



Vol. 14/ Issue: 32/ autumn 2020

**The Deficiency (Death) or Efficiency (Birth) of Language:
Samuel Beckett and Jürgen Habermas**



Received date: 2019.6.23 Accepted date: 2020.12.14
PP.264-273

DOI: [10.22034/jpiut.2020.42949.2717](https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2020.42949.2717)

Hossein Sabouri (responsible author)

Associate professor, English Language and Literature Department- -University of Tabriz- Iran,
sabouri@tabrizu.ac.ir

Amin Khanbazian

M.A. student in English Literature, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages,
Tabriz University, Tabriz, Iran
khanbazian.amin@gmail.com

Abstract

The proximity of philosophy and literature has been endured since the dawn of time, both holding their stand among the critical thinkers from the ancient age to the modern time. A wide range of schools and thoughts have come to the stage of philosophy, one of the last ones being the Frankfurt School, whose notions target the social life of human beings and their interpersonal connections, which have been affected by the tragic events of the twentieth century. Jürgen Habermas, as the prominent figure of the Frankfurt School, turns down the challenging thoughts of his peers and expands the theory of “Communicative Action” through which he propounds the essentiality of reason and the importance of a constructive interaction among people with different social classes using a common and practical language. The post-war literature and specifically drama of absurd being known with significant figures like Samuel Beckett found a widespread prominence not only in the field of literature but also extended toward other fields like philosophy. In this analysis, through the works of Samuel Beckett, known as the predecessor of the absurdist drama, the dichotomy of ideas between the death of communication posited by Beckett and the efficiency of language supported by Habermas have been investigated.

Keywords: Absurdist, Communication Action, Language, Literature, the Frankfurt School

Hamm: We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?
Clov: Mean something! You and I mean something!
 "Samuel Beckett"

Introduction

A text free from philosophical interpretations and meanings is hard to find; in other words, philosophy can be easily found both in the lines along with between the lines of any form of fictional or non-fictional writing. There are a plethora of literary and philosophical concepts tied up with fictional ones including, the efficiency and deficiency of language, Self and Other, capitalist ethics, the binary opposition of subject and object, hegemony, identity crisis, and so many other topics.

The main concern of literature is the individual's social world, how he has been trying to have his impact on it, and his longing for the alteration of it. In other words, literature is based on the man and society where he lives, which are the essential components of it. The function of literature has always been the echo of humankind's inner thoughts, needs, desires, enigmatic dreams, and any other emotion and feeling that has made this creation more puzzling and unfathomable even to himself. Thus, the primary focus has been shifted to "the expression or representation of human life through the medium of social creation viz. language" (Wellek & Warren, 1989, p. 94).

According to British author W. H. Hudson (2006), "literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language" (p. 10). Looking through the works of literature, it seems an improbable task to eliminate the general outlook, spirit, and values that exist in the deep layers of society, which is only due to the fact that no single author is grown up in an utterly isolated environment.

On the other side of this argument, tracing the history of philosophical discussions goes back to ancient ages in Greek civilization. Being known as the architect of philosophical principles in modern time, Descartes's enthusiasm in following and expanding the duality of subject and object, prior to other figures like Plato and Aristotle, transformed the form of philosophy. Moreover, the emergence of the Frankfurt School is considered as the bottom line for the thoughts of modern time. By consciously analyzing and outlining the main issues and problems of the modern era, the philosophers of this school put an end to different thoughts like the Cartesian opposition between the subject and object.

In this light, the Frankfurt School has been placed among those movements which puts a lot of effort dealing with the involuted discussions concerning the cultural and philosophical issues along with well-known theorist and philosophers like Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Weber with which they share a similar philosophy and target to expand a critical theory of modern era's society as the interdisciplinary works. Starting from the great philosophers like Marx and Hegel, the Frankfurt School commenced a dialectical method through which history and

culture were replete with various forms of challenges and chaos among different groups that would lead to some historical advances or regressions.

Nietzsche's comments and analysis on religious, philosophical and moral concerns with Sigmund Freud's focus on the concept of sexuality, the coinage of the term "unconscious," and the inspiration of family through the procedure of becoming socialized had outstanding effects on the Frankfurt School. In this regard, Max Weber dealt with criticizing reason, which was an explication of how the development of rationalization, the emergence of the capitalist economy, and the loss of meaning and subjectivity in everyday life had its undoubting influence on the Frankfurt school.

The Frankfurt School "criticized fascist and totalitarian societies from the standpoint of Enlightenment concepts of democracy, human rights, individual and social freedoms, and rationality" (Hahn, 2000, p. 270). Due to various, and probably opposing works existing in this field, the school was divided into the first and second generation. In the first generation, the primary focus was on beauty, aesthetics, and literariness, mainly discussed by the great thinkers of the modern era, involving Benjamin, Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Horkheimer, and other influential figures whose major concern was the philosophical and literary subjects. The chief theories argued by philosophers were the concepts like alienation, identity crisis, the level of consciousness toward narratives, along with determinism, positivism, Capitalism, Enlightenment, and the vagueness of the speech. Being given the opportunity and liberty to criticize the Marxian Capitalism and the revolution of the proletariat freely, the school commenced repudiating the common ideas and beliefs that were held for decades or centuries while being "articulated with a common vocabulary and against a background of more or less shared assumptions" (Jay, 1996, p. xvi).

Language is always considered as the means of power and authority dictating ideologies and thoughts on people and individuals, but the other side of it, the representation of meaninglessness and mockery, got prominence in the twentieth-century works of post-war absurdist authors and dramatists. For Eugene Ionesco, as one of the pioneers in this field, "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless absurd, useless." (Esslin, 1968, p. 23) The development of such absurd dialogues in the present works expanded the idea of a meaningless language that is on the verge of death.

The Duality of Death and Birth in Nature of Language

The German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas is a contemporary figure and a leading thinker of the Frankfurt School, holding a worldwide reputation for the introduction of "Communicative Action," which provides an infrastructure of a critique by demarcating common standards of the language used to repudiate the discrimination. His theory, being a response to the extensive and worldwide notions and works of literary figures like Samuel Beckett propounding the meaninglessness of language and the deficiency of proper communication among human beings, tries to point out the issues related to human language, its roots, how it works in a social context, and the essence of

connection that exists between the language that they employ and the ability of people to perceive the world around them. In a broader sense, its overall objective is the improvement of human societies and abolishment of discrimination via contributions made by efficient language and the social interactions among people.

During his career, Habermas had a radical shift from the peculiar notions endorsed by the Frankfurt School, having plenty of discrepancies and dissimilarities comparing to the first generation to become a second-generation thinker of the movement. By the process of conversion to democracy, Habermas preserved his stand as the only democratic scholar who expanded the idea of transformative processes by connecting the democratic discussion to the potentialities of each individual to grow and develop. Regarding his firmly held beliefs about the primacy of logic and reason, he had contradictory opinions and ideas compared to his peers. Despite the fact that he was significantly affected by German philosopher Martin Heidegger, he didn't believe in some critical notions like the field of metaphysics and irrationality that Heidegger had. Rationality for Habermas was the base for practical communication, and by developing a perfect speech condition, he tried to make way for an undemanding socio-political criticism.

That being said, Samuel Beckett, on the other side, is a renowned literary dramatist of the twentieth century, whose "play critiques the universal values of Enlightenment humanism, which are exposed as self-serving mystifications that rationalize and instrumentalize the practices of social life" (Castle, 2013, p. 378). His work shares common areas with Existentialism, and he pursues the alteration of what we may call "meaning" to "meaninglessness" and then becoming a form of "Absurdity." In their book, *Can one live after Auschwitz?*, Adorno (2003) comments on Beckett and his works, writing that

Beckett simply puts a stop to the infinity, in the bad sense, of intentions: their meaning, according to him, is meaninglessness. This is his objective and non-polemical judgment on existential philosophy, which by means of the equivocations in the concept of meaning transfigures meaninglessness itself to meaning under the name of ... absurdity. (pp. 269-270)

The French dramatist, in his works, seeks a form of philosophy that attempts to negate by utilizing the characters that deal with a meaningless and utterly absurd existence lacking the consolation provided by any kind of myth, religion, or philosophical values that might help him go through the conflicts and absurdities. Most of his works are known not as stories but as fragmented pieces deploying the minimal but deficient language that lacks the art of rhetoric and puts an emphasis on the alienated and absurd truths. Besides that, "man himself is inadequate, suffering, and disordered. Even though he is part of that meaninglessness" (Haynes & Knowlson, 2003, p. 16).

Following other distinguished philosophers like Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer and his precursors, the second-generation member of the Frankfurt School, Habermas, denies the Marxian ideas concerning Self and Other by claiming that the social theory of present time must provide a right field for the human beings to regain their voice as the subjects and not to be treated as objects. Hence, a common understanding would be created by the exclusion and elimination of contradictions and conflicts. These critical ideas of Habermas more

and more emphasized the requirement for reconsideration of man's stand and role in the society and delineation of the roots of his problems and alienations. Accordingly, it seems that everyday communication is revealed to be distorted and fragmented, which is the main motive for Habermas to come up with a theory of an efficient language and communication that leads to a tranquil and soothing society aiming to discard the Frankfurt School's notions of lacking communication and the deficiency of language.

For Beckett, representing a new language, identity, form, and narrative different from previous works of him is something substantial and necessary, being a literary attempt to the Frankfurt School and its first generation. Along with his definition of language, which is an abortive and deficient tool, each individual's conceptualization of his true self is influenced and changed by the transformations that occur in the historical and cultural contexts. Beckett himself adds that,

More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. (as cited in Bryden, 2007, p. 134)

As it has been claimed by the Frankfurt School, the modern era saw the emergence of mass culture in new shapes in which various foundations of mass communications like advertisements, broadcastings, films, journalism, and magazines were the great means utilized for the sake of domination and hegemony on social communities. Unlike the expected cultivation of human beings in a more educated and refined manner by culture, the product of the culture industry, introduced by Horkheimer and Adorno, is more inane and less civilized. Following that, "Habermas tried to establish critical theory on a stronger theoretical foundation to overcome the impasse that he believed the Frankfurt School had become trapped in" (Hahn, 2000, p. 271). From this standpoint, by building up a thorough critique entailing a modern and traditional social theory and philosophy, an efficient language is used to base these thoughts.

The concept of identity is one of the main concerns of modernist writers and philosophers, which is fully dealt with by the prominent figures of Europe such as Heidegger, whose interest is the human life and its shortness, Jean-Paul Sartre and the concept of Existentialism, and post-Freudian theorists and the concept of Self. The same concept of identity is also perceptible in the plays of Samuel Beckett, whose "ideas follow through to the concern with the split self, doubling strategies, and fragmentation of time typical of postmodernist dramas" (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 143). The state of disintegration and fragmentation of subjectivities is never meant to be transcended but only moved forward to all patterns of movements.

Among the members of the Frankfurt School, Adorno had directly referred to Beckett and his works and discussed them widely. At the same time, the other first-generation members of this school likewise mentioned the plays of Beckett with a connection to the term "Absurdism." The application of this term must be

far from term absurdity, as a group of philosophers and thinkers like “Sartre had erroneously made absurdity into an ontological rather than a historical condition” (Jay, 1996, p. 274). However, the entire effort of Beckett to restore a meaningful and efficient language is doomed to fail, as there’s no proper word found to express the chaos of this universe and its beings.

Habermas highlighted those areas such as journals, newspapers, and public places that promoted democracy where there were conflicts of opinions and issues ranging from political to economic and critical fields leading to more efficient social interactions and interpersonal communications, contrary to the principle that Marx supported. In addition to that, Habermas was the leading figure who talked about the public sphere defined as any philosophical or political institution, which asserts that any individual or groups of people ought to be provided the opportunity to reach a state of peace and serenity by gathering up their needs and desires in order to find out the suitable political practice in which they are given their real subjectivity and appropriate liberty to express their opinions and thoughts without feeling any kind of menace or repression. By focusing on language and the nature of communication, Habermas argued that the perfect model of communication is concealed inside the language itself. He stated that an efficient language had the potentiality of giving the man the required understanding to reach an agreement, and also, using the faculty of logic and reason would help him have a more effective form of argument.

The absurdist play is generally known as a metaphor used for some specific sides of human existence, and through the works of Beckett, as one of the well-known figures of this field, “one enters a world in which there is no contradictory sense of the self in its ‘health and validity’ to mitigate the despair, terror, and boredom of existence” (Laing, 1969, p. 42). Among the group of absurd dramatists calling forth an indeterminacy and uncertainty after the World Wars, Beckett’s works are filled with conflicts and disputes, while there’s a strangeness and eccentricity in the characters, settings, and the events that take place inside the works. In this fashion, while looking through his remarkable play, *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir, as the two characters of it are desperately committed to their lives, and they are left with no choice but to concede and live it:

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?

VLADIMIR (impatiently): Yes, yes, we're magicians. But let us persevere in what we have resolved, before we forget. (Beckett, 1954, 44)

The characters of his play are believed to be deformed and deteriorated, trying to explore and build up meaning in their lives through a dead language and look for the true identities they have lost.

According to poststructuralism, the language entails the whole world of human beings, and their world constitutes the entire universe. Language has been highlighted as the primary element in philosophical discussions, and its trace have always been observed among the great figures of this field, namely, Heidegger, Gadamer, Wittgenstein, and Quine. According to claims posited by Habermas,

none of the social thinkers were successful in evolving a theory like the “Communicative Action.” He discussed the efficiency of language and came up with a novel social theory, which emphasized both interdisciplinarity as well as multidisciplinary. Believing that language had the sufficient and practical capacity to attack and challenge any form of power and hegemony, Habermas supported the combination of ideas such as philosophy, social theory, economics, and cultural studies to form a consistent and harmonious body of language. In other words, a society can be flourished and developed to offer enlightenment for democracy just by means of an efficient language. Through a society in which every single individual has the opportunity to speak and have his own voice, with reciprocate communication, language can be understood and at the same time produced by each member of that society.

In terms of the ambiguity of language and its deficiency, Beckett's plays tend to signify the disintegration and distortion of language, which is pushed to a more corrupted state and is empty of any definite meaning, particularly in its everyday practice used in the social circumstances. One of the common motifs existing in Beckett's works is the indeterminacy and uncertainty, which leads to the vagueness of meaning that is an almost impossible task to be obtained in his works.

Beckett's model of philosophy is emphasizing on taking down the grand narratives and in view of this, Shira Wolosky, pointing out the art of Beckett, states that “the language of self-negation finally fails to silence itself, and in so doing proves fecund,” and the inexpressibility of language gives rise to “reproductive and inventive energy” (Hatavara et al., 2016, p. 164). While using language, he attempts to examine the restrictions prevailing in its usage, both as a way of communication and a tool for the utterance of the inner thoughts and factual statements. The collapse of reason and its abandonment from language is the sole reason for the failure and deficiency. “It is also the impossibility of both living and dying: the terror of surviving the collapse of reason. As early as *Waiting for Godot*: “Thinking is not the worst. ... What is terrible is to have thought” (Federman & Graver, 1997, p. 269).

For the first time in several years, Beckett appears to enjoy having fun with language, using words such as plinth, cranium and, squeak for satiric effect. Under the massive pressure exerted on it, the language he uses, seems to have a vigorous form. Thus, it's not an unusual matter to observe that “the most expressive moments in his plays often occur in the pauses and silences, indicating, at turns, repression, fear, anticipation or horrified inarticulacy” (McDonald, 2007, p. 36), and communicative failings of language.

One can affirm that what Habermas holds as his major idea and principle is the combination of various fields of thoughts like political ideas, social theory, philosophy, postmodernism, and many other subjects included in his discussion and arguments. Also, Adorno favors the more modernist-formalist works of Joyce, Beckett, and Brecht, and he argues that a certain subjectivism and tendency toward abstraction are necessary in order for art to maintain a critical distance on social actuality, indicting its failure to satisfy deep subjective longings for satisfaction. (Eldridge, 2003, p. 241)

According to the Frankfurt School, capitalism caused new ways of domination, administration, and bureaucracy, usurping each individual's liberty

and freedom and restraining democracy and worldwide applications. Based on the claims of the Frankfurt School, the outcome of such repression is a homogeneous social community and culture, leading to mass society and the disappearance of individuality. In an article written by Dick Howard (1976), *Moral Development and Ego Identity*, we come to read that “the socialization of capitalist society has gone so far that the notion of an individual ego no longer makes sense” (p. 177).

Yet, the primary challenge of Beckett is to restore a language which is condemned to fail, not being able to find the proper and accurate words that would convey this chaotic and short-lived life and pushed toward its deficiency and death. He rejects both the plot and syntax in its conventional form, dismantling his language to fragmented pieces and rarely using more than one word to represent the difficulty of human communication and interaction. In his works, “Beckett also explores the humour of stupidity, where concepts are used in ways that contradict their meaning: ‘Did you ever have an instant of happiness?’ ‘Not to my knowledge’” (Colebrook, 2003, p. 134).

Happiness is considered as a vague term to be apprehended by any individual. Beckett’s outlook toward the world around him encourages its readers to abandon their traditional views on the values that they hold in their life. There is an insistence on the “language” by the characters asking questions, which are sometimes weird, and uncommon exceeding the standards and the expected norms. An absurdist play, using deficient language, is in favor of representing a metaphor for the various sides of human existence, leading to uncertainty and hesitation.

Exploring through Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, his main concern is to find the pathological in language. The only forms of speech that characters use to ease their attempt to communicate are nonsense and quips, including in their language. Beckett’s *Endgame* has been discussed directly by Adorno, although there are other indirect and limited references to Beckett’s works referring to them as “Absurdism”:

What philosophy Beckett provides, he himself reduces to cultural trash, like the innumerable allusions and cultural tidbits he employs, following the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon avant-garde and especially of Joyce and Eliot. For Beckett, culture swarms and crawls ... before him: modernism as what is obsolete in modernity. Language, regressing, demolishes that obsolete material. (Adorno, 1991, p. 241)

Beckett’s other play, *Endgame*, “is a glimpse into a world where the dignity and majesty of humanity – its ideals, aspirations, philosophies and discoveries, its spirituality and high-mindedness – are stripped away” (Castle, 2013, p. 378). The prominent trait of this work is the utter deficiency of meaning in the contexts of social discussions, and it’s filled with dialogues that are repetitive, discursive, fragmented, disjointed and often contain only one syllable. This play has been admired for its unwavering delineation of the terrors and horrors of life following World War II.

As mentioned earlier, the modern age has provided a variety of means and tools such as rational society, modern science, and different institutions to create solace and give meaning to the lives of individuals. Nevertheless, the outcome was quite the contrary of what was expected, having the democracy turned to fascism,

the reason to irrationality, logic leading to wars, the civilization to savagery, and last but not least, enlightenment and knowledge to subjugation and dominance.

Conclusion

The entanglement of philosophy with any form of writing, whether it is a fictional or non-fictional one, is not obscure to anyone. Throughout its history, from ancient Greek to modern time, a close affinity has always remained between the literature of each era and the philosophical movements of that time. Literature, in this manner, always had the concern of speaking on behalf of the people, and becoming the voice for the expression of human beings' vicissitudes, and putting all its effort to trigger a change in the lives of the objectified people.

Among the various thoughts that emerged during the history of philosophy, the Frankfurt School, known as the critical theory, is the movement concerning the social thought and freedom of humankind. The wide range of thoughts and works, which haven't always been in agreement with each other, paved the way for splitting the movement into two different divisions of the first and second generation. The German philosopher and second-generation sociologist, Jurgen Habermas is known for his repudiations of Marxian thoughts, and by introducing the theory of "Communicative Action," emphasizes on human being's faculty of reason and how each individual is entitled to regain his subjectivity by building an authentic communication with others in an entirely equal condition.

This thought of Habermas in the birth of a constructive communication among human beings is considered and seen as challenging the principles of the twentieth-century post-war dramatist, Samuel Beckett, whose plays have been attributed to the "Absurdist" works written after the horrific experiences of World Wars. The common motif found in his plays is the futile attempt of the characters to find a practical means of communication among each other. The entire of his plays including *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are filled with immense distress in which characters desperately try to use the language to its fullest for the sake of the utterance of their inner struggles. It's quite clear that the more they attempt to build up a connection among each other, the more does the language prove to be in its decline to death.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1991). *Notes to literature*, Trans by: S. W. Nicholson, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Adorno, T. W. (2003). *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*. R. Tiedemann (Ed.). Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Beckett, S. (1954). *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
- Bryden, M. (2007). *Gilles Deleuze: Travels in Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Castle, G. (2013). *The Literary Theory Handbook*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Colebrook, C. (2003). *Irony*. New York: Routledge.
- Eldridge, R. (2003). *An introduction to the philosophy of art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Esslin, M. (1968), *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Federman, R., & Graver, L. (Eds.). (1997). *Samuel Beckett*. London, England: Routledge.
- Hahn, L. (Ed.). (2000). *Perspectives on Habermas*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing.
- Hatavara, M., Hyvärinen, M., Mäkelä, M., & Mäyrä, F. (Eds.). (2016). *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media: Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*. London, England: Routledge.
- Howard, D. (1976). *Moral Development and Ego Identity: A Clarification* by Dick Howard. *Telos*, 1976(27), 176-182. doi:10.3817/0376027176
- Haynes, J., & Knowlson, James (2003). *Images of Beckett*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hudson, W. H. (2006). *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*. India: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.
- Jay, M. (1996). *The dialectical imagination: A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*. -Berkeley: University of California.
- Laing, R. D. (1969). *The divided self: An existential study in sanity and madness*. London: Penguin Books.
- Llewellyn-Jones, M. (2002). *Contemporary Irish drama & cultural identity*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- McDonald, R. (2007). *The Cambridge introduction to Samuel Beckett*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wellek, R. & Warren, A. (1989). *Theory of Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World.
- Wolosky, S. (1995). *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press