



COMMUNICATION PROBLEM IN SAM SHEPARD'S PLAYS

Aydın GÖRMEZ*

M. Metin BARLIK**

Zeki EDİS***

Abstract

The lack of communication and deficiencies in language are apparent themes in Sam Shepard's works. His characters representing modern man simply cannot communicate. At this point a question arises: is it because language is missing and conveys no meaning or his characters have no ability to communicate? The answer to this question is not that simple since there are various factors that are at work. However, recklessness and arbitrariness of the characters are only two reasons that could be counted among others.

Shepard seems to prefer a world of silence where language is stripped of its meaning, and monologues replace dialogues. To express themselves, his characters mostly use violence, instead of words. Violence becomes a kind of language. This article aims to reveal how masterfully Shepard applies a language, which brings the playwright closer to absurd playwrights.

Key Words: Sam Shepard, Absurd, Communication, Body Language, Violence.

SAM SHEPARD'IN OYUNLARINDA İLETİŞİM SORUNU

Öz

İletişim yokluğu ve dildeki kusurlar Sam Shepard'ın oyunlarının belirgin temalarıdır. Modern bireyi temsil eden Shepard'ın karakterleri iletişim kuramazlar. Bu noktada “bu durum, dilin eksikliğinden ve dolayısıyla bir anlam taşımamasından mı, yoksa karakterlerin iletişim kurma yeteneğinin olmamasından mı kaynaklanır?” sorusu akla gelir. Bu sorunun cevabı çok kolay değildir çünkü bunun birçok nedeni vardır. Ancak bu nedenler arasından karakterlerin umursamazlığı ve keyfiyeti sadece iki örnek olarak verilebilir.

Shepard, dilin anlamını yitirdiği ve diyalogların yerini monologların aldığı bir dünya tercih eder gibidir. Onun karakterleri kendilerini ifade etmek için kelimeler yerine çoğunlukla şiddete başvururlar. Şiddet bir iletişim aracı haline gelir. Bu makale, oyun yazarını saçma oyun yazarlarına yaklaştıran dil kullanımını nasıl ustaca uyguladığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sam Shepard, Saçma, İletişim, Beden Dili, Şiddet.

* Y. Doç. Dr., Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Van/Türkiye, aydingormez@hotmail.com

** Y. Doç. Dr., Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Van/Türkiye, drbarlik@gmail.com

*** Öğr. Gör., Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Van/Türkiye, zekiedis@hotmail.com



1. INTRODUCTION

In a language, words are expected to carry shared meanings and one learns those meanings by means of education and socialization. Language is not only an important medium in communication but it also gives man an identity and a worldview (Fulcher, 1999: 275). However, all these aspects of language are shattered in Sam Shepard's plays. We get a contradictory impression of the language the characters use: either it has lost its function and does not convey any meaning, or it reveals the bare reality of human nature. The disorder of the lines is a reflection of inner worlds, so it reveals a frightful truth. His characters do not pretend, and they do not try to filtrate or soften their words. They are extremely natural. In accordance with the language the characters use, the characters do not think about their attitudes; they react recklessly and the dialogues in Shepard's plays reflect this arbitrariness. They do not wait for the right word to come; they simply say it. As a consequence, what they say renders ambiguity. This condition openly carries the traits of Dadaist and surrealist writings (Bigsby, 1985: 235).

According to a survey conducted by the social psychologists, on average, the influence of words on communication is 10 %, tone 30 %, and body language 60 % (Altıntaş and Çamur, 2001: 39). Body language, though unconsciously, is used very often. As such, communication without words constitutes an important place in Shepard's plays. Shepard applies silent communication, namely non-verbal communication, widely in his works. In his plays, the plots are not of much importance, and the language carries uncertainties, but the body language tells what words deny (Bigsby, 2000:165). All these characteristics clearly show traits of Absurd drama where clichés and repetitions are what the characters stick to and they result from quite obsessive habits of mankind (Uslu, 2001: 190).

2. COMMUNICATION PROBLEM IN SAM SHEPARD'S PLAYS

As a postmodern playwright Sam Shepard writes in a way very much indebted to absurd playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. For absurdist playwrights, language reflects predicaments of our modern age. Since corruption, distortion and fragmentation are what shape our true nature and identity, it becomes almost impossible for all these problems not to cover the language as well as our culture. Sam Shepard is an experimental playwright who likes to reflect this absurd situation of mankind on stage. *The Tooth of Crime*, *Action*, *Curse of Starving Class*, *Tongues*, *Buried Child*, *Paris, Texas*, *A Lie of the Mind* and *Savage/Love* are just some of his plays we will examine here concerning the issue mentioned in the introduction.

The setting of *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) is a barren stage on which there is only a silver-studded black chair which gives an evil appearance. The play tells the duel or an absurd word battle between an aging superstar, Hoss and the young Crow. This is an elusive battle and its rules are confusing. A 'game' is mentioned in the play, and seemingly this is a death game.

Charles Morowitz, the director of *The Tooth of Crime*, talks about the language Shepard applies in the play: "It utilized an invented language derived from several American idioms which included pop, underworld slang, sports jargon, and that ever-changing vernacular that musicians continually keep alive amongst themselves and which gradually filters into the national tongue" (qtd. in Shewey, 1997: 81). The experts agree that since the play includes American peculiarities, it is hard to understand outside America, as it was put on stage in England. Morowitz tells about its London production: "The play has been largely uncomprehended in London. But the play is as American as



rolled joints of faded Levis. It not only belongs in America, it actually looks exotic and unreal in England” (qtd. in Shewey, 1997: 85). Not only the language the characters use but also the identity of them are shattered and fragmented. And naturally they “cannot communicate through the inadequate language which cannot wholly transform the inner fragmented self of them” (Mehrabani, 2012: 135)

The characters’ inability to find a way to convey their thoughts is a theme in most of Shepard’s plays as Don Shewey argues about *Action* (1974), which “mirrors the very difficulty of finding a language of social communication and a means to express feeling” (1997: 92). Shewey suggests that *Action* “defines Nixonian America in a jagged, constrained structure that mirrors the very difficulty of finding a language of social communication and a means to express feeling: on a very basic level *Action* is about loss of language. This play is considered as his “most Beckett-like play” (92). In *Action*, the main character, Shooter, describes how misleading it is to assume to have a sweet home and the paradox between the appearance and the reality:

Just because we’re surrounded by four walls and a roof doesn’t mean anything. It’s still dangerous. The chances of something happening are just as great. Anything could happen. Any move is possible. I’ve seen it. You go outside. The world is quiet. White. Everything resounding. Not a sound of a motor. Not a light. You see into the house. You see the candles. You watch the people. You can see what it’s like inside. The candles draw you. You get a cold feeling being outside. Separated. You have an idea that being inside it’s cozier. Friendlier. Warmth. People. Conversation. Everyone using a language. Then you go inside. It’s a shock. It’s not like how you expected. You lose what you had outside. You forget that there even is an outside. The inside is all you know. You hunt for a way of being with everyone. A way of finding how to behave. You find out what’s expected of you. You act yourself out (283-284).

In *Curse of Starving Class* (1976), the communication between parents occurs in an indirect way through the children: they leave messages and the children convey them. Moreover, these messages are not constructive, but disturbing and disruptive, which also harm the psychological health of the children, who later develop the similar ‘poisonous’ traits (Sparr, Erstling & Boehnlein, 1990: 570). This might be the reason why Shepard prefers silence or music, as in *Tongues* (1978), in a world where language is stripped of its meaning, and monologues replace dialogues (Biggsby, 1985: 246).

The characters in *Buried Child* (1979) seem to go crazy. There is no affirmative outcome in their actions, they are charged with negative energy, or they seem to use their overcharged loads in a harmful way. They behave as if they are trapped by an unseen force. This condition has deprived them of the ability to communicate. They seem to use images or visuals for communication reminding us of primitive rituals. Spreading corns and their husks around, the brutal haircut resulting in bleeding the scalp, hurling the wooden leg, harvesting vegetables from uncultivated soil, and above all, unearthing a tiny corpse of a baby which is still fresh are the horrible scenes by means of which this vicious family try to communicate (Hinden, 1986: 407). The wild, beast-like family members do not recognize Vince, in *Buried Child*, who has not lost his human features yet. This recognition is a symbolic one. The monstrous family members have developed a strange form of communication and cannot communicate with anyone outside. They do not see similar behaviours in Vince at first; such a person cannot be one of them. Having been intoxicated after taking so much alcohol, Vince undergoes a sort of transformation and resembles them. Only then does the family recognize him, and Vince inherits



not only the property, the home and the sofa, but also the physical and psychological features of Dodge, the grandfather.

Language fragmentation, which is peculiar to postmodernist writing, is manifested in *Buried Child*. As a contradiction “most of the characters are unwilling to say anything but, at the same time, they need to talk; that’s why “aimless and fragmented conversations are the exact result of talking for the sake of talking” (Hooti and Shoostarian 2011: 83). For the character Tilden, talking is even a matter of life and death “you gotta talk or you’ll die” (1981: 78).

In *Paris, Texas* (1983), Shepard turns language into a deformed one through the hero who, escaping from the social responsibilities, is dissocialised, and stuck into a deep and frightening anxiety (Bigsby, 2000: 190). The playwright purposefully starts the play with Travis, a mute character, which becomes a matter of concern around the critics. In an interview in the Guardian he makes the issue clear:

It was a very conscious decision. As conscious as you can get. I had two experiences with very close friends of mine who experienced aphasia, the loss of language. It shocked me. With aphasia, oftentimes the symbolism of language is skewed and the names for things can be swapped around. The person speaking absolutely understands what they mean inside, but they might call a “door” a “dog.” It’s very easy to lose language – it can be shut off in a second. So, what about a character who can’t speak, but has all this stuff going on inside of him? He’s feeling, but it’s not being expressed. That’s where we started. (qtd. in Hogg, 2013)

In the opening stage direction of the play, *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), the writer sums up not only his characters’ but also modern man’s psychological condition: “Impression of huge dark space and distance between the two characters with each one isolated in his own pool of light” (7). As the play begins we are introduced a character, Jake, isolated from life, and wanders in a realm where everything is lost, and cannot utter the words properly. His isolation and alienation have been mirrored in the language as well. Like any of his characteristics, his language is also out of control. Language is not any more a means of communication, but instead, ambiguity and chaos are seen as the medium as a result of an unfriendly deterministic existential world.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, language is used for deceiving and betraying others. Jake and Beth’s illogical manners demonstrate a considerable harmony with the language they use. Having a brain damage, Beth has lost most of her motor abilities including control over using language. When she speaks, her tongue becomes troubled and towards the end of her speech the meaning is finally lost with stuttering. The language she utters is fractured and becomes meaningless.

When Beth tries to realize the violence she was exposed to, she comes up with the word ‘love’ as a bizarre conflict which Shepard applies effectively in his plays. In some parts of the play, we repeatedly observe that towards the end of Beth’s speech, language is completely out of control. The language she uses is fractured and becomes meaningless. Beth’s difficulty in speaking derives not only from her brain damage, but it is the language itself lacking, not adequate to express (Bigsby, 2000: 190-1).

To express themselves, the characters mostly use violence instead of words. Violence becomes a kind of language. Man cannot communicate any longer. Thus, language is replaced by physical violence. In such plays as *A Curse of the Starving Class*, *Tongues* (1978), *Savage/Love* (1979), *Buried*



Child, and *True West* (1980), language is not capable of expressing thoughts and feelings because pains, fears, anxieties, despair and chaos are different sources of this inadequacy. Even love or other good feelings are manifested by means of violence in most of his plays as the play title, *Savage/Love* implies (Bigsby, 2000: 187). Jake's beating his wife in *A Lie of the Mind*; Wesley's urinating on his sister's charts, and Weston's breaking the door in *Curse of the Starving Class*; Austin's assault on a typewriter with a golf club in *True West*, and the characters' beating the wall of the stage or Eddie's car being shot and blown up in *Fool For Love* (1982) are simply the examples of ways of a communication.

The playwright also examines marital disharmonies and parental irresponsibilities. The absence of meaning is also felt in dialogues between parents, grandparents, or children. The relationship between the husband and wife becomes a hostile one. They do not respect each other. The only idea they have in common is the fantasy to escape. They exchange words, which gives a false impression that they communicate. They never reach a compromise. What is more, they do not try to understand, or listen to each other. Everyone speaks without listening. Since they do not have an idea about what the others are saying, they cannot make judgements properly. The modern man suffers from the lack of meaning because the natural form of communication disappears, replaced by an artificial one performed by experts in exchange for money (Sparr, Erstling & Boehnlein, 1990: 574).

Shepard tries to delve into the inner world of the individuals. He makes their heart speak, so the characters act recklessly, and the dialogues are uttered randomly. The language reflects the thoughts and inner worlds of the characters purely. The abrupt changes of the moods bring about chaos because what are said are the direct reflections of feelings which have not been thought over before being expressed. Shepard, as an experimental writer, knows how stormy human psyche is. He knows very well that the language we speak never expresses our real emotions:

The way that I think about language is that it's happening inside all those people. That it just happened to be spoken because it's a play. Like you can be washing the dishes and (have) an apocalyptic nightmare going on inside you. People at a picnic, yet inside they're in turmoil. It is like as if it could be seen in this sort of way-that the play is silent and the dialogue just comes out of what's going on inside all those people. That's what's so neat about writing-you get to speak all that stuff that's going on in your head. (qtd. in Shewey, 1997: 46)

In his plays the power of words has a capacity to form some visions in the mind of the audience or reader rather than to explain the milieu the characters share. Language or words come off as a result of intuition rather than rational thought. Spontaneity is superior to design, and words get their energy from the power of intuition. However, rationality is not fully put aside although it is not privileged (Bigsby, 2000: 174).

3. CONCLUSION

Modern individual experiences an unavoidable fragmentation in almost every field of life. A fragmented language is naturally followed by a fractured identity, which is clearly illustrated in Sam Shepard's plays. The idea that language has lost its function and meaning is not only Shepard's but also almost all postmodernist writers, notably absurd playwrights' thought.



The characters cannot control their behaviours and the language they speak, which causes an absurd condition. Therefore, language becomes unreliable and never conveys the real messages the characters intend to give. The language modern man uses is full of deficiencies, so it cannot bear any message or meaning. Then, if the language is lacking and cannot reflect truth or provide communication, it is invalid. The predicaments of his characters are, in fact, those of ours, and both they and we try to find solutions for these problems, and thus to end all the ailments and chaos, yet all are in vain (Bigsby, 1985:249-250).

Like Beckett and Pinter, Shepard believes that language masks devils and angels. The playwright writes in a form very much indebted to the absurd theatre. Particularly using nonsensical and abrupt actions, sudden and unexpected changes in identity, illogical dialogues nullifying the validity of language, rejection of linear structure and reasonable procedures, inconsistency of the characters and using an absurd communicative way are what bring him close to absurd drama.

4. WORKS CITED

- Altıntaş, E. and Çamur, D. (2001). *Sözsüz iletişim ve Beden Dili*, Ankara: Nobel Yayın Dağıtım.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. (1985). *A Critical Introduction to the Twentieth Century American Drama*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. (2000). *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000*, The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, UK.
- Fulcher, J. and Scott, J. (1999). *Sociology*. Oxford University Press.
- Hinden, M. (1986). After Beckett: The Plays of Pinter, Stoppard, and Shepard. *Contemporary Literature*. 27. pp. 400-408.
- Hooti, N. and Shooshtarian, S. (2011). A Postmodernist Reading of Sam Shepard's Buries Child. *Canadian Social Science*. Vol. 7:1. pp. 76-89.
- Shepard, S. (1998). Action. *From the Other Side of the Century II: A New American Drama*, eds. Los Angeles: Douglas Messerli and Mac Wellman, Sun & Moon Press.
- Mehrabi, B. (2012). Postmodernism and Language in Sam Shepard's True West and Tooth of Crime. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*. (1: 4) pp. 131-137.
- Shepard, S. (1981). "Buried Child" in Sam Shepard: Seven Plays. New York: Dial Press.
- Shepard, S. (1996). A Lie of the Mind. *Plays: 3*. New York: Methuen Drama.
- Shewey, D. (1997). *Sam Shepard*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Sparr, L. F., Erstling, S. S. and Boehnlein, J. K. (1990). Sam Shepard and the Dysfunctional American Family: Therapeutic Perspectives. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, XLIV, 563-576.
- Uslu, A. D. (2001). *Amerikan Tiyatrosunda Düsler*, İzmir: Dokuz Eylül Yayınları.

4.1. Internet Resources

- Hogg, C. D. (2013, December, 1). Sam Shepard, the Good Guy and Bad Guy Stuff Just Doesn't Interest Me. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/>