

## AN EXPLORATION OF MODALITY IN H. PINTER'S *THE DUMB WAITER*

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### ABSTRACT

On the basis of a linguistic approach to the study of literature, this paper intends to present an analysis of the characters and their relationship in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. To do this, concepts and ideas about the system of Modality as presented by Simpson (1993) and Fairclough (1994), are presented. Following a proposed framework, the characters' linguistic choices are studied so as to ascertain the extent to which their assumptions and perspectives differ. The characters' attitudes towards each other as well as towards the events are examined. Ben, the senior partner, apparently secure, and Gus, apparently uncertain, take the same type of role at the end of the play: both of them become victims of an unseen and non-speaking participant. It can be noticed that both Ben and Gus's linguistic choices in terms of modality change as events develop. In short, the linguistic model of modality is proved to be useful for the purpose of uncovering the devices that Pinter uses.

### KEY WORDS

Modality, relational modality, expressive modality, deontic modality, boulomaic modality, epistemic modality, perception modality\*\*.

### RESUMEN

Con base en un enfoque lingüístico para el estudio de la literatura, este trabajo plantea un análisis de los personajes y sus relaciones en *The Dumb Waiter*. Con este fin, se presentan conceptos e ideas acerca del sistema de modalidad propuesto por Simpson (1993) y Fairclough (1994). Siguiendo el modelo propuesto, se estudian las elecciones lingüísticas de los personajes

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\*\* Los términos lingüísticos utilizados son ampliamente conocidos en Inglés. Sin embargo no estamos completamente seguros de su uso en Español y Francés, por lo que la designación de los mismos podría no ser del todo apropiada.

para determinar el grado en que difieren sus presunciones y perspectivas. Se examinan también las actitudes de un personaje hacia otro, así como sus actitudes hacia los hechos. Ben, el superior, aparentemente seguro, y Gus, aparentemente inseguro, toman el mismo tipo de papel al final de la obra: ambos se convierten en víctimas de un participante invisible y mudo para la audiencia. Puede observarse que, en términos de modalidad, las elecciones lingüísticas de ambos personajes varían a medida que se desarrollan los hechos. El modelo lingüístico de modalidad ha resultado una herramienta útil para el propósito de descubrir los recursos lingüísticos y literarios usados por Pinter en *The Dumb Waiter*.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

Modalidad, modalidad relacional, modalidad expresiva, modalidad deontica, modalidad boulomaica, modalidad epistémica, modalidad de percepción.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Basé sur une approche linguistique pour l'étude de la littérature, ce travail fait une analyse des personnages et de leurs relations dans *The Dumb Waiter*. Pour ce faire, on présente des concepts et des idées concernant le système de modalité proposé par Simpson (1993) et Fairclough (1994). D'après le modèle proposé, on étudie les choix linguistiques des personnages afin de déterminer jusqu'à quel point leurs présupposés et leurs perspectives sont différents. Également, on évalue les attitudes d'un personnage envers l'autre, ainsi que leurs attitudes envers les faits. Ben, le collègue supérieur, apparemment très sûr, et Gus, qui semble pas sûr, prennent le même rôle à la fin dans l'oeuvre; tous les deux vont devenir des victimes d'un participant invisible et muet pour le public. On peut voir que, en termes de modalité, les choix linguistiques des deux personnages varient au fur et à mesure que les faits se développent. Le modèle linguistique de modalité est devenu un outil utile pour découvrir les ressources linguistiques et littéraires utilisés par Pinter dans *The Dumb Waiter*.

#### MOTS-CLÉ

Modalité, modalité relationnelle, modalité expressive, modalité déontique, modalité *boulomaïque*, modalité *épistémique*.

Recent trends in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) emphasize the importance of authentic materials for the development of language skills and competence. Surprisingly enough, the tendency to keep literary texts out of the game still persists. Most EFL teachers (at least in our country) are, as McRae (1991) puts it, "guilty of the restrictive schematization of language learning, which is dangerously close to the 'follow-the-course-book' mentality so often prevalent among unadventurous teachers" (p. 23). For the sake of space, the mul-

multiple values and benefits of Literature in EFL teaching and learning will not be exhaustively explained here. Instead, a summary of some of the most relevant statements will be presented.

Carter (1997) argues that “in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language opportunities should be sought for more extensive and integrated study of language and literature than is commonly the case at present” (p. 171). Literature provides texts which are authentic materials and therefore opportunities for the students to experience language and culture. Exposure to real language will not only encourage development of language skills, but also the development of a feeling for language as the student is guided in the comprehension and enjoyment of what he reads, which in turn might influence in the development of reading habits.

Dealing with literature may embrace different objectives. Carter and Long (1992) state these aims in terms of: (a) *the cultural model*; (b) *the language model*; and (c) *the personal growth model*. For the purpose of the present paper the focus will be on the language model. It is our belief that “literature is *made* from language and that the more students can read in and through the language the better able they will be to come to terms with a literary text as literature (p. 2).

Experts in the field, like Carter, McRae, Simpson, have presented a variety of models by means of which different aspects of language in literature can be explored and developed in a consistent and systematic way, which might be of particular concern to the EFL learner as it is a device by which the understanding of relatively complex texts can be achieved. Among this variety of models, an interesting study of *modality*, attitudinal features of language, was carried out by Simpson (1993). Taking his ideas as a starting point, we attempt to consider the possibilities of exploring modality in Harold Pinter’s “The Dumb Waiter”. To do so, some basic ideas about modality as a system within the interpersonal function of language, will be briefly presented.

According to Simpson (1993) “modality refers broadly to the speaker’s attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition expressed by a sentence. It also extends to their attitude towards the situation or event described by a sentence” (p. 47). Simpson identifies four modal systems:

- Deontic System: expressing permission, obligation, requirement.
- Boulomaic System: expressions of desire.

- Epistemic System: speaker's confidence, or lack of it, in the truth of the proposition.
- Perception System (sub-system of epistemic modality): some reference to human perception, normally visual.

Also, Fairclough (1994) claims that "modality is to do with speaker or writer authority" (p. 126). He identifies two dimensions:

- Relational modality: authority of one participant in relation to others.
- Expressive modality: authority regarding the truth or probability of an expression of reality.

It is worth pointing out McCarthy's (1997) indication that modality is often thought of as the province of the closed class of modal verbs (must, can, will, may, etc.) ... but a large number of 'lexical' words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) carry the same or similar meanings to the modal verbs" (p. 85).

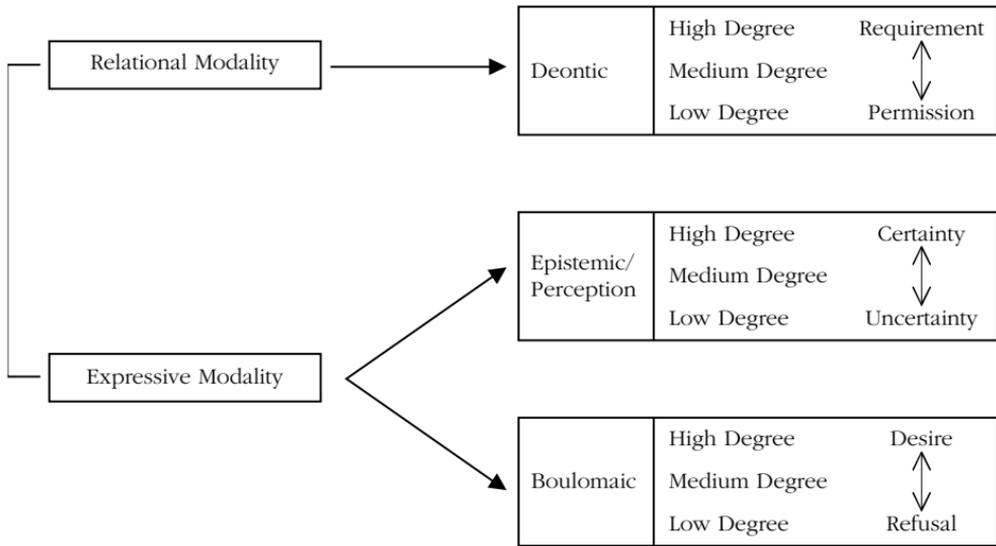
According to him, "all these words carry important information [and] are concerned with assertion, tentativeness, commitment, detachment and other crucial aspects of *interpersonal* meaning" (p. 85).

On the basis of these assumptions, we can affirm that modality, through expressions of condition, obligation, possibility and so on, might help us ascertain the type of relationship between characters depicted by the author, their degree of certainty or uncertainty, their degree of power or control over other characters and events.

For the purpose of our exploration of modality in "The Dumb Waiter" we will present a framework as shown below.

As illustrated in the schema, we are to consider Modality a system whose two terms are in turn systems that consist of other terms. These terms, however, will not be treated as embedded systems. Instead, they will be thought of as *scales*, since each of them represents a continuum from low degree to high degree. It should also be borne in mind that this model is useful to describe modalised propositions. Categorical assertions are unmodalised; that is to say, they are the expression of the basic proposition with no explicit use of modal operators. Notice, for example *They are here* (unmodalised) as different from *They must be here* (modalised). With these ideas in mind, we will proceed to explore Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter".

"The Dumb Waiter" is a one-act play that easily lends itself for an analysis of interpersonal relationships. The characters, two hitmen, wait



in the basement of a restaurant for the final instructions to carry out a contract killing. The play becomes especially suitable for a study of modality since *uncertainty* plays an important role in the development of the events.

For a start, uncertainty is conveyed in the title. As stated by Billington (1996),

the punning title carries several layers of meaning. It obviously refers to the antique serving-hatch that despatches the most grotesque orders for food to these bickering gunmen, but it also applies to Gus who, troubled by the nature of the mission, fails to realise he is the chosen target; or indeed to Ben who, by his total obedience to a higher authority that forces him to eliminate his partner, exposes his own vulnerability (p. 89).

We might even consider the possibility of a reference to a third character, not present on the stage, who delivers the orders just as any waiter would do and who might in fact represent the “higher authority” mentioned by Billington. At the end of the play, it is this invisible character that shows power and control not only over the events but also over Ben. Billington also suggests that the play is “about the dynamics of power and the nature of partnership. Ben and Gus are both victims of some unseen authority *and* a surrogate married couple

quarrelling, testing, talking past each other and ranking about old times” (p. 90).

Based on the above statement that uncertainty plays an important role throughout the play, the reader might assume that we will be dealing mostly with the scale of epistemic modality when studying the nature of Ben and Gus’s relationship. Nevertheless, evidence of all the terms and scales of the proposed framework will be shown during our exploration.

A first reading for general meaning leads the reader’s intuition to identify two different types of character in the play. The reader might easily describe Ben as a powerful participant who tries to control and constrain the actions of a less powerful participant, Gus. Inevitably, the reader will be tempted to establish some kind of comparison between Ben and Gus in terms of superiority and/or authority. It sounds, or looks, as if the two participants shared an ideology (understanding *ideology* from Fairclough’s (1994) perspective: “‘common-sense’ assumptions which are implicit in the conventions according to which people interact linguistically, and of which people are generally not consciously aware” (p. 2). It is this shared ideology which leads Ben and Gus to treat hierarchy as natural and, therefore places Ben in the apparent position to determine what is done and talked about during the play. The reader may notice a large amount of imperative clauses employed by Ben, as well as his eagerness to show some superiority as indicated by expressions such as: *I know how to occupy my time; Who took the call, me or you?*; and the most evident *Who’s the senior partner, me or you?*. Also, there are some stage directions that describe Ben’s attitudes when interacting with Gus: *tonelessly; powerfully; menacing*. On the other hand, we find Gus, who is troubled, uncertain, taut, always asking questions and obeying Ben’s commands. Expressions like *I wanted to ask you something*, or similar, are often repeated by Gus. These seem to be obvious conclusions to be reached from a first reading without necessarily carrying out further analysis. That, however, would be an oversimplified notion. A closer look will lead us into a deeper knowledge and interpretation of the play. In what other ways do Ben and Gus differ?; Is it totally true that Ben is the powerful participant?; What makes Gus seem weaker than Ben?; To sum up, what devices are used by Harold Pinter in order to convey the idea that, despite the fact that Ben imposes some control or power over Gus, both of them are victims of a superior force?; Definitely, any attempt to give answers to these questions will require of closer examination to the language in the play.

When comparing Gus to Ben one encounters important differences. First of all, it was already mentioned, there is the question of authority by expertise: Ben is the senior partner, therefore it is common sense to expect prominence of imperative forms and foregrounded relational modality realised through deontic expressions, such as *You'd better eat them quick; You've got a job to do; You'll have to wait; You'll have to do without it; You'd better get ready anyway; You shouldn't shout like that*; and so on. It is evident, then, that Gus is subordinate to Ben. But a more interesting difference is their view and attitude towards the job they are about to carry out. Ben is apparently secure in his knowledge that the mission will be through as usual. For him, it is only another job to be performed. Gus on the contrary, is puzzled and hesitant. Expressive modality realised through high boulomaic expressions like *I want to ask you something* occur at least eight times in the first half of the play. Some other times Gus dares to ask questions straight forward: *What time is he getting in touch?; Why did you stop the car this morning in the middle of that road?; Who it's going to be tonight?; Who's got it now?; If they moved out, who's moved in?*; Ben deals with Gus's wariness evasively, as if reluctant to respond or talk about the mission. To Gus's questions Ben states other questions such as: *What's the matter with you?; What do you mean...?;* or an intimidating *What?* that forces Gus to change the course of the conversation and talk about unimportant things like the crockery, the lavatory, the bed sheets, etc. While Gus's curiosity makes him question and wonder about Wilson (the unseen authority) all the time, Ben is rather simplistic. This becomes obvious through the large amount of medium-low epistemic expressions on Gus's part realised chiefly through modal auxiliaries: *could, might, must, would*; adverbs: *maybe, perhaps, probably*; verbs: *wonder, know* (with negative polarity); *suppose; think*; and the perception verb *seem*. It is precisely this prominence of epistemic modality, at its medium or low degrees, which conveys the idea of Gus as a weak character, one who is uncertain about the events and therefore one with a diminished authority regarding the truth or probability of expression of reality. Seldom does Ben use modalised epistemic expressions: *it could be any time; they must have been pretty quick; he's probably only rented it*. From this we might be tempted to assume Ben's almost complete knowledge of the reality around him. However, only twice does he employ high epistemic expressions: *We'll be on the job any minute; It'll be any minute now*; This means that Ben is not the "all-knowing" participant as we might believe at first sight. Instead, his

perspective is one perfectly defined in: *Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up?* (our emphasis). Gus on the other hand is wary and uneasy. Such uneasiness is shown through high boulomaic modality in: *I hope he's got a shilling, anyway, if he comes; I'll be glad when it's over tonight; I hope the bloke's not going to get excited tonight or anything; that's what I want to know.*

As previously suggested, Ben's scarce use of high epistemic modality is not a sign of total command or knowledge of the events. His deference to a third unseen participant, explicitly indicated in stage directions, is also shown through his use of some deontic expressions, this time using the pronoun "we" as if admitting he is no longer the boss: *We'd better tell them; We should have used it before; ...we'd better let you know...*; Ben's submission to a third more powerful participant is made clear here as well as in the end:

BEN. Yes

*To ear. He listens. To mouth*

Straight away. Right.

*To ear. He listens. To mouth*

Sure we're ready

*To ear. He listens. To mouth*

Understood. Repeat. He has arrived and will be coming in straight away. The normal method to be employed. Understood.

*To ear. He listens. To mouth*

Sure we're ready

*Sure we're ready*, with high epistemic modality, is uttered twice. Besides that, from this extract we can infer that orders are given to Ben, who accepts and repeats them in a mostly mechanical way. This notion of mechanisation in Ben's behaviour is also shown in the excerpt where he gives the instructions to Gus and makes him repeat them one by one. But Ben misses one step and Gus makes him notice it. Ben's answer is *I know. What?* The use of high epistemic modality here denotes, again, Ben's attitude of superiority over Gus. However, the co-occurrence of *What?* indicates Ben's confusion due to an interruption of the repetition routine. Another clue to Ben's mechanical behaviour is the way he introduces conversation about the news in the paper. This event occurs three times during the play, and the three times the exchange is almost identical. All of this leads us to conclude that Ben is involved in a situation in which he is a victim, rather than the powerful participant. His "*just-do-it-and-shut-up*" policy, his mechanisation and his submissiveness make Ben the perfect hitman and paradoxical-

ly the perfect victim of an organisation that forces him to betray and kill his partner. Gus, on the other hand, with his language loaded with uncertainty and hesitation probes assertive at the end, when we come to realise that he was right to question and suspect that something was wrong. His boulomaic modality in *I wanted to ask you something* and his low epistemic expressions such as *I thought perhaps you might know something* are changed into categorical assertions, as if gaining some control:

GUS I asked you a question.

BEN Enough!

GUS (*with growing agitation*). I asked you before. Who moved in? You said the people who had it before moved out. Well, who moved in?

BEN (*hunched*). Shut up

GUS I told you, didn't I?

BEN (*standing*). Shut up!

GUS (*feverishly*). I told you before who owned this place, didn't I? I told you

BEN *bites him viciously on the shoulder*.

I told you who ran this place, didn't I?

BEN *bites him viciously on the shoulder*.

It is clear here that Gus is no longer the uncertain and obedient partner. The repetition of his assertion *I told you*, seem to place him in a position of authority over Ben. But still, he fails to understand that he is the one to be killed.

The above examination of Pinter's play might lead to further study and analysis. We make no claim to originality. Neither do we consider this exploration to be exhaustive. Instead, it is hoped this study may serve as a starting point to raise some interest among EFL teachers and learners. With this in mind, some pedagogical considerations could be made.

Literary texts provide useful tools in the EFL classroom as students develop an awareness of how language functions. Dealing with linguistic aspects of the text might become interesting and enjoyable by the EFL learner. Workshops can be designed drawing insights from linguistic models and incorporating activities of the same kind used when developing any language session, i.e.: skimming, scanning, prediction, etc. In the case of *The Dumb Waiter*, special worksheets can be prepared where the use of modal operators is foregrounded or where their use is compared when uttered by Ben or by Gus throughout the play.

If dealt with in a Literature session, a Linguistic model for interpretation and analysis might be of special benefit for the students. Grasping meaning on the basis of linguistic evidence may encourage enjoyment as the students develop their literary competence and feel confident and able to handle the literary text in a more skilful manner. Discussion can be promoted on the writer's style and the way he/she manipulates language in order to convey various levels of meaning. At a higher level, the students may be encouraged to discuss the suitability or appropriateness of a determined model in order to uncover and explain hidden meanings.

In short, as Carter (1997) claims, an integration of language and literary study can be of mutual benefit. While literary texts can be used to promote the development of various skills in the EFL classroom, linguistically-based models and teaching strategies derived from them "can provide a 'way in' to a text, can help raise questions about its meanings and can begin to sensitize students to its linguistic-structural organization" (p. 186).

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