"Il suffit d'avoir lu Beckett pour que tout autre texte soit révélé par son éclairage comme trop peu exigeant et se contentant à trop bon compte".

(Beckett 2006)

Register in Samuel Beckett's Writings in English and French: Vocabulary, Punctuation, and Grammar

Bentolhoda Nakhaei
University of Lorraine-Campus of Metz

Samuel Beckett, his Letters, and his Tragicomedy of *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on April 13, 1906 in Foxrock, county Dublin, Ireland and passed away on December 22, 1989 in Paris, France. He was known as author, critic, playwright, and above all winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. His writings are both published in English and French. Samuel Beckett is mostly known all over the world for his famous play of *Waiting for Godot* published in 1952. In 1929, he acquired the position of *lecteur* at the École Normale Supérieure of Paris. There, he joined the literary circle of James Joyce. In 1937, he decided to settle in Paris. From 1929 to 1940, Beckett's life is clearly represented via his letters written to his friends. In 2009, a selection of these letters were published for the first time. These letters depict Beckett's view and voice of "Western Europe in the 1930s". In fact, "detailed introductions, translations, explanatory notes, profiles of major correspondents, chronologies, and other contextual information accompany the letters" (Craig et al 109). During the World War II, he fought against the Gestapo and fed himself as a farm worker. In 1945, as an Irish citizen, Beckett volunteered for the *Red Cross* and went back to France to work as an interpreter in a military hospital of Normandy. In 1945, he was awarded by the *Croix de Guerre* for his efforts.

One of the most important aspects of the present study is that register in Beckett's writings in English and French has not been questioned yet in details by researchers and translators. That is why the present research aims to shed light on contrastive analysis which can compare stylistic units in order to examine the extent of change in Beckett's register from his letters to his play. As far as the relevant literature is concerned, there is not a wide range of research regarding the subject of register in Samuel Beckett's writings. However, some studies have been conducted on his general style of writing. One of these studies was done by Julien F. Carrier, in 2005, under the title of *Samuel Beckett and bilingualism: how the return to English influences the later writing style and gender roles of All that Fall and Happy Days.* Moreover, in 2011, Saeid Rahimipoor, Henrik Edoyan, and Masoud Hashemi talked about

the subject of self-revelation in Samuel Beckett's style in their article entitled *Self Revelation in Samuel Beckett's Language*. By drawing on certain theories of theoreticians in linguistics and translation studies such as Brian T. Fitch, Anthony Uhlmann, and Saeid Rahipour, this research seeks to present a linguistic and translation analysis of Beckett's register in his four volumes of letters and English, and French versions of his play *Waiting for Godot*. Hence, this study aims to investigate the extent to which the Irish writer's register has been differentiated in the corpus under study by the passage of time to suit the stylistic norms of 20th century in France and England.

Register in Samuel Beckett's Writings in English and French

According to Halliday, *register* is the reflection of "variation in the organizational structure of language according to differences in the field, tenor, and mode of communication" (Halliday 68). For Halliday, register holds a semantic value: "register is the clustering of semantic features according to situation type" (Halliday 68). He considers register as a configuration of the networks of significance. The British linguist believes that the register of the text has a close relationship with context in which the text is written (58):

> The patterns of determination that we find between the context of situation and the text are a general characteristic of the whole complex that is formed by a text and its environment. We shall not expect to be able to show that the options embodied in one or another particular sentence are determined by the field, tenor, and mode of the situation. The principle is that each of these elements in the semiotic structure of the situation activates the corresponding component in the semantic system, creating in the process a semantic configuration, a group of favored and foregrounded options from the total meaning potential that is typically associated with the situation type in question. This semantic configuration is what we understand by the register.

In addition, Halliday is convinced that the register could be influenced by linguistic situation (Halliday 31):

> Types of linguistic situation differ from one another, broadly speaking, in three respects:
> first, as regards what actually is taking place; secondly, as regards what part the language is playing; and thirdly, as regards who is taking part. These three variables, taken together, determine the range within which meanings are selected and the forms which are used for their expression. In other words, they determine the 'register'.

The variation of vocabulary is one of the aspects of register. For instance, the variation of words used by Samuel Beckett throughout his letters and his tragicomedy of *Waiting for Godot* reflects the variation of his register. One may wonder whether the variation of vocabulary that the Irish author has applied in the French version of his tragicomedy is the same as the variation of vocabulary used in the English version. By going through both versions, it could be noticed that the frequency of

variation of vocabulary in the French version is higher in comparison to the English version. It could also be seen that the texture of his version in French is richer in terms of vocabulary.

En attendant Godot (Théâtre) (French Edition)

Aa

Acte premier

Route à la campagne, avec arbre.

Soir.

Estragon, assis sur une pierre, essaie d'enlever sa chaussure. Il s'y acharne des deux mains, en ahanant. Il s'arrête, à bout de forces, se repose en haletant, recommence. Même jeu.

Entre Vladimir.

ESTRAGON *(renonçant à nouveau).* - Rien à faire.
VLADIMIR *(s'approchant à petits pas raides, les jambes écartées).* - Je commence à le croire. *(Il s'immobilise.)* J'ai longtemps résisté à cette pensée, en me disant, Vladimir, sois raisonnable. Tu n'as pas encore tout essayé. Et je reprenais le combat. *(Il se recueille, songeant au combat. A Estragon.)* - Alors, te revoilà, toi.

Figure I.

Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before.
Enter Vladimir.
ESTRAGON: *(giving up again).* Nothing to be done.
VLADIMIR: *(advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart).* I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. *(He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.)* So there you are again.
ESTRAGON: Am I?
VLADIMIR: I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone for ever.
ESTRAGON: Me too.
VLADIMIR: Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? *(He reflects.)* Get up till I embrace you.
ESTRAGON: *(irritably).* Not now, not now.
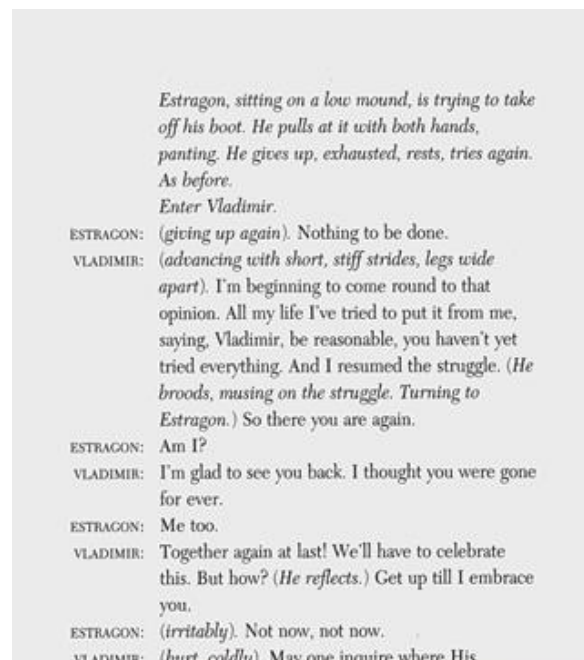VLADIMIR: *(hurt, coldly).* May one inquire where His

Figure II.

Another aspect of register refers to the variation of "grammar, […] and pronunciation related to the tenor or social relationship between participants" (Halliday 33). In fact, the level of formality of style indicates the variation of grammar and vocabulary. For instance, the level of formality of register is higher in Beckett's letters in comparison to his tragicomedy. Each volume demonstrates the author's evolution of writing style from the 1930s to the 1980s. However, in his well-known German letter of 1937, he talked about his strong desire of disintegrating the English formal grammar from syntax. In his letters, he maintained a pejorative tone about his own English style. On the other hand, he believed that French language gave him more advantage of control in terms of grammar and vocabulary. In this regard, he asserts (Craig et al 366): "I am inclined as always in English to shit and pullulate–but there's a play there all right I think–if I can retrain my native vulgarity".

Textual Analysis

The focus of the present study is on Samuel Beckett's correspondences and his tragicomedy in English and French. In 1952, he published his famous play *Waiting for Godot*[1] first in French and later in English. Beckett's play turned to become a success in the *Theater of the Absurd*. In 1953, *Waiting for Godot* was played in the *théâtre de Babylone* in Paris. With this performance, Beckett started to pave his path to the hall of fame. In 1969, he won the Nobel Prize. He never appeared in any public speech that is why he accepted the award without presenting himself at the ceremony. In 2016, a selection of his correspondences was published under the title of *Dear Mr. Beckett: Letters from the Publisher, the Samuel Beckett File*.

The question of register in Samuel Beckett's writing has been a complex subject since he wrote texts both in English and French. In fact, Beckett's register reveals a cultural, historical, and above all philosophical complexity. His writing style consists of abundant allusions to the work of other writers. In other terms, his writing opposes to the dominant literary, philosophical, and theological ideas of his era.

Dante Alighieri[2], René Descartes[3], Arnold Geulincx[4], and James Joyce[5] are the writers whose thoughts and philosophies are referred to in Beckett's writings. In fact, in his writings, he tried to talk about existential concepts such as the relationships between different individuals and their struggles for life. He frequently questioned the existence of human being and quested for finding the true nature of *I*. For instance, the two main characters in *Waiting for Godot* are depicted in two acts, living a miserable life, asking themselves the reason of their being. They think that they are waiting for a person whose name is *Godot*, though they are not sure whether he appears. One of the notions which is

---

[1] In French, *En attendant Godot*.
[2] Dante Alighieri was an Italian poet, writer, thinker, and a political person who lived in 9th century.
[3] René Descartes was a French mathematician, physician, and philosopher who lived during 12th century.
[4] Arnold Geulincx was a Belgian philosopher who lived in 12th century and followed Descartes in his philosophy.
[5] James Augustine Aloysius Joyce was an Irish novelist, writer, poet, and literary critic. He was a follower of avant-garde movement in 20th century.

referred to in this context is the saying of Descartes: "I think, therefore, I am". *Who am I? Where am I going? What am I supposed to do in this world? What will happen to me?* These are the questions that Beckett attempted to ask through his literary texts.

One of the peculiarities of Beckett's register is *brevity*. The sentences are short and the grammar is very simple. In other terms, the words which are spoken by the characters throughout *Waiting for Godot* are short and a few. This brevity offers the readers the opportunity to reflect on the action which is taken place in each page of the tragicomedy. The brevity is also demonstrated in *mise en scène* of his play, i.e. there is only one leafless tree throughout the two acts. By following the simplicity of the writing style of certain authors and philosophers such as René Descarte, Arnold Geulincx, and James Joyce, Beckett chose concentration in the construction of linguistic structures in his writings.

Another peculiarity of Beckett's register is the *time slicing*. Throughout his writings, he created silences and pauses between the conversations of the individuals. According to Daniel Katz (Uhlmann 363), "Beckett is the great technician of the pause, the materialized linguistic rupture. Any linguistic unit is structurally temporal in that phonemes and morphemes need to be deployed in sequence, and that word order determines meaning, but this logical temporality is attacked by pressures on the aural temporality of the spoken word on Beckett's stage, by both the pause and its dialectical observe, and speed". For instance, in *Waiting for Godot*, in the first act, 41 silences, and 38 pauses are observed, and in the second act, 70 silences, and 24 pauses are seen. The time slicing is, in fact, a type of structure that the Irish author has used a lot in his play. On the contrary, Lucky's dialogues demonstrates a "Lucky's logorrheic flow" (Uhlmann). Lucky's long nonsense dialogue in act one on page 36, 37, and 38 could be a good evidence of the above assertion (Beckett 36-38):

> Given the existence as uttered forth in the public quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames […].

Another aspect of Beckett's register is the *syntax slicing*, i.e. the language has been deliberating decomposed. The sentences have no subject, no specific pronoun or they are not even conjugated. For instance, in the first page of the first act of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon opens his conversation by saying "Nothing to be done". On the second page, Vladimir's catalogue opens up with another sliced syntax of "Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. […] Now it's too late". In the next line Estragon says "Taking off my boot". In the second act, on page fifteen, there are more evidences of the *syntax slicing*. As an example, on the first line, Estragon says: "What a day". Afterwards, on line ten, Vladimir opens his conversation by saying: "one isn't master of one's moods". On line sixteen, Estragon only says one word of "Happy?" without using any pronoun subject and/or verb. As it could be seen in the given examples, the syntax of the text is decomposed. In addition, with respect to the formality of his language, on 6 February 1937, Samuel Beckett writes to Thomas

McGreenvy[6]: "It is indeed getting more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it…To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through–I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer" (Craig et al 69). It could be said that Samuel Beckett uses these two peculiarities of style in order to enhance the notion of obscurity in his work. In addition, the silence, the pause, and the decomposition of sentences result to the chaos, darkness, confusion, and ambiguity of the 20th century.

With regard to the fact that Samuel Beckett wrote both in English and French, Corinne Scheiner (Craig et al 613) asserts: "It is good to know that while translating his own texts, Beckett has always remained faithful to the original text". Scheiner adds "it is clear from accounts of his collaborations that Beckett does not seek to produce literal, word-for-word renderings of his texts. Rather, he clearly understands the process of self-translation to be one of rewriting" (Craig et al). As already mentioned, Beckett's texts are embellished by allusions. To translate these allusions from English into French, the Irish author has engaged the process of cultural transposition. According to Scheiner, in his translations, Beckett has used the three following translation strategies: "(I) he replaces unfamiliar references with ones familiar to the new reader; (II) he retains the references present in the first version but, recognizing that these references are likely unfamiliar to the new reader, he offers more information, (III) he interpolates additional references drawn from the new reader's culture" (Craig et al). For instance, in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett changes *Connemara* for *Normandie*, and *Puncher* for *Poinçon*. In fact, for him, translation equals rewriting. Thus Beckett's register in his translations is not identical with his register in the original text.

According to Lois More Overbeck (Craig et al), from 1929 to 1989, Samuel Beckett wrote about sixteen thousand letters. His letters are the description of "his own work, from the insecurities of a fledgling writer to a man who feels, frequently, that he has written himself out" (Craig et al 428). The letters also show the crisis and changes that happened in Irish, French, and German society and culture. Since, Beckett always refused to publically appear in any type of ceremony or interview, his letters could be taken as expression of his opinion and feelings about his literary works. He wrote the letters to his close friends, i.e. Thomas McGreevy, Georges Duthuit, Alan Schneider, and Barbara Bray describing his difficulties and emotions with regards to his efforts for writing. For instance, he wrote to Avigdor Arikha saying: "The rhythm and the syntax of weakness and penury, not easy to catch. All the same, I am getting there a little better-VIth version of the beginning". In fact, Beckett's letters depict the gradual change that happens "between his original conception and the realization of his work" (Craig et al 30).

---

[6] MacGreevy changed his name to MacGreenvy. From the second volume of Beckett's letters, the changed name is reflected.

With regard to the language used in Beckett's letters, it must be said that he tried to "communicate the incommunicable" about his private life with his close friends[7], collaborators[8], and close relations[9], therefore, the punctuation, and the grammar applied follow a coherence (Rahimipour & Hashemi 821). In addition, the lexis which are used maintain a certain coherence in comparison to the lexis used in *Waiting for Godot* either in English or in French. For Beckett, words are timeless. His attempt was to destroy the rationality, tense, aspect, and above all structure in his sentences used in his tragicomedy. According to Rahimipour, "he tries to develop a new language of timelessness and spacelessness, a language as 'a system of sounds devoid of content which moves only within itself'" (Rahimipour & Hashemi 821). The register used in his play reveals a sort of breakdown and disintegration of language. In fact, "the disintegration captures the language and the dialogue fades in sheer minimalism" (Rahimipour & Hashemi 821). Beckett's intention of applying such a detached register in his play is to show the reality of wordless of self of the human in 20th century. The repetition of words is another technique for Beckett to demonstrate the disintegration of language throughout the two acts in his play. By using nonsense words and irrational sentences and long pauses, the Irish author attempts to break the rationality of the conventional language of his era. In other terms, an ambiguous language is used to communicate the serious dilemmas of man after the Second World War. The words have lost their meanings as the 20th-century man has lost his purpose of life after seeing the death and depression of the post-war era. In fact, Vladimir and Estragon's register shows their bewilderment in search to find the meaning of their existence.

The language is also disintegrated from its action. The characters talk about taking action, they agree on it and at the end, no action is taken. This pattern happens over and over especially when the reader reaches the end of the second act of the play. As an example, on page 123, Vladimir asks from Estragon if they agree on going. Estragon replies "yes, let's go". However, no action happens.

Concerning the disintegration of register in relation to other elements, it might be asserted that the role of the words and their meanings are also decentralized in the favor of existential concepts that the author tried to transfer to his readers. Since the characters of the play are waiting for someone whose name is Godot, they constantly refer to a type of absence of a protagonist. The absence underlined in the dialogues of the characters creates an absence of speech and long pauses. Therefore, language loses its main role in the play in order to highlight the plot of the play. The absence of words could also be eradicated only through one fulfilling action, i.e. the appearance of Godot. In this regard, Rahimipour explains (Rahimipour & Hashemi 823):

> To penetrate into the sheer the core of the theme, Beckett finally demolishes the structure of language in every aspect violating its syntax, semantics, etc. This can be detected in lucky's supposedly meaningless and uncontrollable stream of words. What climaxes the point is his strong belief in it manifested in his vigor and strength of his speech. He talks seriously and

---

[7] Tom MacGreevy, Ethna MacCarthy.
[8] Jérôme Lindon, Robert Pinget.
[9] Barbara Bray.

"delivers a long, gabled monologue about the fate of man caught between an indifferent Godot and an inhospitable nature" highlighting the exact dilemma of modern man. The annihilation of the convention of language has enabled Beckett to convey meaning through nonsense. Lucky: Given the existence as uttered in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from…

Conclusion

By using different strategies such as repetition, disintegration, nonsense, ambiguity, and above all decentralization of the language in *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett attempted to underline the notion of annihilation of the existence of the human being in the 20th century. In other terms, apart from his letters, in his play he has completely separated the meaning from the syntax in order to highlight the perplexity, and confusedness of the man looking for a significance and purpose of existence. The man who is waiting for coming the Messiah who might help him out in finding hope. At the same time, the detachment of the aspects of the verbs applied in his play show the futility and bitterness of this anticipation. Through different variations in terms of lexis, grammar, and above all, punctuation, the Irish author intended to transfer his feeling of suffer, his inner anguish, and loss of hope after what he psychologically experienced through his life especially during his fight against Nazi Germans during the Second World War (Britannica). At the end, it must be asserted that the writing style of Beckett is different in his play in comparison to his letters; since in his English version of the play, he has shown a sort of hostility towards English syntax. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, he kept a positive viewpoint about the French language and attempted to have a coherent style in his French translation of *Waiting for Godot*. As far as the register is concerned, his letters kept an informal language since they were mostly written to communicate with his acquaintances. On the other hand, the register of his play could, at some extent, be considered as vulgar; because it aims to tell the story of two tramps.

With regard to the punctuation of the French and English versions of *Waiting for Godot*, an extent of nuance could be observed. In other terms, the English square brackets are changed to parenthesis in French. In addition, the place of periods are, to some extent, changed in the French version. As an example, one could refer to the very first page of the play where Estragon says: "[Giving up again.] Nothing to be done". In the French version, Beckett eliminated the sign of colon which is in front of the dialogue of the character and translated this phrase as it follows: "Estragon (renonçant à nouveau)—Rien à faire" (Beckett 1).

All things considered, one could conclude that by decomposing the language of *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett aimed to depict the philosophical enquiry of human being in search of the nature of his existence. The enquiry of two tramps led to their confusion, disorientation, and above all depression due to their meaningless or absurd existence.

REFERENCES

Beckett, Samuel. *En attendant Godot*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1952.

———. *Waiting for Godot: A tragicomedy in two Acts*, Faber and Faber, Paris, 1956.

Esselin, Martin J.. "Samuel Beckett". Encyclopedia Britannica, 18 Dec. 2020, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Beckett. Accessed 6 June 2021.

Durozoï, Gérard. *Beckett-irremplacable*, Hermann, Paris, 2006.

Craig, George, Dow Fehsenfeld, Martha, Gunn, Dan, More Overback, Lois. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Volume 1, "1929-1940", Lois More, Overbreck (ed.), Cambridge University press, New York, 2009.

———. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Volume 2, "1941-1956", George Craig, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (ed.). Cambridge University press: New York, 2011.

———. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Volume 3, "1957-1965", George Craig, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (ed.). Cambridge University press: New York, 2011.

———. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Volume 4, "1966-1989", George Craig, Dan Gunn, Lois More Overbeck (ed.). Cambridge University press: New York, 2016.

Fitch, T. Brian. *Dimensions, structures et textualité dans la trilogie romanesque de Beckett*. Lettres Modernes Minard: Paris, 1977.

Johnson, Trevor, Schembri, Adam. *Australian Sign Language: An introduction to Sign Language Linguistics*, The University Press Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007.

Halliday, M. A. K, *Language as a Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold. 1978.

Oppenheim, Lois, *Samuel Beckett Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2004.

Quintallet, Jacques, *En attendant Godot*, Bréal: Paris, 1999.

Rahipour, Saeid, Edoyen, Henrik, and Hashemi, Masoud, 'Self Revelation', in *Samuel Beckett's Language* in Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, Elsevier: Netherlands, 2011.

Uhlmann, Anthony, *Samuel Beckett in Context*, Cambridge University Press: New York, 2013.