragon have nothing to do in their lives but wait for Godot and their waiting is fruitless. In contrast to Vladimir and Estragon, Pinter's characters seem active. Ben breaks the long waiting by fulfilling his mission at the end of the play. Furthermore, "Pinter does not dehumanize his characters as Beckett and Ionesco do but leave them 'human, all-too-human'" (Hollis as cited in Binyan, 2007, p. 39). Pinter's "characters are real, but the over-all effect is one of mystery, of uncertainty, of poetic ambiguity" (Esslin as cited in Binyan, 2007, p. 38). Another difference is that in *Waiting for Godot*, there is a kind of comradeship and friendship between Vladimir and Estragon which is absent in *The Dumb Waiter*. Ben is extremely hostile and menacing to Gus and he is able to kill his partner. Ben and Gus were working for a long time together, but it seems there is something wrong with their relationship. They do not trust each other.

One difficulty of the absurd play is to pinpoint the theme because the play has manifold layers and the absurdity is the heart of the play which is mainly concerned with man's inability to establish a meaningful life in a chaotic world. Both Beckett and Pinter's plays are open to different interpretations and the underlying theme of *Waiting for Godot* and *The Dumb Waiter* is existentialism. The two plays' major theme is man's struggle to find meaning for his life and his search for his lost and traumatized identity. Uncertainty of life dominates both plays. *Waiting for Godot* presents a chaotic world without any meaningful pattern and Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* are uncertain about their circumstances. The only thing certain in both plays is the characters' uncertainty. They spend the whole plays waiting for someone who never comes and waiting is one dominant aspect of modern life which is full of boredom and anxiety. The plays reflect an image of a modern man who is paralyzed, traumatized and immobilized and passivity and stagnation are his emblem. Another important theme is man's alienation in modern world and alienation of human relationships and the cause behind this alienation is the lack of communication which is well displayed through characters' behavior and language.

Apart from similarities between the two plays, there is one striking difference between *Waiting for Godot* and *The Dumb Waiter*. In addition to the existing themes between the two plays, Pinter adds his Pinteresque touch. Unlike Beckett's play, *The Dumb Waiter* is full of violence and threat. It exhibits menace inside and outside the room. The people are not only alienated, they are also hostile and menacing. In addition, Pinter's play blends absurdism and realism in a fantastic and artistic way.

In terms of techniques, Pinter's play exhibits many Beckettian characteristics and techniques. To fill the endless waiting, characters in both plays use language to pass time. Sentences are fragmented, meaningless, unfinished and repeated several times. Characters' aim is not to share a meaningful talk and discussion, their aim is to engage in frivolous conversations with incoherent responses. *The Dumb Waiter* includes many repetitions and actions endlessly repeat themselves. In addition to the fragmented language, *Waiting for Godot* and *The Dumb Waiter* include extensive use of para-verbal languages for example mimes, silences and pauses.

### **Eloquent Silences in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter***

Regardless of analyzing some similarities and differences between the two plays, the use of silences and pauses that dominate the plays is another aspect of affinities and differences between *Waiting for Godot* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Although Beckett and Pinter's plays are short, they include many silences and pauses which are not unnecessary and meaningless techniques that the audience can neglect, underestimate and degrade their importance. The use of silences and pauses open another room for interpretation to decode the hidden and enigmatic meaning behind their use. It is very tempting to decode the silences because they also speak and the pauses are pregnant with multiple meanings.

In fact, Beckett and Pinter's use of pauses and silences can be on one level a kind of break to facilitate actor's ideas or give the audience a chance to have a clear idea of what is being said

on stage. Silence is used to understand the perplexed meaning. For Bruneau, "silence lends clarity to speech by destroying continuity" (as cited in Schmitz, 1994, p. 346). However, the extensive use of silences embeds other hidden meanings that can greatly contribute to the understanding of both plays. So from silences, audience can hear a language, but not sounds. "There is an eloquent silence, which serves to approve or to condemn, there is a silence of discretion and of respect. In a word, there is tone, an air, a manner which renders everything in conversation agreeable and disagreeable" (Francois as cited in Kenny, 2011, p. 2). Thus, silences convey different meanings.

Examining Beckett and Pinter's silences reveals that both playwrights use silences to indicate lack of communication and failure of conversation between characters. Silence in both plays shows the distance and alienation between people. Schmitz (1994) states: "nothingness is also interpreted: silence carries meaning, silence can also serve as an indicator of unsuccessful communication... it is particularly suited to sounding out unclear relationships between speakers" (p.346). *Waiting for Godot* and *The Dumb Waiter* stress man's alienation, especially his alienation from other human beings. Language lost its function of communication and both plays are full of repetitions and dialogues' aim is not to gain genuine conversations. Characters randomly ask questions and there are questions without answers and answers without questions and no one listens to the other which reveal the inability of humans to communicate with each other and the incapacity of the character to sustain comprehensive and fluent dialogue. *Waiting for Godot* is full of silences for instance after a long silence, Vladimir says:

VLADIMIR: say something!

ESTRAGON: I'm trying.

Long silence.

VLADIMIR: (in anguish) Say anything at all!

ESTRAGON: What do we do now?

VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot

ESTRAGON: Ah!

Silence (p. 41-42)

Like Beckett's play, *The Dumb Waiter* includes many silences. In addition to Ben and Gus alienation from other people because they are staying in a basement room without any windows to see "what it looked like outside" and they "come into a place when it's still dark... [they] sleep all day,... do [their] job, and then [they] go away in the night again" (Pinter,2003, p.2400), there is a lack of communication between the characters themselves. Furthermore, the dumb waiter as a machine is an indicator of the failure of communication. Using the speaking tube, a person cannot speak and listen simultaneously which indicates an unhealthy conversation and a gap in communication. Although silences in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Dumb Waiter* express lack of communication, Pinter's silences go beyond the lack of communication. They indicate refusal of communication. Ben refuses to communicate with Gus and he reads the newspaper which is his excuse to avoid communication. He is most of the time either silent, ignoring Gus' questions or answering with hostility.

GUS [thickly]. Who is it upstairs?

BEN [nervously]. What's one thing to do with another?  
 GUS. Who is it, though?  
 BEN. What's one thing to do with another?  
 [BEN fumbles for his paper on the bed]  
 GUS. I asked you a question.  
 BEN. Enough!  
 GUS [with growing agitation] I asked you before...  
 BEN [hunched]. Shut up. (p. 2419)

The quotation is an epitome of many unhealthy conversations between Gus and Ben or both characters retrieve to dead silence.

Beckett is famous for his use of silences and pauses and they convey messages as speeches and help the character to hide his real thoughts. In addition to being an indicator of lack of communication, silences have an emotive function. "The most expressive moments in his plays often occur in the pauses and silences, indicating...repression, fear, anticipation or horrified inarticulacy" (McDonald as cited in Bloom, 2008, p. 150). Albeit silences in both plays seem similar, they, in *Waiting for Godot*, express characters' sadness and loneliness and contribute to the play's general atmosphere of sadness, void, loneliness and nothingness. Kenny (2011) views that "five short plays...sample the existential world of... Samuel Beckett. When it is quiet, with the silence screaming in your ears, you see the bleakness, the pointless vacuum of nothingness before you" (p.106). Vladimir and Estragon throughout the play try to overcome silence because it reminds them of the void of their lives. To fill the silence, characters speak for the sake of speaking and talk incessantly to escape the terrifying silence of the nothingness in which they are entrapped. They are idle and have nothing to do. ESTRAGON. In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent (p. 40)  
 Afraid of their silence, they start talking randomly.

Long Silence  
 VLADIMIR. Say something!  
 ESTRAGON. I'm trying.  
 Long silence  
 ....  
 VLADIMIR. Help me!  
 ESTRAGON. I'm trying.  
 Silence  
 ...  
 ESTRAGON. That's the idea, let's contradict each other (p. 40-41)

Although Vladimir and Estragon try to overcome the silence, they fail to avoid it and most of the play is filled with silences. McDonlad states:

Estragon and Vladimir are so desperate to keep the conversation alive, to block out the sound of the dead voices. Or perhaps to keep back the realization that the silence brings:

their conversations are merely a habit which protects them from the stricken awareness of their own abjection and solitude (as cited in Bloom, 2008, p. 151).

Their silences indicate the emptiness of modern life conversations.

Despite the fact that Pinter borrowed the use of silences from Beckett, his silences convey a different message. The most distinctive element in Pinter's dramatic technique is the use of silences and he is known as the master of pauses that are his trademark. Pinter himself differentiates between two kinds of silences. "One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed" (Qi & Zexiang, 2007, p. 31). Silences contain rich meanings and are as eloquent as speeches. Listening to Pinter's silences in *The Dumb Waiter* reveals violence and fear. Unlike Beckett's silences that express man's sadness and life's nothingness, Pinter's silences show characters' violence and threat which characters try to lock and conceal them in their silences. Scrutinizing the silences, they create an atmosphere of unease and violence. The pauses which are part of the silences "were like furrows in which seeds of thought were planted, germinated and produced a bumper crop of dramatic fruit... his pauses as mere crucibles of dread" (Kevin, 2008). Pinter's characters transmit a great deal of information by being silent or giving a pause in their conversations. "Pinter cleverly uses silences, understatement and cryptic small talk to create a mildly menacing atmosphere in which a darker or greater reality seems to lurk" (Kenny, 2011, p. 106). In *The Dumb Waiter*, the tension between speech and silence, the said and the unsaid and revealing and concealing creates a rich and superb drama. Pinter's play is full of silences which reveal menace and underlying violence.

The beginning of the play is a long silence. Ben is reading a newspaper and Gus ties his shoelaces without any conversation. Then, throughout the play, there are many pauses and silences and Ben refuses to communicate with Gus because he is afraid of revealing and exposing himself and his hostility and menace are locked in his silences. In addition, whenever Gus asks Ben about the nature of their mission, the answer is a sinister silence. At the end of the play where tension is very high, there is a great amount of silence which reveals a great hostility and violence.

BEN. [savagely] That's enough! I'm warning you!

[Silence]

[Ben hangs the tube. He goes to his bed and lies down. He picks up his paper and reads.]

[Silence]

[The box goes up] ...

[Silence] (p. 2420)

Finally, the play ends with a long silence which puts an end to Gus' life. Furthermore, audience has to listen to silences to discover and uncover the language locked within the silences and ignoring a pause or a silence is as ignoring a speech. Raby (2009) contends:

Pinter writes silence and he appropriates it as a part of his dialogue. The actor who has not decided what is going on in this gap will find that his emotional life is disrupted...Otherwise the actor produces a non sequitur, which is absurd and makes the character ridiculous (p. 163).

Pinter's silences in *The Dumb Waiter* cannot be neglected and they greatly contribute to the understanding of the general meaning of the play.

### Conclusion

From the constellation of the aforementioned ideas, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* are similar and dissimilar in many points and silences are an important feature that characterizes both plays. Albeit the two plays share many characteristics of the theatre of the Absurd and silences seem similar and meaningless, the research paper vindicates that silences convey important messages relevant to the modern society. Yet, while silences of Beckett are an indication of the void and emptiness of modern life, Pinter's silences are pregnant with threats and violence. Consequently, silences are as important as speeches and deserve both audience and readers' attention to get a clear understanding of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* and understanding other literary works for future research relevant to this enigmatic phenomenon: silence.

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