THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

General Editor: N. F. Blake

Professor of English Language and Linguistics

University of Sheffield

THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

General Editor: N. F. Blake

Professor of English Language and Linguistics,
University of Sheffield

Published titles

<i>An Introduction to the Language of Literature</i>	N. F. Blake
<i>The Language of Shakespeare</i>	N. F. Blake
<i>The Language of Chaucer</i>	David Burnley
<i>The Language of Wordsworth and Coleridge</i>	Frances Austin
<i>The Language of Irish Literature</i>	Loreto Todd
<i>The Language of D. H. Lawrence</i>	Allan Ingram
<i>The Language of Thomas Hardy</i>	Raymond Chapman
<i>The Language of Drama</i>	David Birch
<i>The Language of Jane Austen</i>	Myra Stokes
<i>The Language of the Metaphysical Poets</i>	Frances Austin
<i>The Language of James Joyce</i>	Katie Wales
<i>The Language of Twentieth-Century Poetry</i>	Lesley Jeffries
<i>The Language of George Orwell</i>	Roger Fowler
<i>The Language of Old and Middle English Poetry</i>	G. A. Lester

Series Standing Order (The Language of Literature)

If you would like to receive future titles in this series as they are published, you can make use of our standing order facility. To place a standing order please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address and the name of the series. Please state with which title you wish to begin your standing order. (If you live outside the United Kingdom we may not have the rights for your area, in which case we will forward your order to the publisher concerned.)

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS, England

THE LANGUAGE OF DRAMA

Critical Theory and Practice

David Birch

© David Ian Birch 1991

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1991 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-51638-6 ISBN 978-1-349-21459-4 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-21459-4

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4
03	02	01	00	99	98	

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	1
1 Drama Praxis	6
Authorship	6
Literature	11
Multiple Voices	19
Language and Action	21
Performing Meanings	25
Interpretation	29
2 Making Sense	34
Realities and Fictions	34
Ideology	41
Illusion	45
Order	48
3 Conflict	54
Dialogism	54
Goals	55
Co-operation	60
Struggle	66
4 Control	76
Classifications	76
Word-Shock	83
Defamiliarisation	97
Domination	101
5 Roles	108
Routines and Fronts	108

Subjectivity	113
Stereotypes	121
6 Cultural Power	131
Gender	131
Carnival and Masks	140
Writing Back	146
<i>Afterword</i>	151
<i>References and Bibliography</i>	154
<i>Index</i>	170

If you just let a play
speak, it may not make
a sound.

(Peter Brook)

For
Frederick Birch
1923–90

Then I saw that the wall had never been there,
that the 'unheard-of' is here and this, not
something and somewhere else.

(Dag Hammarskjöld)

Acknowledgements

This book was completed during an overseas study programme granted to me by Murdoch University, Western Australia, which I took up as a Visiting Fellow in the Department of English Studies, University of Nottingham, UK. I would like to thank Ron Carter, in particular, for the support he gave to me during this fellowship; the staff of the Hallward Library, Cripps Computing Centre and Cripps Hall; the careful and detailed attention Norman Blake, the general editor of this series, gave to this book in preparation; and the highly skilled secretarial support given to me by remote control from Jan Bide in Perth.

My debt to contemporary theorists and drama scholarship is a large one. If I have failed to give due notice of particular contributions directly in the text, recognition of the contribution is acknowledged in the References and Bibliography. Furthermore my colleagues in the School of Humanities, Murdoch University, are a continual source of stimulation. I should record my debt in particular to those colleagues and students who were engaged in the debates (and battles) about semiotics, theatre and drama praxis; to Tan See Kam, whose comments were invaluable, and to David George, David Moody, Serge Tampalini, Jenny de Reuck, Anthea Gupta and John Frow for critical comment on earlier drafts.

The author and publishers wish to thank the following who have kindly given permission for the use of copyright material:

Alan Bold for material from *The State of the Nation*, Chatto and Windus, 1969; Jonathan Cape Ltd. for material from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*; and with the Estate of Eugene O'Neill for material from *The Iceman Cometh*; Rosica Colin Ltd. on behalf of the author for material from *Greek* by Steven Berkoff. Copyright ©

Steven Berkoff 1980, 1982, 1983, 1986, 1989; and *East* by Steven Berkoff. Copyright © Steven Berkoff 1977, 1978; Grafton Books for material from *Boys from the Blackstuff* by Alan Bleasdale; Grove Press for material from *American Buffalo* by David Mamet, 1977; A. M. Heath and Co. Ltd. on behalf of the author for material from *Home* by David Storey, Jonathan Cape; Heinemann Publishers (Oxford) Ltd. for material from *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by L. Pirandello; Methuen London for material from *Being and Nothingness* by Jean-Paul Sartre, 1957, *The Worlds* by Edward Bond, 1980; *Softcops*, 1983, *Traps*, 1978, and *Cloud Nine*, 1979 by Caryl Churchill; *The Complete Fawlty Towers* by John Cleese and Connie Booth, 1988; *Elizabeth: Almost by Chance* by Dario Fo, 1987; *The Ride Across Lake Constance*, 1973 and *Kaspar*, 1969, by Peter Handke; *The Ruffian on the Stair* by Joe Orton, 1967; *Betrayal*, 1978, *Old Times*, 1971, *The Dwarfs*, 1977, and *The Caretaker*, 1960, by Harold Pinter; *Shout Across the River*, 1979, and *Caught on a Train*, 1982, by Stephen Poliakoff; *The Pope's Wedding* by Edward Bond, 1977; *Poppy* by Peter Nichols, 1982; *Painting a Wall* by David Lan, 1979; *Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths, 1976; and *Fish in the Sea* by John McGrath, 1977; Oxford University Press for material from *Boesman and Lena*, 1980, and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 1974, by Athol Fugard; and 'The Road' in *Collected Plays*, 1973, and *A Dance of the Forests*, 1963, by Wole Soyinka; Margaret Ramsey Ltd. on behalf of the author for material from *Season's Greetings* by Alan Ayckbourn. Copyright © Haydonning Ltd.; Tanner Propp Fersko and Sterner on behalf of the author for material from *Four Dynamic Plays* by Ed Bullins.

Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the first opportunity.

Foreword

The Language of Drama may sit somewhat polemically in a series called *The Language of Literature*, if by 'literature' readers expect a critical practice theoretically based on the canons and orthodoxies of Anglo-American new criticism. If, however, 'literature' is seen in terms of a wider, more discursive, context, which is theoretically based in contemporary social semiotics and critical practice, then *The Language of Drama* will sit rather more comfortably in such a series.

'Comfortable' is a relative term. There are ideas and views in this book which will challenge both received and radical drama criticism amongst those who use drama for classroom purposes, and those who use drama for production purposes. I draw together both of those concerns, and others, in a framework of contemporary language, literature, discourse, culture and semiotics theories, to develop a social, critical practice for the analysis of the language(s) of drama texts.

The Language of Drama, therefore, is different to the rather more traditional literary approaches to the language of drama texts (for example, Brown, 1972; Kennedy, 1975; Evans, 1977) and to the more formal semiotic approaches (for example, Elam, 1980; Pfister, 1988) in a number of important ways.

First of all, my approach to language is developed out of an interdisciplinary concern for bringing together many of the insights into language made in contemporary critical, linguistic, cultural, philosophical, sociological and political theories. This results in a critical practice which is as concerned with social meaning and cultural practices of discourse as it is with detailed linguistic analysis of words and sentences. In that sense, then, what is involved is a practice of language analysis which is concerned both with the detailed description of language structures

and with the broadening of what constitutes those structures socially, politically and discursively, as part of a *social semiotic*.

Second, my approach involves a redefining of the drama text, away from the narrow concept of it as a literary 'play' which is 'brought to life' on stage, or which can be discussed in the same critical terms as a poem or novel, to an understanding of how it means, socially, politically and discursively, according to the various uses made of it in widely differing performance contexts.

The critical vocabulary for doing this is quite different to that used in the more traditional literary and linguistic approaches to texts. I hope that *The Language of Drama* will function as a means of introducing many of the important ideas and practices of contemporary critical theory and language analysis to students of drama; particularly as drama has, in comparison to other discourses and genres, attracted so little attention from language theorists and analysts.

My approach is also a politically committed one. I am concerned with developing a theory of *drama praxis* which argues for a social theory of language based on conflict rather than the more usual co-operation, and for a social theory of drama based on the political and institutional uses to which texts can be put. Taken together, this involves a theory of drama praxis which calls for action in the form of change, both in terms of classroom and production practices involving drama, and in the larger institutional (ideological) practices of society.

I am not an innocent, disinterested, academic observer of texts, but, as I developed in some detail in *Language, Literature and Critical Practice* (Birch, 1989a), I am concerned with a critical theory and practice which will deconstruct texts in order to demonstrate the often oppressive social/institutional practices which determine how those texts mean. This therefore involves a drama praxis which is principally concerned with the relationship of language and ideology; language and power; language and control; with issues of authorship and control of meaning; with gender; institutional oppression; multiplicity of meanings; with the way we are constructed as subjects; with open rather than closed interpretation; with choices and multiple voices; with stereotypes and performance roles; with discourse frames and conventions; with the social determination of multiple realities and fictions; with dialogue and interaction; with disturbance and

defamiliarisation and with cultural power. These, and other related concerns, form the critical concerns of *The Language of Drama*, and as such are as important for those who use drama in the classroom as for those who use drama in production.

The critical theories, practices, ideas, vocabulary and texts I have chosen to exemplify points in this book have been chosen to demonstrate an interdisciplinary concern for how drama texts mean. I include a wide range of texts which are used for theatre, television, radio, film, print production and classroom analysis. I concentrate, in the main, on contemporary texts which are easily available for further study. Those texts include plays written for theatre, radio and television; filmscripts; television comedy; jokes; performance poetry; theatre reviews; academic discourse; actors writing about their work; dramatists writing about their work; directors writing about their work; publishers' blurbs and transcriptions of 'everyday' language. All of these categories of text, and more, make up the *discourse* of drama. This discourse, and my developing concern with the critical theory and practice of drama praxis, is the focus of *The Language of Drama*.

There are six chapters. The first chapter, 'Drama Praxis', discusses issues of authorship and some of the more traditional aspects of treating drama texts as literature, and establishes the need for a different, more radical, approach to understanding language and drama as part of a social semiotic. I establish what I mean by praxis; develop a communicative theory of language based on social interaction, multiple voices and multiple interpretations, and introduce the theoretically crucial notion that *HOW* texts mean is more important than *WHAT* texts mean. This involves pragmatics and performance, which in turn involves us in recognising the various ways we have of making meaning beyond the words of a text. I propose that writing, reading, analysis, rehearsal, production and reception are best considered as performance processes, and that no single interpretation of a text should ever be considered the 'right' one.

Chapter 2 'Making Sense' and Chapter 3, 'Conflict', develop some of these ideas and examine the frames and conventions of performance and production; the ways we make things sensible, and the criteria and ideologies involved in some of those ways; the realities, fictions and illusions of making sense, and the inter-

actional control, co-operation and conflict that can result. That interaction is considered in terms of dialogism and the various goal-oriented manipulation strategies that we use in order to effect change upon someone else.

Chapter 4, 'Control', develops this further by looking at the classifications and moves that can be made in order to establish a particular role relationship, and the various language categories that can be used to support that role as a dominant/controlled one. A major part of that control is an institutional one which establishes value distinctions between standard and non-standard languages, and which prioritises standard languages and their texts and users. This creates a domination which drama praxis deconstructs and seeks to change by defamiliarisation strategies.

Chapter 5, 'Roles', continues this deconstruction by examining the various performance routines and fronts we use in interaction, concentrating on context and appropriateness, and on the way we are constructed (interpellated) as performance subjects by the gaze of others. This involves the way we are named and the way we name others; the deixis involved in establishing person, time and place relations, and the stereotypes which can result and thereby oppress.

Chapter 6, 'Cultural Power', develops this idea of oppression by examining issues of gender, sexuality, womens' language, carnivalesque discourse, colonial and post-colonial oppression and the praxis involved in appropriating repressive discourse and writing back in order to overthrow disabling images and identities.

All six chapters, as well as the Afterword which summarises the discussion of language and praxis, are concerned with how these issues, and others, affect the discourse of drama, and what we DO with it in the various performances of reading, writing, analysis, rehearsal, production and reception. Specifically, the first two chapters form an introduction to some of the more general, theoretical, ideas of the book, and the remaining four develop these ideas more fully by a detailed analysis of the language of a wide-ranging collection of drama texts. I use these examples to demonstrate some of the specific issues affecting a critical understanding of drama discourse, and to set the agenda for developing the discussion beyond this book into the classrooms, rehearsal rooms and studios, theatres and press

rooms, living rooms and studies, where those performances take place each day. Drama praxis is about social and institutional action and change. *The Language of Drama* is about effecting that action and change.