The 'what-do-you-mean syndrome'. A taxonomy of misunderstandings in Harold Pinter's plays

Francisco YUS RAMOS
Department of English Studies, University of Alicante

ABSTRACT

Harold Pinter's plays usually display situations in which characters misunderstand each other. This paper applies a pragmatic (mainly relevance-theoretic) taxonomy of misunderstandings to the different varieties of miscommunication that can be found in these plays. The result of this application is that, quite unexpectedly, many conversational exchanges in which the speaker relies on very explicitly communicated information in order to guarantee successful communication, systematically end up in misunderstanding. This unexpected abundance of misunderstandings can be explained from two points of view: one *discursive*, in which these misunderstandings are regarded simply as adding to the lack of communication that is felt in the plays, and the other on a more *connotative* level, in which misunderstandings are, rather, linguistic exponents of ideological battles of aggression and defensiveness in everyday conversational exchanges between characters.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper misunderstandings are analysed in a number of Harold Pinter's plays under a pragmatic (basically relevance-theoretic) framework. The research on misunderstandings based on this particular (cognitive) framework was first proposed in Yus Ramos (1997a, 1998a), after a theoretical distinction between the speaker's *direct intention* and the speaker's *indirect intention*. The former refers to instances where the speaker merely wants to communicate a minimally contextualised message obtained from his utterance

(Sperber and Wilson's *explicature*), whereas the latter has to do with (increasingly) indirect senses of the utterance which demand extra contextualisation and cognitive effort for its optimal interpretation (Sperber and Wilson's *implicature,* slightly different from Grice's 1975 term). It was argued that the *semantic distance* between the *explicature* and the *implicature(s)* of an utterance might be a possible source of misunderstandings if the hearer is unable to locate the speaker's intended message in this *direct-indirect continuum* (see Gibbs (1994) for discussion). This idea was later developed into a full taxonomy of misunderstandings in Yus Ramos (1997b), in which all possible sources of misunderstanding were listed.

This taxonomy is now applied to the dialogues between characters in Harold Pinter's plays, basically in order to check how exhaustive the taxonomy is, and also in order to extract conclusions that might be derived from the higher occurrence of certain types of misunderstanding. Certainly, misunderstandings are basic in Pinter's plays, and considered by many analysts one of the discursive failures emphasizing the overall sense of communicative breakdown that is often felt when Pinter's characters engage in everyday conversational interaction.

In general, in the performance of Pinter's plays, the audience is faced with this (often striking) communicative failure and a general feeling of perplexity involves the scene, since, on the one hand, the dialogues in Pinter's plays sound familiar and valid, and interpreted as believable informal everyday language. In fact, "insofar as his plays are firmly rooted in real speech and real situations he [Harold Pinter] appears naturalistic —and was, in fact, originally lumped together with the social realist 'kitchen sink' school" (Esslin 1984:43). On the other hand, though, a certain dose of unreality can be sensed in every conversational exchange, making both addressee characters and the audience feel uneasy (Kennedy 1983). As Mateo Martínez (1990:275) points out, language, whose main function is to exchange information, becomes an elaborate lack of communication, a way of saying nothing, a communicative device closer to silence. In other words, Pinter draws language closer to silence, while making silence talk (Hidalgo 1996:35).

This paper begins, in section 2, with a review of my proposal of a taxonomy of misunderstandings (Yus Ramos 1997b). An application of this taxonomy to Pinter's plays follows. For this application, a careful analysis of the following preliminary selection of plays was carried out: *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), *The Birthday Party* (1960), *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Collection* (1963), *The Homecoming* (1965), *No Man's Land* (1975), and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996). The detailed reading searched for instances of misunderstandings between characters, and these were labelled afterwards according to which category of the taxonomy they fitted. Some of these instances are quoted in the examples from Pinter's plays provided in section 3.

The main insight of the article is developed in the so-called *'what-do-you-mean syndrome'* (introduced in section 4) and the subsequent discussion in section 5. This coining refers to very repetitive misunderstandings that, quite unexpectedly (if we take into account the amount of processing effort demanded from the interlocutor), provoke a question in which the character requests an explanation about the speakers' implicit intentions or about the extent of the meaning of their utterances. This unexpected communicative failure puzzles both the addressee character and the audience, as they realize that in Pinter's plays even the most straightforward and apparently 'secure' *means of verbal communication is questioned.*

In my opinion, this unexpected type of misunderstanding is the key to the noticeable feeling of lack of communication that Pinter's plays often *exude.* However, behind this outer *discursive* layer of miscommunication, we can find the true *connotative* motives behind the characters' *'what-do-you-mean syndrome'*: language used as an explicit weapon for power and dominance (and the parallel defensiveness) by interlocutors.

2. A TAXONOMY OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS

In Yus Ramos (1997b), the relevance-based taxonomy quoted below was developed from the hypothesis that all types of misunderstanding can be accounted for by just twelve categories resulting from the interrelation of three pragmatic *continua.*

CHARACTERISTICS OF STIMULUS	SOURCE OF MISUNDERSTANDING
1 intentional, explicit, nonverbal.	intentional as unintentional.
2 intentional, explicit, verbal.	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the *explicit/implicit continuum*).
3 *intentional, explicit, nonverbal.*	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the *explicit/implicit continuum*).
4 intentional, explicit, verbal.	explicit as implicit.
5 intentional, explicit, nonverbal.	explicit as implicit.
6 intentional, implicit, verbal.	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the *explicit/implicit continuum*).
7 intentional, implicit, nonverbal.	faulty interpretation (but correct location in the explicit/implicit continuum).
8 intentional, implicit, nonverbal.	intentional as unintentional.
9 intentional, implicit, verbal.	implicit as explicit.
10 intentional, implicit, nonverbal.	implicit as explicit.
11 unintentional, explicit, nonverbal.	faulty interpretation.
12 unintentional, explicit, nonverbal.	unintentional as intentional.

To start with, a two-fold definition of misunderstanding was proposed as (a) the addressees' inability to pick up the speakers' intended interpretation (among the possible range of interpretations that an utterance —or nonverbal action— has in a given conversational context); and (b) the addressees' inability to process optimally the (non)verbal information which reaches them without a prior intentionality in its production, that is, *exuded* information coming from the environment and which Wilson & Sperber (1993) call "accidental transmission of information".

In short, the three *continua* involved in the emergence of misunderstandings are:

(a) *Intentional-unintentional continuum.* This *continuum* ranges from explicitly ostensive behaviour (Sperber & Wilson 1986a) to information conveyed to other people without the "sender's" awareness. Since intentionality is located in inextricable areas of human cognition, it is often difficult to estimate to which extent the information conveyed is intentional or accidentally transferred, and this could be a source of eventual misunderstandings.

(b) *Verbal-nonverbal continuum.* The importance of nonverbal communication in daily interaction is commonly acknowledged nowadays in pragmatic research. Often, nonverbal behaviour can replace verbal speech completely, or at least reinforce, contradict, etc. what is being said verbally. In dialogue (1) from Pinter's *The Caretaker*, for example, gestures are used in order to help the interlocutor in the correct comprehension of an utterance:

(1)   Davies.   I noticed that there was someone living in the house next
               door.
      Aston.   What?
      Davies.   *(gesturing).* I noticed...
      Aston.   Yes. There's people living all along the road (*The Caretaker,*
               p. 2).

(c) *Explicit-implicit continuum.* This continuum refers to the issue of indirectness in conversation, and the parallel issue of the role that literal meaning plays in comprehension. With the increasing importance of context in pragmatic research, the role that literal meaning —meaning in a *null* or *zero* context— plays in understanding has turned problematic. The two main areas of discussion are: (a) whether literal meaning is a necessary element in everyday discourse processing or not; and (b) whether literal meaning is a preliminary stage in the processing of indirect utterances or not.

(a) In a nutshell, I would reject the idea that literal meaning plays any fundamental role in comprehension, since even if it is acknowledged that there is a kind of *raw material* that speakers use in the formation of acceptable strings of words, this material is short-circuited as soon as language accesses

its most interactive role. Even if the speaker intends to convey very straightforward, factual information, some basic contextualization is always required, either in terms of disambiguation, or reference assignment for indexicals, or access to background knowledge, among other mental operations from contextual sources.

(b) Besides, literal meaning should not be treated as a preliminary stage into a more implicit (i.e. connoted) interpretation of the utterance since, as several studies have demonstrated, indirect utterances need not take longer to process than more literal-oriented ones, given certain contextual features (Gibbs 1994), and often the intended implicative meaning is reached without a prior estimation of the literal meaning of the utterance.

In my opinion, this two-fold issue may be settled if we approach it under a relevance-theoretic perspective, that is, defining explicit-implicit information according to the number of *contextual assumptions* needed to reach the intended *contextual implication* (see Yus Ramos 1997d; 1998b). If the intended interpretation can be obtained through a very basic contextualization of the utterance (disambiguation, reference assignment, location of referents for indexicals...), the utterance will be located on the explicit end of the continuum, whereas an increasing dependence on the hearer's ability to extract information from various extra-linguistic sources (background knowledge, mutually shared assumptions...) would gradually shift the utterance to the implicit end of the continuum. This might be an argument for those who defend a higher processing effort for indirect utterances but, as I have commented above, this need not be the case, although on certain occasions this increased effort may in fact occur.

In the study of misunderstandings, this proposal of *an explicit-implicit continuum* can be further developed into what I label *degrees of explicitness* vs. *degrees of implicitness*. Instead of one *explicit-implicit continuum,* there would be two *sub-continua,* one *explicit* and one *implicit,* and there would be different degrees of indirectness within each *sub-continuum* (Yus Ramos 1997e). On the explicit side, we would find factual information plus fixed expressions like politeness formulas and certain *non-implicative metaphors* (that is, *dead metaphors* which have lost their connotative power and have now been incorporated into everyday language, as in "prices have gone up"), among other possibilities. Highly over-discussed examples of (apparently) indirect utterances like Searle's classical *can you pass the salt?*, a polite formula in which the speaker makes a request, would be located inside the *explicit sub-continuum,* but towards its indirect end.

Besides, the shift from the *explicit sub-continuum* to the *implicit sub-continuum* would take place on those occasions in which the speaker is "aware" that he is demanding from his interlocutor the use of extra-linguistic contextual information (encyclopaedic knowledge, mutually manifest assumptions, etc.) which is not part of the information which can be

extracted from a minimal contextualisation of the utterance, in order to reach the intended information. This is particularly interesting for the study of misunderstandings, because under this picture addressees may find it difficult to process a (non)verbal message optimally not only in its initial adscription of the message to the *explicit* or the *implicit sub-continuum*, but also in the subsequent choice among the different increasingly indirect possibilities within each *sub-continuum*, a two-fold cognitive operation which is related to what has been labelled *fase de incertidumbre* (Yus Ramos 1997a:53) and *processing challenge* (Yus Ramos 1998a).

The combination of the three *continua* briefly reviewed above *(intentional-unintentional, verbal-nonverbal, explicit-implicit)* would result in the twelve possible categories (quoted at the beginning of this section) which would cover all the possible types of misunderstanding in everyday interaction [1].

3.   MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN PINTER'S PLAYS: SOME EXAMPLES

The characters in Pinter's plays usually interact through very elementary verbal means, and do not usually rely on nonverbal behaviour for the transmission of information, with the exception, perhaps, of the value that silences acquire in these plays (Mateo Martínez 1992:78; Hidalgo 1996). However, we can still find instances fitting many of the twelve categories in the taxonomy. Below, there is a summary of the number of examples which were found in the plays selected: *The Dumb Waiter* (TDW), *The Birthday Party* (TBP), *The Caretaker* (TCA), *The Collection* (TCO), *The Homecoming* (TH), *No Man's Land* (NML), and *Ashes to Ashes* (ATA):

Category	TDW	TBP	TCA	TCO	TH	NML	ATA	Total
1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2	11	15	13	10	6	8	10	73
3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
4	1	—	2	1	1	1	1	7
5	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
6	—	2	2	1	—	—	—	5
7	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
8	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
9	—	1	—	1	1	.—	—	3
10	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
11	—	—	1	—	1	1	—	3
12	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

In Pinter's plays, despite being a written medium, we can find misunderstandings of nonverbal behaviour. Dialogue (2) would fit the

attributes of category 7 in the taxonomy (faulty interpretation of intentional and implicit [2] nonverbal behaviour), in this case through the use of paralanguage:

(2) Stanley. Tch, tch, tch, tch.
     Meg.   *(defensively)*. What do you mean?
     Stanley. You're a bad wife *(The Birthday Party,* p. 16).

Also, the final part of example (3) shows how the character Lenny does not process optimally the nonverbal information which Ruth conveys unintentionally (category 11 in the taxonomy):

(3) Lenny. Good evening.
     Ruth.   Morning, I think.
     Lenny. You're right there.
             Pause
             My name's Lenny. What's yours?
     Ruth   Ruth.
             She sits, puts her coat collar around her.
     Lenny. Cold?
     Ruth   No *(The Homecoming,* pp. 27-28).

In verbal interaction between characters, there are also examples of misunderstandings, all of them fitting the categories in the taxonomy. As suggested above, misunderstandings often centre around problems in locating the utterance in the *explicit* or *implicit sub-continuum* and also, as part of the so-called *processing challenge,* further problems in locating the utterance within the range of possible (increasingly implicative) interpretations within either *sub-continuum.* In exchange (4), for instance, an explicit request for information is understood as having some implicative connotations which are unintended. Consequently, the problem here is that Ben wrongly locates the utterance in the *implicit continuum* and not in the *explicit* one (category 4 in the taxonomy):

(4) Gus. *(Rising; looking down at Ben)* How many times have you read that paper?
           (Ben slams the paper down and rises)
     Ben. *(angrily)* What do you mean?
     Gus. I was just wondering how many times you'd...
     Ben. What are you doing, criticizing me?
     Gus. No, I was just...
     Ben. You'll get a swipe round you earhole if you don't watch your step.
     Gus. Now look here, Ben...
     Ben. I'm not looking anywhere! *(The Dumb Waiter,* pp. 15-16).

In the next example, the character does locate the utterance correctly in the *implicit* end of the *continuum,* but despite this, he cannot find the intended interpretation of the utterance and the exchange results in misunderstanding. Despite having overcome successfully the preliminary stage in the *processing challenge,* the character finds it difficult to extract the correct interpretation (category 6 in the taxonomy):

(5) James.   You know something? You remind me of a chap I knew
               once. Hawkins. Yes. He was quite a tall lad.
     Bill.   Tall, was he?
     James.   Yes.
     Bill.   Now why should I remind you of him?
     James.   He was quite a card *(Pause)*
     Bill.   Tall, was he?
     James.   That's... what he was *(The Collection,* p. 33).

There are also three examples in which a character interprets the intended *implicit* interpretation of an utterance as belonging to the *explicit sub-continuum.* Here, all the contextual assumptions needed to reach this connoted implicative meaning of the utterance are short-circuited and replaced by a more direct interpretation (category 9 in the taxonomy). This is what happens in the final utterance by Max in the following dialogue:

(6) Lenny.   Tch, tch, tch. Well, I think you're entitled to be tired, Uncle.
     Sam   Well, it's the drivers.
     Lenny.   I know. That's what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the
               drivers.
     Sam.   Knocks you out.
               Pause
     Max.   I'm here too, you know.
               SAM *looks at him.*
               I said I'm here, too. I'm sitting here.
     Sam.   I know you're here *(The Homecoming,* p. 12).

Max's indirect utterance seems to be understood here merely as factual information about his physical location.

4.   THE 'WHAT-DO-YOU-MEAN' SYNDROME

However, the most frequent source of misunderstanding that can be found in Pinter's plays is the addressee's inability to pick up the intended interpretation of an otherwise *explicit* utterance, despite the hearer's preliminary successful identification of the utterance as belonging to the *explicit sub-continuum* (seventy-three examples of category 2 in the

taxonomy). Several reasons for this kind of misunderstanding can be proposed, and some of them seem more naturalistic and valid than others, that is, some dialogues do resemble real life conversational exchanges in which certain utterances might lead to misunderstandings:

First, there can be problems with the location of referents for indexicals. This identification is part of what Sperber & Wilson call an enrichment of the logical form to yield a basic proposition or explicature of the utterance, but since indexicals refer to entities which are located *outside* the utterance, they can easily lead to misunderstandings if both interlocutors do not share the same deictic reference. This is what occurs with the pronouns *him* in dialogue (7) and *her* in dialogue (8):

(7)   Meg.   Have you seen him down yet? *(Petey does not answer)* Petey.
        Petey.   What?
        Meg.   Have you seen him down?
        Petey.   Who?
        Meg.   Stanley
        Petey.   No *(The Birthday Party,* p. 68)

(8)   Spooner.   Tell me about your wife.
        Hirst.   What wife?
        Spooner.   How beautiful she was, how tender and how true [...] You will not say. I will tell you then... that my wife... had everything. Eyes, a mouth, hair, teeth, buttocks, breasts, absolutely everything. And legs.
        Hirst.   Which carried her away.
        Spooner.   Carried who away? Yours or mine? *(No Man's Land,* pp. 30-31).

Second, and closely related to the problems locating referents for indexicals, the addressee may be unable to work out the person, object of concept to which a particular word refers. This can be noticed at the beginning of example (8) in the word *wife,* and it also occurs with the word *paper* in dialogue (9):

(9)   Max.   [...] I want to cut something out of the paper.
        Lenny.   I'm reading the paper.
        Max.   Not that paper. I haven't even read that paper. I'm talking about last Sunday's paper. I was just having a look at it in the kitchen *(The Homecoming,* p. 7).

Third, problems in comprehension can arise if there is a lack of certain *encyclopaedic or mutually shared information between the interlocutors.* This is what happens with the information about visitors in exchange (10) and the mistaken assumption about the interlocutor's job in example (11):

    (10) Meg.   I'm expecting visitors.
                         He turns.
           Stanley. What?
           Meg.   You didn't know that, did you?
           Stanley. What are you talking about?
           Meg.   Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them (*The Birthday Party*, p. 20).

    (11) Mick.   [...] But you better be as good as you say you are.
           Davies.   What do you mean?
           Mick.   Well, you say you're an interior decorator, you'd better be a good one.
           Davies.   A what?
           Mick.   What do you mean, a what? A decorator. An interior decorator.
           Davies.   Me? What do you mean? I never touched that. I never been that.
           Mick.   You've never what?
           Davies.   No, no, not me, man (*The Caretaker*, pp. 71-72).

Fourth, hearing problems can also be a source of misunderstanding (here, closer to *non-understanding* than to misunderstanding, see Humphreys-Jones 1986):

    (12) Mick   What did you say your name was?
           Davies.   Jenkins
           Mick.   I beg your pardon?
           Davies.   Jenkins
                        (Pause)
           Mick.   Jen...kins (*The Caretaker*, p. 28).

Apart from these, let's say, *predictable* and *naturalistic* sources of misunderstanding, there are many unforeseeable misunderstandings in Pinter's plays in which an explicitly communicated information is misunderstod for no apparent reason. Besides, on most occasions the interlocutor signals the presence of misunderstanding by opting for the tediously repeated question: *what do you mean?* This union of category 2 from the taxonomy plus the interlocutor's request for explanation is what I label *'what-do-you-mean syndrome'*. Examples of this *'syndrome'* abound in Pinter's plays (one third of the 73 examples in category 2):

    (13) Lenny.   *(to Joey)* How'd you get on?
           Joey.   Er... not bad.
           Lenny.   What do you mean?
                       Pause

	What do you mean?
Joey.	Not bad
Lenny.	I want to know what you *mean* —by not bad.
Joey.	What's it got to do with you? (*The Homecoming*, pp. 65-66).

(14) Rebecca. Oh by the way somebody told me the other day that there's a condition known as mental elephantiasis.

Devlin. What do you mean, 'somebody told you'? What do you mean, 'the other day'? What are you talking about? (*Ashes to Ashes*, p. 49).

(15) Aston. Where were you born then?

Davies. *(darkly)* What do you mean?

Aston. Where were you born (*The Caretaker*, p. 25).

(16) Stella. He doesn't matter

James. What do you mean?

Stella. He's not important.

James. Do you mean anyone would have done? You mean it just happened to be him, but it might as well have been anyone?

Stella. No.

James. What then? (*The Collection*, pp. 29-30).

(17) Ben. How do you know those sheets weren't clean?

Gus. What do you mean?

Ben. How do you know they weren't clean? You've spent the whole day in them, haven't you?

Gus. What, you mean it might be my pong? (*The Dumb Waiter*, p. 7).

5.   DISCUSSION

This high occurrence of misunderstandings belonging to category 2 in the taxonomy (73 examples) would be surprising in real life everyday conversational interaction. Indeed, the safest way to guarantee an optimal outcome of communication would be, in theory, to provide the most explicit utterance that one can think of (and obviously belonging to the most *explicit* side within the *explicit sub-continuum*) in order to convey the intended interpretation. In theory, again, if one opts for an implicit utterance to communicate a message which could have been communicated by a more explicit utterance, one is somehow risking successful interaction. Misunderstandings having to do with the *processing challenge* seem more likely to happen than those fitting category 2 in the taxonomy.

Needless to say, on many occasions one does not choose to be implicit, but *has to* rely on implicit utterances or else it would be impossible to

communicate the same amount and quality of information as one would by choosing an implicit utterance (metaphors and ironical utterances would be possible examples). But nevertheless, there are cases in which the speaker has a choice of many possible verbal strings of words to communicate a certain message, and the more information that the speaker leaves implicit, that is, *hearer-dependent*, the more out of control he will be of the optimal outcome of the conversational interaction. For instance, if instead of a very explicit answer like (18b) to the question (18a) the speaker opts for increasingly implicit utterances such as (18c-e), which need more *contextual assumptions* (supplied by the interlocutor) to yield the right *contextual implication* (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986a), the speaker will become more and more dependent on the interlocutor's ability to extract contextual information, and therefore will have less control over optimal comprehension, although the quality and quantity of the information provided also varies accordingly (Blass 1990: 50-52):

> (18) (a) Do I look strange in my cover cloth?
>   (b) No, you look fine.
>   (c) Everybody wears them around here.
>   [contextual assumption needed: (1) people do not look odd if they wear what everybody is wearing]
>   (d) We are in Africa.
>   [contextual assumptions needed: (1) many women in Africa wear cover cloths; (2) people do not look odd if they wear what everybody is wearing]
>   (e) We are in a hot continent.
>   [contextual assumptions needed: (1) Africa is the continent that she is talking about; (2) many women in Africa wear cover cloths; (3) people do not look odd if they wear what everybody is wearing]

In my opinion, the numerous instances of exchanges fitting the characteristics of the *'what-do-you-mean syndrome'* are basic in Pinter's picture of a society unable to communicate efficiently, that is, a picture of the inability that characters show to dominate language and find the appropriate expression to convey the intended message (Mateo Martínez 1990:275-276). On many occasions we can find examples of characters trying their best to find an expression matching the message that they want to convey, but failing to do so:

> (19) Stanley. [...] I bet you wouldn't think I'd led such a quiet life. The lines on my face, eh? It's the drink. Been drinking a bit down here. But what I mean is... you know how it is... away from your own... all wrong, of course... I'll be allright when I get back... but what I mean is, the way some people look at me

you'd think I was a different person. I suppose I have changed, but I'm still the same man that I always was, I mean, you wouldn't think, to look at me, really... I mean, not really, that I was the sort of bloke to-to cause any trouble, would you? *(McCann looks at him)* Do you know what I mean?

McC. No *(The Birthday Party,* p. 40).

(20) Mick. I could tell him to go, I suppose.
Davies. That's what I'm saying.
Mick. Yes. I could tell him to go. I mean, I'm the landlord. On the other hand, he's the sitting tenant. Giving him notice, you see, what it is, it's a technical matter, that's what it is. It depends how you regard this room. I mean it depends whether you regard this room as furnished or unfurnished. See what I mean?
Davies. No, I don't *(The Caretaker,* p. 71).

Therefore, one of the communicative problems which Pinter's characters face is "not a failure, let alone an impossibility of communication, merely a *difficulty* of explicit communication" (Esslin 1984:39), and this fact is enhanced by the abundance of so-called *'syndromes'*. In Pinter's plays, "nothing of what characters do or say has a unique, perfectly comprehensible meaning which reveals the truth" (Sanchis Sinisterra 1996). Pinter himself acknowledged this when, on the one hand, he stated that language has to be absolutely precise (in Gussow 1996:25), and on the other hand he admitted that he was speaking knowing that there are at least twenty-four possible aspects of any single statement, depending on where you're standing at the time or on what the weather is like (Pinter 1962). This approach to conversation as a dubious task can be noticed in his plays, since characters can often be found struggling with the inaccuracy of language, demanding very specific words for the intended message, and questioning any utterance which does not match its optimal meaning, as happens with *funny* in dialogue (21) and *end* in (22):

(21) Davies. I was saying, he's... he's a bit of a funny bloke, your brother.
Mick stares at him
Mick. Funny? Why?
Davies. Well... he's funny...
Mick. What's funny about him?
Pause
Davies. Not liking work.
Mick. What's so funny about that?
Davies. Nothing.
Pause
Mick. I don't call it funny.

Davies.   Nor me (*The Caretaker,* pp. 49-50).

(22) Devlin.   But we've never ended.
     Rebecca.   Oh, we have. Again and again and again. And we can end
                again. And again and again. And again.
     Devlin.   Aren't you misusing the word 'end'? End means end. You
                can't end 'again'. You can only end once.
     Rebecca.   No. You can end once and then you can end again (*Ashes to
                Ashes,* p. 67).

This obsession for linguistic accuracy is also bound to be surprising for
both the addressee character and the audience. As has been demonstrated
under relevance theory, basically through the notion of *loose talk* (Sperber
& Wilson 1986b), people are not usually too accurate in their utterances
simply because it is not relevant in the course of the conversation. Imagine,
for instance, that in a normal everyday conversational exchange, instead of
(23a), one uttered (23b):

(23) (a) My brother earns 300.000 pesetas a month.
     (b) My brother earns 290.894 pesetas a month.

Surely the interlocutor of (23b) would be surprised at the unexpected
accuracy of this information, since a much *looser* utterance such as (23a)
would provide the same amount of *contextual effects* while demanding less
processing effort. This increased effort is shown by the tendency that the
interlocutor would have to look for further connotations in (23b) than the
speaker, perhaps, intended. This unexpected request for accuracy will
therefore surprise both characters and the audience and will add to the
overall feeling of communication between characters as a difficult task that
can be felt in Pinter's plays.
    At the same time, the audience is also faced with the paradox of
characters who opt for very explicit utterances in order to avoid the risk
involved in daily communication and guarantee an optimal processing of their
utterances, but whose apparently secure communicative attempts end up in
failure. In this sense, faced with the inexplicable behaviour of characters, with
the mistaken and inappropriate use of language and silence, a disturbing
surprise begins to invade and mar normality (Sanchis Sinisterra 1996). In
other words, the audience is presented a tension "between the delight in
words, the love of vivid, vital language on the one hand, and the nausea
caused by the contemplation of the vast mass of dead, atrophied language
which daily confronts us" (Esslin 1984:36). The outcome of this reiterative
'syndrome' is an overwhelming feeling of social collapse.
    In conclusion, Pinter attacks the foundations of human interaction by
stripping characters of language as an essential means of communication

(Mateo Martínez 1992:85), and this fact is strengthened by the high number of conversational exchanges leading to this unexpected *'syndrome'*.

However, below this preliminary *discursive* explanation of the *'what-do-you-mean syndrome'* in Pinter's plays, there is a deeper, more connotative level of interpretation: the possibility that characters do not try their best and (unexpectedly) fail to understand the explicitly communicated information that they are given, but that they actually are not so much interested in understanding and tend to use the *'syndrome'* as a weapon for aggression and defensiveness, as a means to show that no matter how explicit communication is intended to be, it is bound to fail if dominance is felt to be at stake. Esslin (1984:39) acknowledges this possibility when he states that

> a playwright so fascinated by the difficulty, the terror, the pitfalls of communication will inevitably be fascinated by words and their multifarious uses to disclose and to disguise meaning. Pinter's theatre is a theatre of language; it is from the words and their rhythm that the suspense, dramatic tension, laughter and tragedy spring. Words, in Pinter's plays, become weapons of domination and subservience, silences explode, nuances of vocabulary strip human beings to the skin.

In dialogue (24), for instance, character Stanley is surely aware that Meg's question refers to what brand of cigarette he is smoking:

(24) Meg.   Is the sun shining? *(He crosses to the window, takes a cigarette and matches from his pyjama jacket, and lights this cigarette)* What are you smoking?
      Stanley. A cigarette *(The Birthday Party*, p. 19).

In fact, under relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986a), it is claimed that addressees invariably pick up the interpretation of an utterance which provides the highest number of *contextual effects* in exchange for the least *processing effort*. Once the addressee finds an interpretation fitting these two conditions, he will look no further. This is why the most likely interpretation of (25a) is (25b) and not (25c), which is also possible, in theory:

(25) (a) He has bought *The Times.*
      (b) He has bought a copy of the paper *The Times.*
      (c) He has bought the company which publishes the paper *The Times.*

Besides, it is possible to predict which interpretation the addressee is more likely to select among a range of possible interpretations in a given context (Yus Ramos 1997c). In dialogue (24) above, Meg is bound to be surprised to see that her question was not fully comprehended, and this can

be interpreted as an aggressive discursive strategy by Stanley, who manages to convey a message about who is in control of the interaction.

Therefore, in Pinter's plays language turns out to be a useful weapon for characters in their attempt to discourage their interlocutors on the (numerous) occasions in which they do not want to collaborate in the interaction. In these instances, often an interlocutor demands some information which the other interlocutor systematically refuses to provide, without appearing to realize the state of anxiety that his unwillingness to cooperate provokes (Mateo Martínez 1990:346)[3]. Behind uncooperative linguistic strategies there is an inherent reluctance to be controlled by the interlocutor. Dialogues (26) and (27) clearly illustrate this point:

(26) Stanley. *(quietly)* Who do you think you are talking to?
     Meg.   *(uncertainly)* What?
     Stanley.   Come here.
     Meg.   What do you mean?
     Stanley.   Come over here.
     Meg.   No (*The Birthday Party,* p. 21).

(27) Ben.   It came under the door?
     Gus.   Must have done.
     Ben.   Well, go on.
     Gus.   Go on where?
     Ben.   Open the door and see if you can catch anyone outside.
     Gus.   Who, me?
     Ben.   Go on! (*The Dumb Waiter,* p. 10).

But perhaps the most illustrative example of language used as a weapon can be found in dialogue (28), where we clearly notice the defensiveness and search for power through language, through the mastering of words that takes place in the exchange:

(28) Ben.   Go and light it.
     Gus.   Light what?
     Ben.   The kettle.
     Gus.   You mean the gas.
     Ben.   Who does?
     Gus.   You do.
     Ben.   *(his eyes narrowing)* What do you mean, I mean the gas?
     Gus.   Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.
     Ben.   *(powerfully)* If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
     Gus.   How can you light a kettle?
     Ben.   It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!

Gus.	I've never heard it.
Ben.	Light the kettle! It's common usage!
Gus.	I think you got it wrong.
Ben.	*(menacing)* What do you mean?
Gus.	They say put on the kettle.
Ben.	Who says? *(they stare at each other, breathing hard)* *(Deliberately)* I've never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle. [...] Nobody says light the gas! what does the gas light?
Gus.	What does the gas-?
Ben.	*(grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arms' length)* THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL! (*The Dumb Waiter,* pp. 11-12).

Apart from the obvious example of problems in the comprehension of indexicals that is noticed at the beginning of the dialogue, we can also observe the tension underlying this long conversational exchange. Esslin (1984:65) is right when he suggests that "the dispute about language is here quite manifestly a dispute about authority, a fight for dominance".

From this perspective, language acquires a much more connotative value. In Pinter's (1962) own words, language is here "a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smokescreen which keeps the other in its place". Elsewhere he adds that "what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility". And Sanchis Sinisterra (1996) adds that characters "have a feeling of *the other* as a threat and they disguise with verbal strategies, camouflage behind the clichés and stereotypes of language, defend themselves with breakups of conversational logic, and escape or attack through silence" (my translation).

In this sense, when at the end of dialogue (28) Ben uses *kettle* instead of *gas,* it is clearly a form of surrender. Pinter's stage direction clearly gives us a picture of the feeling of confrontation arising between the two interlocutors: *Ben goes to his bed, but realizing what he has said, stops and half turns. They look at each other.*

To sum up, the *'what-do-you-mean syndrome'* can be understood at a general preliminary 'discursive' level of surprise, when both addressee characters and the audience face misunderstandings onstage which take place despite the speaker's efforts to communicate by means of the most explicit information that can be used to convey the intended interpretation. But also, at a deeper connotative level, the *'syndrome'* can be understood as part of the characters' fight for power and dominance. As Esslin (1984:40) suggests:

words become weapons in the mouths of Pinter's characters. The one who gets hold of the more elaborate or more accurate expression establishes

dominance over his partner; the victim of aggression can be swamped by language which comes too thick and fast, or is too nonsensical to be comprehended.

In fact, and taking this analysis one step further, this connotative level the *'syndrome'* could even be interpreted as the addreseee character's defensiveness against the possible implicative meanings hidden behind the linguistic aggression performed by the speaker. If this interpretation is valid, the *'syndrome'* would now be closer to category 4 in the taxonomy than to category 2, because in this case the interlocutor would be extracting additional implicative meanings of information which has been (in theory) communicated in an explicit way.

In any case, and to sum up, at this (increasingly) connotative level, the *'syndrome'* would not be so much an exponent of a general lack of communication in Pinter's plays, as an explicit weapon building up communication barriers and strengthening feelings of dominance and defensiveness between characters. The interlocutors of these unexpected interpretive failures, and the audience in general, realize the intentional aggression performed through verbal means since they are surely aware that the choice of an utterance belonging to the *explicit sub-continuum* should guarantee optimal comprehension. Also, adding further connotations to this interpretation, the addressees of the *'syndrome'* might even regret not succeeding in conveying hidden implicit assumptions in their apparently explicit utterances (category 4 in the taxonomy). No matter what interpretation we choose, eventually only those characters who *do* want to understand will, but not many characters seem to be interested. The continuous questioning of the other character's attempted communication is a favorable environment for *'what-do-you-mean syndromes'* to arise.

NOTES

[1] Some of the categories resulting from this combination have been rejected. Basically, two criteria have been used as the main source of rejection: (1) *Co-occurrence of non- intentionality and verbal stimulus.* It is impossible that a speaker communicates a verbal stimulus without some intentionality to provide a certain amount of information (or else, no words would be uttered in the first place). (2) *Co-occurrence of nonverbal communication, non-intentionality and implicit quality.* All unintentional nonverbal behaviour should be considered *explicit,* because there is a close link between implicitness and the communicator's intentionality to rely on the interlocutor's ability to extract information from various contextual sources.

[2] A nonverbal action will be considered *implicit* when its interpretation cannot be considered the most straightforward and explicit one that can be extracted in a given context, but some connotations are intentionally added to the action, in such a way that some extra-linguistic contextual knowledge is required for its optimal interpretation. The most clear example would be intra-cultural nonverbal gestures whose meaning is only valid within a particular community of users.

³ This is why the analysis of Pinter's characters' violation of Gricean maxims has proved to be so fruitful (see Mateo Martínez, 1990, 1992).

Department of English Studies, University of Alicante
Apartado 99, E-03080 Alicante
Tel. (96)5903400 Ext: 3027
e-mail: francisco.yus@alc.es

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