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Conversational Dispossession: Verbal Authority, Spatial Access, and Conditional Belonging in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*

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Abstract

The article sets out and examines the idea of conversational dispossession—which is the way in which a person's ability to define himself, to defend his account of what has happened, and to claim a position in a social setting is gradually undermined by others exercising control over the course of the conversation. By looking at Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party and The Caretaker together, the article claims that the violence in these plays is not mainly physical and is not simply atmospheric, but is instead carried out through ordinary conversational practices such as questioning, interruption, repetition, contradiction, making demands for an explanation, using strategic silence, and offering help. It identifies three overlapping mechanisms: narrative dispossession, whereby a character's control over his own past is weakened; spatial dispossession, in which the linguistic negotiation becomes linked to physical access to a room; and relational dispossession, in which one's sense of belonging is made dependent on compliance or usefulness. For the analysis it makes use of speech-act theory, Goffman's treatment of face and the interaction order, and Foucault's idea of discourse, although it maintains that each of these frameworks has its limitations. The comparison demonstrates that Stanley's intense interrogation and Davies's prolonged bargaining result in different kinds of vulnerability: in the first play an already established identity is broken down, while in the second the issue is whether a person in a vulnerable position can ever secure a lasting place. The concept of conversational dispossession is presented as an interpretive one rather than as a new critical term, and its usefulness is judged by the things it brings to light in the plays' language.

Keywords: *Harold Pinter; conversational dispossession; speech acts; face-work; spatial criticism; The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; modern British drama; dramatic dialogue; belonging.*

Introduction: The Violence Hidden in Ordinary Speech

Pinter's theatre is frequently referred to as violent, and while this description is accurate it is also too vague. In *The Birthday Party* no actual physical violence takes place: two men turn up, a party is held, and one man is removed the following morning. In *The Caretaker* as well, no one is hit, evicted by force, or legally excluded; a tramp is given a bed, offered a job, and then left in a room with the light off. The violence in both plays is genuine, but it is mostly carried out through conversation—through questions which have to be answered, offers which have to be accepted or rejected, stories which are disbelieved, and silences which are made to have significance. The article maintains that these are not merely the surface characteristics of Pinter's menace but rather the means by which it functions. Its main argument is that the ordinary practices of conversation in these two plays act as a method of

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dispossession: they take away from the characters their authority over their own identities, their histories, and ultimately their position in the world.

The main issue that the article deals with is one of precision. Over fifty years of criticism has shown that Pinter's dialogue is menacing, oblique, repetitive, and full of power; that his characters are engaged in struggles over territory and recognition; and that his pauses and silences have a dramatic effect (Onič; Zhang; Uchman). The aspect which has been comparatively less clearly defined, however, is the way in which the exchange of ordinary statements redistributes authority — for instance, who acquires the right to demand an account from someone, who is obliged to provide one, whose version of events is taken to be credible, and how a conversation about a room can become a decision on whether or not someone is allowed to stay there. The term "comedy of menace", which was invented by David Campton in 1957 and first applied to *The Birthday Party* by Irving Wardle in 1958, has proved to be remarkably enduring (Dukore et al.), but it describes an atmosphere rather than a specific process. In the same way, the claim that Goldberg and McCann "annihilate Stanley's personality totally" and then enable his "forced rejuvenation" as a respectable member of the system is a statement regarding the outcome, not about the communicative process that leads to it (Dabi and Paul 448). The point being made in this argument is that this process can be analysed and that in order to analyse it the dialogue must be viewed as social action rather than as an expression of an underlying theme.

That is why I am suggesting the idea of conversational dispossession as the central concept of the article, meaning the way in which a person's capacity to define himself, to defend his version of what happened, and to claim a position in a social setting is gradually undermined by others' control over the course of conversation. The concept is intentionally composed of three parts since in Pinter these three aspects are interwoven. Narrative dispossession works by means of questioning, accusing, contradicting and by disrupting a person's personal history, thus weakening the individual's authority over his own identity. Spatial dispossession is achieved through discussions concerning housing, rooms, the domestic setup and the right to remain, showing how linguistic negotiation becomes directly linked to physical access to space. Relational dispossession comes about through apparent offers of help, demands for cooperation, individual complaints and competing assertions of authority, demonstrating how a sense of belonging can become based on compliance, usefulness or on accepting another person's conditions.

The discussion is based on six questions. Firstly, how do ordinary conversations in Pinter's plays become tools of coercion? Secondly, in what way does questioning, silence, interruption, repetition, contradiction, and the presence of competing narratives result in an unequal

distribution of power between the characters? Thirdly, in what way does the struggle to control language overlap with the struggle to control both domestic space and social belonging? Fourthly, why do the verbal conflicts in the two plays lead to different kinds of vulnerability and exclusion? Fifthly, how do Pinter's pauses, evasions, ambiguities, and indeterminate exchanges question the idea that conversation must lead to mutual understanding? And finally, what contribution does the comparison make to the study of modern British drama, interpersonal power, and the connection between language and material vulnerability?

The comparison is useful since both plays present the same issue under different circumstances. While *The Birthday Party* shows how intense and deliberate pressure is exerted on a man who already has a room and a regular routine, The Caretaker illustrates the kind of scattered and intermittent negotiation carried out by a man who has no room whatsoever. Stanley's experience of being dispossessed is rapid and final: his existing identity is taken apart and he is removed as its holder. In contrast, Davies' dispossession is gradual, can be reversed and in part is self-caused; he is never truly at ease and the play continually raises the question of whether he can turn tolerance into a sense of belonging. When the two plays are read together, two mistakes are avoided — the mistake of seeing all Pinteresque power as one homogeneous force and the error of always taking the intruder as the agent and the resident as the victim. As several critics have pointed out, Stanley is not an innocent: he makes fun of Meg and manipulates her affection before the men arrive, and he is just as doubtful in his own way as the men who take him away (Hall & Wong). Davies is not a passive sufferer but an active and contradictory participant in his own marginalization, "not an innocent victim but also a victimizer" (Mahmoudi et al.). Aston's hospitality is not simply acts of benevolence nor is it covert domination; it is a vulnerable attempt to establish a connection on the host's own terms (Wong). The comparison is therefore also a form of discipline in that it brings each character's agency into sharp focus together with their vulnerability.

II. Beyond Menace: Conversation as Social Action

2.1 The Critical Inheritance and Its Limits

The first and to this day the most influential way of describing these plays is in terms of atmosphere. Martin Esslin's concept of the Theatre of the Absurd provided critics with a set of terms relating to futility and a breach of conventional forms, and later scholarly work has on numerous occasions had to struggle against the dulling impact of that terminology. As one recent study states, Esslin's concise definition "turned off the revolutionary potential of the absurdist movement" since it made all absurdist playwrights identical; what distinguishes

Pinter is the way in which he places tyranny "among the teapots", so that "power, its uses and abuses, starts at home" (Hall). This point is similar to the one advanced in this article, and the purpose of the present paper is to give it concrete form: if power begins at home then it begins in the everyday patterns of communication within the home—namely in who is asked where he was born, who is told to sit down, who is asked to explain himself, and who is allowed to change the subject. Research within the comedy-of-menace tradition has listed the pertinent stylistic features—oblique and repetitive language, characters who talk past one another, avoid giving answers, and refuse to listen (Onič)—and stylistic analysis of the Pinteresque has shown that the distinction between a pause, a long pause, and silence is one of the most typical traits of his dramatic work, so that the "empty patches" and the white spaces on the page should be interpreted as texture rather than as interruptions (1944- et al.). Silence, in this view, is not a failure of communication but an alternative form of it: Pinter himself differentiated a silence in which "no word is spoken" from one in which "a torrent of language is being used" to cover a character's nakedness (Uchman), and it has been demonstrated that silence and pause are more effective than speech at revealing anger, fear, and distress while at the same time producing a menacing atmosphere (Zhang).

The work in question proves that Pinter's language is achieving something, though it fails to make clear exactly what it is achieving and at what cost. The most promising advance in recent criticism has been the introduction of pragmatic and conversation-analytic approaches. Elyamany's examination of the interrogation scene in *The Birthday Party* shows that asymmetrical turn-taking, the violation of Gricean maxims, and the use of impoliteness strategies all result in "asymmetrical relational power" and therefore cause "an identity loss" for those who have their face assaulted "unwarrantedly and excessively" (Elyamany). Aliwie's investigation of conversational silence in the same play regards silence as a deliberate speech act which has specific functions in terms of power and face (Aliwie). Lee applies Austin's theory of performatives to The Caretaker, claiming that Davies "uses the performative as a means of survival", that Aston resists by using the constative, and that Mick "shows mastery in carrying out performativity" (Lee). Other research on repetition in interrogation scenes from drama produced after 1950 regards Pinter's play as a typical example and sees repetition as a means of inflicting verbal and psychological violence (Onič and Kacijan 18), while a broader pragmatic tradition has analysed dramatic dialogue by means of speech acts, turn-taking, and civility in order to shed light on the relationships between the characters (Duzgun; Splitu & Matic). Studies making a comparison between interruption in parliamentary and dramatic dialogue have demonstrated how the particular constraints of each institution determine who is allowed to interrupt and what effect this has (Ilie).

These two limitations appear again in the existing literature and they determine the area that this article addresses. The first one is methodological: in many pragmatic studies the play is treated as a corpus against which the framework's categories can be illustrated, and as a result the analysis ends up verifying the theory rather than putting it to the test in the face of dramatic complexity. Lee makes this point clearly by stating that Austin's framework "remains strong and self-sufficient in its ability to examine drama and needs no further development or modification from later theorists" (Lee). I hold the contrary view: it is precisely at the points where speech-act theory, face theory, and discourse theory break down—that is, where the sincerity, intention, and institutional status which these theories take for granted are either conspicuously missing or deliberately withheld—that Pinter's plays reveal themselves. The second limitation is interpretive: thematically based criticism which interprets Pinter through the lenses of ideology, absence, or the metaphysics of the absurd tends to spread power so thinly that no character can be held responsible for anything. For example, an Althusserian interpretation concludes that Stanley, Meg, Goldberg, and McCann are all interpellated subjects, Goldberg and McCann being no less blind than their victim (Günday). This is a valid argument and Section III deals with it directly, but it runs the risk of eliminating the very asymmetry which makes the interrogation so unbearable for the audience.

The third element comes from spatial interpretations of The Caretaker. The action of the play is set in a room full of junk in a run-down house, the other rooms of which require "a lot of doing" (Mahmoudi et al.), and it has long been noted that the subject of the play, in the most direct terms, is "fighting for a room" (Li and Li). The house has been seen as a place of refuge that eventually becomes a prison, with Aston's post-asylum silence, Davies's constant self-reinventions, and Mick's unfulfilled ambitions serving as textual signs of fragmentation (BAMBA). Thematically, the play has been linked to isolation, class division, racism, mental health, and the difference between illusion and reality (Richa & Morgan). However, the spatial and the practical aspects of the criticism have generally developed side by side: one group focuses on the room while the other concentrates on the dialogue. The point I am proposing here is that in these plays the room is created through the dialogue—access to domestic space is gained, granted, taken away, and disputed through speech—and it is for this reason that the plays are so much more disturbing than their plots.

2.2 Speech Acts, Face and Discourse: A Selective Framework

Austin's account of the performative demonstrates that saying something usually involves doing something as well: utterances have illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, and a marriage vow does not depict an existing reality but brings one into being (Coeckelbergh). He also believed that when one says "I know" one is not merely reporting on a mental

achievement but is instead giving one's word — that is, offering one's authority in support of the truth of a proposition — and that promising is a ritual which ties the speaker to others and in which his reputation is at stake (Smith). This is directly applicable to Pinter, since his characters are always giving their word, asserting that they know, and binding themselves to arrangements which they are unable to keep. It is also relevant in a second, more subtle way: the felicity conditions which must be met in order for an illocutionary act to succeed are largely conventional, whereas other theorists regard the conditions of success as lying in the speaker's intention, so that the two main approaches to speech acts differ exactly where Pinter's dialogue is most ambiguous (Lalić). Sbisà's reappraisal points out that Austin was aware of the issue of "non-seriousness" but did not pursue it, and that perlocution assumes a view of action as one involving responsibility (Sbisà). The category of the non-serious is native to the theatre, and Pinter's dialogue makes this aspect visible: his characters make promises, accusations, and offers the conventional status of which is uncertain and the intentions of which are not available to their listeners. Searle's classification of directives, commissives, and declarations, and Grice's cooperative principle, provide useful labels for what is being attempted and what is being withheld (Ma), but the plays constantly show the breakdown of the cooperative assumption, which is why Gricean analysis in this context usually amounts to a list of maxims that have been violated (Elyamany).

Goffman provides the second set of terms. His idea of the interaction order introduces a kind of action syntax which is separate from personality and social structure (Heritage and Clayman), and his explanation of self-presentation regards the work involved in interaction as consisting in the projection of a face which must be accepted by others and which in turn must be maintained by them, the value of smooth interaction stemming from this mutual maintenance (Keane). The concept of face has since been developed in many different directions so that competing concepts can now be identified and compared (Arundale), and the interaction order has been connected with the joint production of discourse (Toye). Conversation analysis has demonstrated that preference structures govern sequences: agreement is preferred to disagreement, self-correction is preferred to other-correction, offers are preferred to requests, and a recipient can make use of these preferences by anticipatorily completing the speaker's turn in order to prevent a dispreferred action from taking place (Lerner). This final point is an exact description of what Mick does to Davies, and of what Goldberg and McCann do to Stanley: they complete, redirect and foreclose Stanley's utterances before he has the opportunity to carry out his own action. The drawback of face theory in this case is that it assumes that the participants are aiming at preserving one another's face; Pinter's interrogators, on the other hand, are aiming at destroying it, and the theory therefore has to be inverted rather than applied (Elyamany).

The idea of discourse that Foucault presents offers the third and most warning element. According to this view, a discourse is a structured set of statements whose acceptance is decided by the structure itself and not by how well they correspond to some reality outside it (Lynch), and such sets of statements define subjects—specifying who is allowed to speak, with what authority, and on what subjects (Griggs and Howarth) (Ostrowicka). Above all, since the subject of this play is a room, the Foucauldian statement is not limited to spoken words but also covers texts, tables, and "arrangements of things, such as architecture", and it is in discourse that power and knowledge come together, with discursive formations assigning "empowering and disempowering subject positions" (Feindt and Oels). This way of putting it justifies the main point of this article: the room in The Caretaker is not merely the setting for a verbal confrontation but rather one of the statements by means of which the confrontation takes place. Foucault's limitation is just as significant. He is not interested in ordinary performatives but only in "serious speech acts"—utterances which are supported by expertise, a position within an institution, and an authoritative style of discourse (Griggs and Howarth). Pinter's most important utterances are by no means serious in this sense; they are improvised, without foundation, and can be denied. The value of discourse theory in this case is therefore mainly negative: it shows what Pinter's characters do not have—the institutional justification which would give weight to their words—and thus explains why they have to acquire that justification through their conversations with one another.

With regard to the spatial dimension I make use of Lefebvre's threefold understanding of space as material, conceptual and lived, a version adapted by critics who have pointed out that stage space is at the same time architectural, metaphorical, psychological and theatrical (Khalil; 林佳靜 & Dang). Particularly useful is Robinson's study of rooms in dramatic realism since it regards realist interiors as both physical enclosures and as spaces which can be experienced on an unreflective and a reflective level, and notes that homes function as shelters even though their inhabitants are continually reminded of what is beyond the walls through intrusion (Stojanovic). Research into marginalised characters has portrayed their relationship with space as involving a series of "repetitive negotiations with their surroundings" (Yun) — a description which fits Davies's situation in an unusually accurate manner and which will therefore be employed in Section IV as a counterpoint to language involving outright exclusion.

The following are the consequences of this system. Firstly, the expressive language continues to serve as the main kind of evidence, and theory is accepted only in so far as it helps to solve a textual problem. Secondly, it is not permitted for any one theoretical framework to be able to account for all aspects of either play: Austin is unable to account for the room, Lefebvre

cannot explain the question, and Foucault is unable to explain why Goldberg's authority collapses the moment he is asked to justify his own behaviour. Thirdly and most significantly, the idea of conversational dispossession must be tested in those instances in which it fails—that is, where control is resisted, where domination is not intended, and where the outcome is truly uncertain. Section V looks at these counter-cases explicitly.

III. *The Birthday Party*: Interrogation and the Destabilisation of Identity

3.1 Dispossession before the Intruders Arrive

It is a well-known fact that Goldberg and McCann bring about Stanley's downfall; it is less frequently observed, however, that the gradual loss of his authority starts before their arrival, as a result of the boarding house's own conversational habits. When Meg refers to Stanley in the third person while he is present, she states that "he" has at last come down for his breakfast and adds that he does not deserve it; as one interpretation of the play points out, this use of the third person strips Stanley of his status as a thinking, acting individual by replacing the "I" with a powerful "he" (Iché). The fact that Stanley turns up in pyjamas and with a beard not shaved reinforces his infantilization, and the way that Meg speaks to him presents him as a child whose individuality is not fully acknowledged (Iché). On the other hand, Petey uses the newspaper at breakfast to cut off or reduce communication with Meg and always manages to escape from the boarding house — he is the only character to refuse the party and choose instead to play chess (ALTAY). Therefore, prior to any interrogator appearing, the play has set up a kind of dialogue in which another person's sense of subjectivity is already being controlled by the others. This point is important for the argument since it demonstrates that communicative deprivation is not something that is carried out against Stanley solely by villains; it is a feature of the everyday speech situation he is in, which the intruders then take advantage of and make worse.

The boarding house, in Meg's hands, is also a world which she has designed all by herself — a private universe to which the outside world is cut off — and Stanley's connection with it has been interpreted as that of a fugitive who has taken refuge in one of the upstairs rooms and who, according to his own version of the story, was 'torn to pieces' and then locked up following a concert in the world which he now rejects (Altay). However, this version of events is not supported by anything in the play, and that is exactly the point. Stanley's credibility as a narrator is already questionable when the action of the play begins: he tells Meg about a career spent playing 'all over the country' and then limits it down to a single concert (Iché). The play presents us with a man whose self-description cannot be verified — a view which Pinter himself expressed in a programme note from 1960, when he said that the desire for

verification is to be understood but cannot always be fulfilled, that there are no clear distinctions between what is real and what is not, and that 'the more acute the experience the less articulate its expression' (Lynch 1944 et al.). The conversational dispossession in this play therefore has a special character in that it acts upon a self which has never been secure, and it does not so much reveal a lie as show that no account could have met the demand.

3.2 The Interrogation as A Redistribution of Authority

The interrogation has been said to move along 'tangential lines of thought', consisting of aggressive questioning which almost breaks down Stanley and leaves him by the next morning in the hands of the people who had come to take him (Bennett). What becomes apparent upon careful examination is not the content of the questions but the way in which conversational rights are distributed. According to Elyamany's analysis of take-overs, the scene is structured by a systematic asymmetry: the interrogators manage the allocation of turns, deliberately violate the principles of cooperation and use impolite strategies in such a way as to cause 'identity loss' for the character who, through excessive verbal attacks on his personal identity, is left without a sense of self (Elyamany). The specific mechanics involved should be identified since they are ordinary: interruption prevents a speaker from completing their turn (Duzgun); anticipatory completion, which involves finishing a turn that is still being formed, stops the speaker from carrying out the action they were about to take (Lerner); and repetition — that is, posing the same question again after an answer has been given — turns the exchange into a kind of psychological pressure (Onič and Kacijan). In the course of the interrogation, Stanley is asked for biographical details which he is unable to provide in the form required, and the request is repeated until the form itself becomes the punishment.

Silence performs a similar role and does so in both directions. In this play silence is not merely the absence of conversation but a deliberate action with powers and functions, being used for example to refuse an offer, avoid answering a question, or assert one's own position (Aliwie). The pauses and silences in the play are well known for being more communicative than the actual sentences, and the general view is that they convey anger, fear, and anguish more powerfully than speech and at the same time create a sense of menace (Zhang). Most important of all, the distribution of silence is just as unequal as that of speech: the right to remain silent is in fact a privilege, and in the context of the interrogation Stanley's silences are interpreted as admissions while those of his interrogators are seen as menacing. Pinter's distinction between a silence in which nothing is said and a silence that is covered by "a torrent of language" is directly relevant (Uchman): Goldberg's fluency is in itself a kind of concealment, and the torrent is the sound of someone covering his nakedness.

The play also presents the way in which authority is performed, and it is obvious that this is a performance. McCann cuts a newspaper into five equal strips and says twice to Stanley the same thing, 'Mind that'; when Goldberg notices, he puts an end to his subordinate's action with a show of executive dismissal — 'Why do you do that all the time? It's childish, it's pointless. It's without a single point' (Carpenter). This scene is advantageous for the argument since it illustrates authority being established in front of us through a counterorder rather than through an institution. It also demonstrates that the interrogators' hierarchy is not something natural but one which is kept up by the work of conversation. As Hewett's analysis of Pinter's own performance points out, Goldberg notes that Pinter 'chose to perform Goldberg as a performer', highlighting his questions with gestures and imitating playing the piano when asking whether Stanley can play (Hewett). Goldberg's power is therefore theatrical in two ways: it is exercised through performance and it relies on an audience — Meg's gullibility, McCann's obedience, and Lulu's admiration — for it to be recognized.

It is at this point that the idea of conversational dispossession is more exact than the use of the term menace. While menace has an effect on the audience, dispossession refers to a transaction between the characters. What Goldberg and McCann obtain from Stanley is not mainly his safety—that is in fact the result—but rather his narrative authority, that is to say the right to state who he is and what happened to him. By the end of the play Stanley's name, his past, and his profession have all become interchangeable with any account that is forced upon him, and he ends up in a situation from which he can neither refuse nor offer an explanation. The play presents this as a achievement achieved through dialogue, using questions, repetition, contradiction, and the deliberate withdrawal of the right to be believed.

3.3 What the Play Does not Settle

There are two qualifications which stop this interpretation from being turned into a conspiracy theory. The first relates to Stanley's own behaviour. Before the intruders appear, he makes fun of Meg and manipulates her feelings; according to Hall's description of the 2018 anniversary production, Stanley, "who is both their victim and their prize, is also abusive", and the men who take him are themselves "bullies who are driven by fear" (Hall). Wong's interpretation goes even further by claiming that Stanley is just as questionable as Goldberg and McCann and that his treatment of Meg shows him to be an intruder figure in his own right, so that his removal unintentionally frees Meg from his tyranny (Wong). If this is correct, then the conversational dispossession in the play is not the case of an innocent being victimised by villains but rather a clash of competing claims to the same domestic space — with the key feature that one side has the means of dialogue to enforce its claim while the other does not.

With regard to the totalising interpretations of the play, Günday's Althusserian analysis asserts that Goldberg and McCann are themselves blind agents of the ideology which they promote, being just as interpellated as Stanley, and that the characters' vulnerability reveals a general desire for acceptance (Günday). This interpretation is useful in ensuring that the interrogators do not become all-powerful representatives of the system, and it fits with the instance in which Goldberg establishes his authority by having his subordinate (Carpenter) contradict him. However, I disagree with the conclusion that the overall situation is one of symmetrical subjection. Although all four characters are subject to forces over which they have no control, the scene is asymmetric in the way conversational rights are distributed; Stanley is unable to put the questions, cannot refuse to answer, and cannot leave. To be dispossessed is not the same as to be determined, and that is why the idea of dispossession is intended to maintain this difference.

IV. The Caretaker: Shelter, Domestic Space, and Conditional Belonging

4.1 The Room as a Negotiated Object

The play begins in a room filled with junk in a house where all the other rooms require "a lot of doing" (Mahmoudi et al.). As critics have for a long time pointed out, the subject of the play is a struggle over the room (Li and Li); the struggle, however, is carried out almost entirely through conversation, and the meaning of the room changes with each statement about it. Lefebvre's triad is appropriate in this case because it does not separate the physical from the conceived and the experienced: the room is at the same time a physical shelter, a project ("I'm supposed to be doing up the place"), and a space that is lived in, the value of which is given by the negotiations that take place within it (Dang & Khalil). Robinson's description of realist interiors as phenomenal spaces which are experienced both unreflectively and reflectively, and of homes as shelters in which the occupants are reminded by intrusions of what is beyond the walls, fits Aston's house in a particularly accurate way (Stojanovic). Moreover, the Foucauldian idea that statements involve "arrangements of things, such as architecture", and that discursive formations assign empowering and disempowering positions to individuals, provides the key theoretical point: the room is not merely the background to the communicative struggle but is one of the statements through which that struggle is carried out (Feindt and Oels).

The first point to make is that Davies never truly manages to claim the space in which he finds himself. From the very beginning his right to that space is based on dialogue: he has to be given a bed, has to take it, has to tell people who he is, and has to prove himself useful or at least tolerable. As studies of marginalized people have shown, their relationship with space

consists of a series of repeated negotiations with their environment (Yun), and this description applies much more accurately to Davies than the idea of eviction; he is not got rid of once and for all but is constantly re-negotiated. This is the way in which spatial dispossession is different in this play from spatial dispossession in *The Birthday Party* . Stanley loses a room which he already had; Davies never turns occupancy into possession at all.

4.2 Hospitality and its Terms

The offer of shelter is the key instance of relational generosity in the play and is more nuanced than either a sentimental or a cynical interpretation permits. According to Wong, Aston's kindness and the hospitality he shows can be seen as a real effort on his part to reestablish contact with a world which has let him down following the trauma of being forcibly admitted to an asylum, an effort that is shown in his attention to mechanical objects and in the fact that he is willing to open up to the tramp (Wong). Pinter himself, as noted in a study of the play, stated that Aston does make an effort to build a human relationship and that "when he turns his back at the end, you know he'll never try again", also saying that the audience comes to sympathize with both sides (Love). The significance of this from a dramatic point of view is that the offer is vulnerable not powerful; Aston is not a landlady giving a benefit from a position of strength but a broken man who is trying to enter into a relationship.

Yet an offer is a speech act which includes conditions, and it is the person making the offer who determines those conditions. Austin's argument that promising ties the speaker to his reputation in a new way (Smith) applies in both directions: Aston's offer commits Aston, but it also makes Aston the one who can extend, redefine, or withdraw it. This represents a more subtle form of relational dispossession. Davies's sense of belonging is conditional—depending on Aston's continued goodwill, on Mick's judgment, and on his own usefulness—and the conditional nature is built into the very language of the arrangements rather than being stated outright. The position of caretaker, which Mick offers, turns tolerance into a contractual relationship; when Davies refuses this position, he is not merely declining a job, but rejecting the only available means of legitimate occupation. As one study states, Davies refuses and is "thus in the end expelled from the last shelter that may be offered to him" (Love).

4.3 Davies as Participant

Davies does not merely accept these terms passively, and the way the play presents the situation gives him a good deal of influence. According to Lee's performative analysis, Davies "uses the performative as a means of survival" – that is to say, the self-descriptions, complaints and claims he makes are strategic statements intended to secure his position – whereas Aston responds by using the constative form and Mick shows a mastery of performativity that

exceeds that of either of them (Lee). This is a valuable interpretation, and the fact that it has limitations is noteworthy: it views Davies's statements as tools for survival without considering what occurs when those tools become obvious to the audience. It is precisely because Mick is able to see through Davies's performances and then carry out his own performances more skillfully that the play's conclusion turns on a contest of performativity rather than on moral grounds.

Davies's individual authority as a narrator is, furthermore, continuously flawed, and this is illustrated by the problem of his name. As one researcher points out, throughout the play we are unable to tell whether his actual name is Davies or Jenkins, since Davies himself is unclear and inconsistent about it (Li and Li). Unlike in *The Birthday Party* , where Stanley's identity is destroyed by the actions of other people, in this case Davies's identity is weakened by his own lack of clarity and inconsistency before any of the others get involved. To put it one way, he is a victim of a system which "gives him a name but forces him to use another", and at the same time "is not an innocent victim but also a victimizer" — a man who "combats injustice with inertia and self-righteousness" (Mahmoudi et al.). Moreover, his complaints are undermined by their nature: when he complains about the Greeks, the Poles and "all those aliens" who were given seats while he was treated "like dirt" (Li and Li), he ends up identifying with the very exclusivity that has marginalized him, and it has been noted that the play deals with racism as well as class separation and material deprivation (Richa). According to one view, Davies's search for identity is "restricted to words without any action", taking place through "constant nagging and complaining" and a longing for past glory (Li and Li). Thus, relational dispossession in this play involves a considerable element of self-authorship: Davies does not merely get talked out of his position; he talks himself out of it, in a way which the audience can see but cannot interfere with.

4.4 Mick's Interventions and the Critical Dispute

The point at which Mick's role is concerned is where the interpretation of the play's power relationships divides most sharply, and this difference is worth making because it has a direct bearing on the concept in question. Murphy contends that critics misinterpret The Caretaker by focusing on verbal display and neglecting non-verbal communication, that Davies is not a usurper and is also not an equal victim of a repressive system, and that Mick and Aston "deliberately and maliciously destroy Davies' psyche as part of an unnecessarily harsh game", a view which he supports by referring to the stage directions concerning the silent communication between the brothers (Murphy). Morgan's interpretation, on the other hand, places almost equal emphasis on a different set of points: the play shows different realities to different characters, change is impossible for the self-absorbed Davies, and once his illusions

are broken both Aston and Mick are able to grow and establish more mature relationships (Morgan). Wong brings the two views together by claiming that Davies' betrayal of Aston's goodwill is not merely destructive; it is Mick's intervention that allows Aston to make distinctions and take independent decisions, so that the result involves a degree of empowerment for the host (Wong).

The case made in this article does not call for deciding between these various interpretations, and it is important to be cautious in this regard. Research into overlapping and interrupting dialogue in drama has demonstrated that it is the interruptee's mode of response — that is, the way in which the person who is being interrupted reacts — rather than the mere fact of the overlap that determines whether an overlap should be seen as a hostile interruption (Ivanchenko). When this point is applied to the present situation, it follows that Mick's verbal intrusions cannot be regarded as acts of domination simply on the basis of their formal characteristics. All that can be established from the language is something more limited and defensible: that Mick sets the terms of the negotiation, he is the character who can turn a discussion of the room into a decision regarding the room, and Davies is consistently put in the position of having to answer, justify, and accept. It must be noted that whether or not Mick intends to be cruel is, according to the evidence of the dialogue, genuinely uncertain — and it is worth pointing out that the play's ambiguity on this issue is not a flaw in the analysis but rather a feature of the dialogic system it portrays, in which the power to determine another's fate and the intention to cause harm are not necessarily linked.

4.5 The Ending as the Failure of Negotiation

The play concludes with Davies being excluded and Aston pulling back — a result which Pinter described by stating that when Aston turns his back at the end, the audience realizes he will never attempt to do so again (Love). Two aspects of this ending are significant for the argument in question. Firstly, the exclusion is not declared; it is carried out. There is no announcement of dismissal, no ruling, no official action taken by authority — merely the withdrawal of the conditions under which Davies had been allowed to stay. This is indeed the most complete form of conversational dispossession: a character is dispossessed without having been told that this has happened, and it is this ambiguity at the end that makes the dispossession indefensible. Secondly, the ending has a cost for the host. Aston's silence at the end has been interpreted as an indication of psychological fragmentation as a result of his previous psychiatric treatment (Bamba), and the play's pattern of mutual harm — Davies being uprooted 'not only in the ontological aspect but also in the psychological respect' (Mahmoudi et al.) — the fact that Aston's ability to form connections is closed off — demonstrates that the conversational power at work in this play is not a zero-sum resource

in the sense that one character possesses it and the other lacks it. It is a kind of medium in which everyone is exposed, and in which the most vulnerable party is still the one who is most exposed.

It is here that the idea proves its value. For if we view the play as a struggle for power, we fail to distinguish between Mick's tactical skill and Davies's long-standing insecurity. If we see it as a study of cruelty, we rule out the possibility that Aston's hospitality was genuine and that Mick's intervention was in fact a test and not a trap (Murphy & Wong). If we consider it to be a play about exclusion, we overlook the fact that Davies had been constantly negotiating for something less than full inclusion—namely, for tolerance, for a bed, and for the right to be treated as someone who belongs somewhere. The term 'conversational dispossession' refers to the process by which such negotiations are lost: not through force or by official decision, but through the gradual build-up of instances in which one character's version of himself is disbelieved, his usefulness doubted, his demands rejected, and his right to stay left unresolved until it is too late.

V. Comparative Analysis: From Verbal Authority to Spatial Exclusion

5.1 The Organisation of Conversational Authority

When the two plays are compared, a structural difference becomes clear which is not evident in either play on its own. In *The Birthday Party* the conversational authority is concentrated and episodic since two men come in, take the right to question, carry out this questioning extensively for a limited period of time and then go away having achieved their aim. In The Caretaker however, the authority is spread out and continuous as it passes between Aston and Mick, is exercised in fragments over a period of weeks on the stage, and is never formally asserted by anyone. The table below shows the differences regarding the three mechanisms.

Mechanism	*The Birthday Party*	*The Caretaker*
Narrative dispossession — authority over one's own history	Stanley's account of his past is destabilised before the interrogation and then dismantled by repeated, contradictory questioning (Iché & Iché, Bennett; Onič and Kacijan)	Davies's history is chronically unverifiable — even his name is uncertain — and his self-descriptions are tactical performances legible to Mick (Li and Li; Lee)
Spatial dispossession — access to material space	Stanley holds a room at the outset and loses it through removal from the house (Bennett)	Davies never converts occupancy into possession; his relation to the room is a series of repetitive negotiations whose conditions are set by others (Yun; Love)
Relational dispossession —	Belonging is severed; Stanley's removal is final, and Petey's	Belonging is conditional throughout: hospitality, the offer

belonging as conditional	attempted intervention is too late (Hall)	of caretakership, and eventual withdrawal without pronouncement (Wong; Love; Murphy)

The fact shown by the table is that the same three mechanisms result in different kinds of vulnerability. Stanley's case is that of a man who has something to lose, and the cruelty of the play lies in the rapid and total way in which he loses it. Davies's vulnerability is that of a man who has nothing to lose and cannot gain anything, and the cruelty of the play is found in the length of his failure—in the repeated instances which turn out not to be openings. To regard these as being the same would be to overlook the plays' most significant difference, and that difference is one of time and substance rather than theme.

5.2 Who may Ask, Who must Answer

The contrast raises a question which neither of the two plays deals with directly: who has the right to demand an explanation? In *The Birthday Party* the interrogators' right to ask is claimed rather than won, and this authority is maintained by their refusal to answer questions themselves. Their power, to use Austin's phrase, rests on felicity conditions which they simply take for granted (Lalić) — and the play's discomfort comes about because this assumption does in fact work. In The Caretaker the right to ask is based on ownership and on usefulness: Mick and Aston can ask Davies about his name, his papers, his intentions and his readiness to work; but Davies can ask for shoes, for a bed and for a character reference, and his questions are treated as requests. Grice's cooperative principle and Searle's classification of directives and commissives account for the forms that these exchanges take (Ma), but what is of interest in the plays is the systematic violation of the cooperative assumption: Pinter's dialogue includes repetitions, leads to tautological arguments, avoids giving answers and has the characters talking past one another (Onič). In particular the repetition is not distributed equally: it is used as a weapon when the interrogators employ it (Onič and Kacijan) and serves as a sign of weakness when Davies does.

Silence is also distributed in an uneven way, and this is clear from the comparison. In *The Birthday Party* silence is used in a strategic manner by both sides, but the way it is interpreted depends on who produces it (Aliwie); by distinguishing between a pause, a long pause and silence, Pinter shows that the page itself indicates who has the right to hesitate (1944- et al.). In The Caretaker Davies's hesitations occur exactly at the times when he is being asked about his identity—his pauses when Aston inquiries into his birth, and the pauses that accompany his attempts to explain himself, are some of the play's most significant features (Li and Li).

Aston's silences are of a completely different kind: they are the result of an experience which he is unable to put into words, and the play treats them as a wound rather than as a tactic (Bamba). This asymmetry is the most obvious example of what conversational dispossession brings to light: silence is not a neutral absence but a resource whose value depends on the social position of the person who uses it.

5.3 From Verbal Authority to Material Exclusion

The main comparative insight of the article can now be set out. Ordinary conversation takes on a dramatically violent character when the ability to define a situation is distributed unequally and when the consequences of that inequality extend from speech to identity, to relationships, and to material existence. Both plays show this kind of extension, but they do so through different methods. In *The Birthday Party* the extension is brought about by concentration: such intense verbal pressure is exerted that the target's authority in telling the story collapses, and this collapse is at once followed by the target's physical removal from the house (Elyamany; Bennett). In The Caretaker the extension is the result of attrition: the discussions concerning the room never end in a decision, so that the target's material insecurity continues and grows worse, and his final exclusion is brought about by the withdrawal of tolerance rather than by its outright denial (Love; Murphy). The comparison thus shows something that an analysis of either play on its own would fail to reveal — that Pinter's dramatic violence is not a single technique but a range of techniques, which differ according to tempo, the number of participants who control the conversation, and whether or not the target has something to defend. It also demonstrates that the connection between language and material vulnerability is two-way: in *The Birthday Party* it is speech that is used to take away a room; in The Caretaker it is the lack of a room that is used to control speech.

5.4 Resistance, Failed Control and Pending Cases

A argument of this type is no better than the counter-evidence it manages to withstand, and both plays offer strong resistance to the view in question. Goldberg's authority is established by opposing McCann's idea of tearing up the paper and dismissing it as "childish" and "without a solitary point" (Carpenter) — this act shows the need for control and sets out a hierarchy between the two men which has to be repeated over and over again. Aston's opposition is more subtle but genuine: Lee's interpretation points out a constative mode which Aston chooses not to take part in when Davies and Mick are playing the performative game (Lee), and the way the play ends, with Aston walking away, is a withdrawal from the situation rather than a defeat. In *The Birthday Party* , Petey's comment — 'don't let them tell you what to do' — a line that Pinter said he lived by all his life — is an effort to bring Stanley's narrative

authority back at the end of the play, but it fails; yet the failure is described as being due to a matter of timing and position, not as proof that resistance cannot occur (Hall). As for Davies, he is never simply a victim; he turns down the job, manipulates both brothers, lies about his name, and betrays Aston's trust, and his refusal is an assertion of agency which results in his own exclusion (Love; Mahmoudi et al.). At the same time the question of Mick's intentions remains unresolved, and any interpretation that settles this point would be treating the text unfairly (Morgan; Murphy).

It must also be admitted that not all the conversations in these plays are attempts at control. In some cases, conversations completely fail: the characters talk past each other, repeat what they have said, and misunderstand one another in such a way as to cause confusion rather than achieve control (Onič). Some of the utterances are tentative, evasive, or left unfinished in a manner which anticipates Pinter's own view of language — namely, that language is vague and that there is often an implicit meaning beneath what is said (Li and Li) — and the ambiguity of the plays is not a method of domination but a condition in which domination, when it does occur, has to function. The idea of conversational dispossession is intended to point to a particular pattern, not to interpret every single pause and question as an act of aggression. When it is misapplied — for instance, when an interrupted speaker is regarded as a victim or an unanswered question is treated as a weapon — the concept ceases to have any explanatory power.

VI. Conclusion: The Social Consequences of Being Spoken Over

The fact that conversational dispossession reveals about Pinter's dramatic method is that the fates of his characters are determined in the smallest units of conversation. The question which has to be answered, the offer which must be accepted or rejected, the name which must be given, the calm which has to be filled, and the account of the past which must be made to fit together—these are the events in the plays, and they are events which have consequences. If one looks at the matter in this way, then the menace in Pinter's work is not an atmosphere that surrounds his dialogue but a feature of how the dialogue is distributed: a scene becomes frightening not because of the mood of a particular utterance but because one character can make another justify himself and because that requirement will be enforced. This is a more precise statement than the usual observation that Pinter's language conveys a sense of threat, and it has the advantage of being capable of being tested against the text itself: it suggests that the turning points in the plays will be conversational rather than physical, that authority will be shown by who is allowed to interrupt, question, and refuse, and that exclusion will take place not only through the withdrawal of space but also through the

withdrawal of belief. Both plays confirm these predictions, and the differences between them serve to develop and refine the concept rather than simply confirming it in full.

The article's main contribution to the study of Pinter and to the broader subject of dramatic dialogue lies in its examination of the connection between verbal control and material vulnerability. In these two plays it is shown that language and material circumstances are not two separate systems but form a single system: one can only remain in a room if one is able to give a credible account of oneself, and one can only give a credible account of oneself if one has a room in which to do so. Stanley, who starts with a room, is first deprived of his history and then loses the room; Davies, on the other hand, since he has no history which he can produce, is never secure in the room he is in. This interdependence is the reason why the plays cannot be understood either solely in linguistic terms or solely in social terms, and it is the reason why the idea of conversational dispossession must be kept as a deliberately hybrid concept. It is also because of this that the plays retain their ambiguity: the concept does not assert that conversation always results in domination, merely that where domination does occur it is produced through conversation — and it does not claim that the characters who dominate understand what they are doing, since the plays are careful to leave the question of intention unresolved.

The worth of the concept lies in its comparative portability. It provides a means of describing the connection between conversational control and dispossession, a description which can be compared with other dramatic dialogue — for example, the later political plays in which the relationship between language and violence becomes explicit (Saunders), and in which the comedy of menace and the political critique have been argued to be continuous rather than sequential (Khaled); or the broader body of postwar drama in which interrogation and repetition act as means of psychological violence (Onič and Kacijan). Its limitations are just as evident. It is a descriptive and interpretive concept and not an established term in the critical vocabulary, and it has been developed in this instance through a close analysis of two plays rather than as the result of a systematic examination of Pinter's theatre; it cannot be said to account for the full range of his theatrical language, and it should not be applied to plays whose conversational economies are substantially different from those of these two. Moreover, it does not solve the interpretative problems raised by the plays. Questions such as whether Goldberg and McCann are agents of an ideology, of the state, or no more than the product of their own fear (Günday; Hall); whether Mick is being cruel or merely testing (Murphy & Wong); whether Aston's hospitality is generosity weakened by need or need disguised as generosity (Love; Wong) — all of these remain unanswered, and the role of the concept is to make these questions clearer rather than to resolve them.

The two courses open up for further investigation. The first of these is of a performance nature: Elyamany's suggestion that a study of dramatic discourse in audio-visual form is valid, since the distribution of conversational authority involves not only who speaks but also who looks at whom, who moves and who has to wait (Elyamany), and the non-verbal evidence which Murphy points out in the stage directions of The Caretaker fits into this kind of analysis (Murphy). The second involves extending the concept beyond the domestic setting—to plays in which the dialogic economy is supported by institutional power, in such cases the "serious speech acts" which Foucault regarded as the means of authoritative discourse being available to one side and denied to the other (Griggs and Howarth; Feindt and Oels). In either of these lines of approach, the question left to us by the two plays is the same: what is the cost to an individual of being spoken over, and who decides when the conversation comes to an end?

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