

**Speech Rhythm as a Comic Device  
in Plays by Harold Pinter,  
in particular *Old Times*  
and *Ashes to Ashes***

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**Thesis submitted to hovedfagsgrad**

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**November 2002**

At destruction and famine you shall laugh,  
and shall not fear the wild animals of the earth.

*The Book of Job 5: 22*

TITUS: Ha, ha, ha!

MARCUS: Why dost thou laugh? it fits not with this hour.

TITUS: Why, I have not another tear to shed: [...]

William Shakespeare. *Titus Andronicus*.

III.i.264-66

BILL: I'll ... tell you ... the truth.

HARRY: Oh, for God's sake, don't be ridiculous.

Harold Pinter. *The Collection*. P2: 144.

## Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to give a special thanks to my supervisor Stuart Sillars for believing in me. He has helped me clarify my ideas and guided me in my work by pushing me forward. At the same time letting me stick to my own speed through the various stages of the process. Other members of the staff at the English department have also contributed with comments and loan of books.

My fellow hovedfag students at the English department in Bergen have contributed moral support and never-ending relevant discussions. And also the opposite. My friends have been kind to let me discuss my project with them, although I suspect it has been tedious at times.

Finally, I owe a warm thanks to my parents and my sisters for encouragement and motivation.

The facsimile used on the title page is taken from *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

## Abbreviations

With parenthetical page references and brief comments, I employ the following abbreviations:

*e.p.* Electronic publication  
(This abbreviation is used within parentheses in the running text since it is sometimes difficult to determine the page number of an Internet publication.)

*OED* *The Oxford English Dictionary*

*P1* Pinter, Harold. *Plays One*. London: Faber, 1991.

*P2* Pinter, Harold. *Plays Two*. London: Faber, 1996.

*P3* Pinter, Harold. *Plays Three*. London: Faber, 1997.

*P4* Pinter, Harold. *Plays Four*. London: Faber, 1998.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

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 [...] few English playwrights before him have displayed so acute an observation of the mannerisms, repetitions and nonsensicalities of the vernacular as it is actually spoken. [...] In fact, what sounds like tape-recorded speech is highly stylised, even artificial.  
(Esslin 39-40)

## 1.1 Dramatic Genre and the Comic

In an interview with Harold Pinter, Mireia Aragay expresses surprise that the audience laughed during a performance of his play *Ashes to Ashes*: “When I read the play it didn't seem to me to be dealing with anything particularly funny” (Pinter, “Writing, Politics and *Ashes to Ashes*” 76). Although statements like this draw attention to the difference between readings and performances of plays in general, it may also reveal a confusion of the concepts of dramatic genre, comic theme and comic language and technique. Pinter's answer a little later in the interview points to the complexity of laughter, which in his view is “created by true affection; it's also created by quite the opposite, by a recognition of where we are ugly” (*loc.cit.* 77).

Laughter or comic effect is not merely dependant on the subject matter of a play. The importance of the traditional comic and tragic genres of drama may hide the fact that comic mood and comic technique need not necessarily be the same thing. In the words of Susanne Langer, humour “is not the essence of comedy, but only one of its most useful and natural elements” (80). Langer regards laughter as a physical reflex like tickling (*loc.cit.* 75), and this view is not very far from Sigmund Freud's concept of laughter as “automatism of release“ (173). Langer even warns against seeking the nature of laughter in the apparently ludicrous: “The ultimate source of laughter is physiological, and the various situations in which it arises are simply its normal or abnormal stimuli“ (76).

This is why many theatre historians see much twentieth century drama as transcending traditional genre into tragicomedy. Robert W. Corrigan, for example, argues that when there is no commonly shared view of truth, the events in a play become ambiguous to the audience, in terms of moral value, for instance, and hence the events also become ambiguous within the narrative of the play: “When you can’t be sure what actions really mean, and when the relationship between actions and results is unclear, the serious tends to be inseparable from the ludicrous” (225). Borrowing George Bernard Shaw’s words, tragicomedy in a present-day sense can be described as “a chemical combination which [makes] the spectator laugh with one side of his mouth and cry with the other” (qtd. in Rose 32).

*The Sunday Times*’ review of the London production of Pinter’s *Ashes to Ashes* found a connection between horror and comedy: “This dark, elegiac play, studded with brutally and swaggeringly funny jokes, is one of Pinter’s most haunting works” (*P4*: rear cover). The menacing atmosphere in many of Pinter’s plays is connected to the effects of the comic techniques. In a complex way this atmosphere may indeed even be necessary for the humour. Freud, for instance, sees laughter as a release of tension, and “precisely in cases where there is a release of affect“ laughter may be evoked as a result of the contrast between sympathy and derision (173). At any rate, consciously devised language techniques may convince, or force, an audience to laugh, regardless of atmosphere, theme or subject of the play in question.

What may force the audience of a Pinter play to laugh is the language of the dialogue. I find that a great part of the comic effect of Pinter's plays arises from his use and treatment of colloquial speech.

## 1.2 Speech Rhythm in Pinter’s Drama

Pinter’s dramatic dialogue is based on both the colloquial and a neatly structured manipulation of the vernacular. In reviewing the Birmingham Repertory Theatre’s 1993

production of *Old Times*, Michael Billington stresses the important theatric impression inherent in this quality of Pinter's language: It's a sign of the production's quality that, without violating Pinter's verbal rhythms, it finds (sic) new resonances in this haunting play" (*e.p.*). As Peter Hall has it, Pinter's "repeated patterns of speech create rhythms where the precise accenting of words is crucial", and in addition Pinter's pauses "often put form into nearly colloquial speech" (126). F. J. Bernhard also stresses Pinter's rhythmic stylisation, and holds that any

single line of dialogue might be taken as realistic prose. But in the pattern of the play as a whole, the words have a consistent rhythmic construction and a symbolic charge that lift them beyond conventional realism" (191).

There is thus an ambiguous relationship between the naturalistic effect of Pinter's dialogue and other effects of stylisation. This stylisation, or the juxtaposition of stylisation and an impression of natural speech, may not only have "a symbolic charge", in Bernhard's words, it may also create comic effects. In my view, the "consistent rhythmic construction", which breaks the convention of realism, has comic potential.

Comic effects of stylised language are related to the construction of rhythm in the imitation of speech. Even though it is not verse drama, Pinter's dramatic language has similar characteristics to poetic language although his drama suggests naturalism:

It is his ability to combine the appearance of total reality with complete control of rhythm and nuance of meaning which is the measure of Pinter's stature as a poet. Pinter's dialogue is as tightly – perhaps *more* tightly – controlled than verse. Every syllable, every inflection, the succession of long and short sounds, words and sentences are calculated to a nicety. And it is precisely the repetitiousness, the discontinuity, the circularity of ordinary vernacular speech which are here used as formal elements with which the ingredients from which he takes the recurring patterns and artfully broken rhythms *are* fragments of a brilliantly observed, and often hitherto overlooked, *reality*, he succeeds in creating the illusion of complete naturalness, of naturalism. (Esslin 40)

As something that is superfluous or unnecessary, the repetitions, rhymes and stylised rhythms may reveal that a character tries to control the role of addresser, as well as possibly hiding or evading more difficult subjects. These are central motifs in many Pinter plays, and the study

of rhythm as a broad concept in Pinter's drama and language will thus be illuminating for the interpretation of his plays.

Although Pinter is not a verse dramatist, Esslin describes his language as poetic, with the meaning of containing poetic qualities or devices. Rhythm is a central element in poetry, both in traditional poetry with a patterned meter, and in poetry with free meter. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* states that 'rhythm' is Greek for 'flowing', and defines it as in "verse or prose, the movement or sense of movement communicated by the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables and by the duration (*q.v.*) of the syllables" (Cuddon 798). Rhythm can thus be found in both natural colloquial and stylised speech. The word 'rhythm' will in this thesis be used quite widely, not only to describe the distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables, but also to describe the distribution of the flows and breaks in the movement of less finer elements. This includes Esslin's use of the concept of rhythm that includes "the succession of long and short sounds, words and sentences" (40). Tempo or speed of delivery will also be treated as a rhythmic device. The uses of the term may even be extended to cover the alterations of ideas, themes and characters. However, 'dialogic rhythm' is more technically precise and denotes that the rhythmical movement in question covers at least two separate utterances by at least two different characters.

As exemplified here, my thesis will use a range of conventional terms in ways that extend and slightly modify their traditional definitions. This method will for instance be useful in the application of rhetorical terms to describe various the details of Pinter's linguistic techniques and their effects.

### 1.3 Rhythmic Devices and Effects

Pinter's stylisation of the vernacular may be seen as poetic work in accordance with Esslin's argument. Just as aptly, Andrew Kennedy links dramatic dialogue to music and conversation:

Placed between the rhythmic incantation of 'music' and the raw energies of everyday 'conversation' – those polar opposites and inseparably paired twins – dialogue may approximate, but never become, either music or conversation. (*Dramatic Dialogue* 5)

George Bernard Shaw also compares dramatic texts to musical scores, in particular regarding misconceptions about Shakespeare: “Shakespear (sic) is a bore and even an absurdity to people who cannot listen to blank verse and enjoy it as musicians listen to an opera (Shakespear's methods are extremely like Verdi's)” (124). Alastair Macaulay notably stresses that “Pinter, like Beckett, should be played like music” (“Expansive Roles on an Intimate Scale” *e.p.*) The relation between the two features of music and natural conversation adds tension to dramatic dialogue. As music and conversation blend into dialogue they create theatric qualities like artifice, naturalism, defamiliarisation and flow or break of speech rhythm. I will discuss these qualities later in this introduction.

In poetry or prose, figurative language often has rhythmical implications. Alliterations and puns are types of rhyme rather than of rhythm, as the repetition of a word arguably creates a stronger beat than the occurrence of a rhyme. Nevertheless rhyming contains an element of music and rhythm (Cuddon 797), since repeated sounds often receive stress. As rhyme echoes sounds, it creates rhythm through repetition or beat, and such effects may occur with or without intent on part of the speaker. Repetition is thus a key term. I will in the following use the term both in the conventional restricted sense referring to poetry, as well as in connection with larger movements in the dramatic plot. In the same manner, ‘rhyme’ will not only cover “proper” full specimens like end rhymes or couplets, but also assonance, consonance, synthetic rhymes, half-rhymes and alliteration.

Natural individual speech, unlike collective speech like for instance church prayer, has a free rhythm, as it does not have an identifiable and patterned structured rhythm. An

important feature of speech rhythm is that people normally do not expect it to have large amounts of obvious repetition. When this occurs, the audience may regard the techniques as expressions of artifice, or even artificial, as Esslin does (40). According to the *OED*, “the ordinary use now” of ‘artifice’ is an “ingenious expedient, a manœuvre, strategem, device, contrivance, trick“, although the term also denotes the product of art. The tension between spontaneity and the natural has relevance for Pinter's dramatic speech rhythm. In my thesis the concept of the audience's realisation of artifice will hence be used to signify the audience's impression when witnessing a sequence of dramatic dialogue miming real conversation, but realising that the dialogue is in fact stylised. The adjective ‘artificial’ will be used according to the meaning of artifice.

#### 1.4 Comic Artifice

Rhythm is thus a device for evoking the feeling of artifice, not only as a feature in poetry, but also in dramatic speech. In order to pinpoint the quality of artifice in dramatic speech rhythm I will use ‘poetic’ with reference to artifice and stylised speech. If during conversation the addressee regards an utterance as poetic, in my sense, for example if it contains an end rhyme distributed between two discernible lines, the addressee will often experience this phenomenon as comic. The reason is probably due to the artificial sound of the utterance. If the speaker utters something that sounds deliberately poetic when he or she in fact did not intend this, the utterance is also experienced as comic by the addresser. Freud sees the unintentional aspect as a basic element in laughter: “The comic arises in the first instance as an unintended discovery derived from human social relations.” (167). Henri Bergson (133) holds that “absentmindedness is essentially laughable“. Laughter rising from occurrences of unintentional poetic speech reveals that the fact that the spoken language has a potential for

using the rhythm normally found in poetry is experienced to be an unusual and funny phenomenon. Cuddon describes one of the two functions of rhyme thus:

it echoes sounds and is thus a source of aesthetic satisfaction. There is pleasure in the sound itself and in the coincidence of sounds, and this pleasure must be associated with the sense of music, of rhythm (*q.v.*) and beat; the pulse sense which is common to all human beings. Part of the pleasure often consists of the surprise that a successful and unexpected rhyme evokes; this is especially true of comic verse where ingenious rhymes make an important contribution to the humour; (Cuddon 797)

One source for the comic effect of rhyme may thus be the pleasure the rhyme evokes. Freud uses the term 'comic pleasure' and among several "favourable conditions" for the comic effect he explains that "the generating of comic pleasure can be encouraged by any other pleasurable accompanying circumstance as though by some sort of contagious effect" (173).

## 1.5 Speech Rhythm as Artifice

Fixed rhythm or metre in speech - or written texts intended to be spoken, like the text of a play - is an optional feature, unlike regular rhythm in music. Still, the same components constitute rhythm in both media. Deliberately structured rhythm in speech may seek to imitate the natural rhythms of spoken dialects and accents. However, sometimes a speech rhythm reveals its status as stylised so clearly that the listener becomes conscious of it. In the case of the performance of a Pinter play this situation may cause laughter, in general because the audience sees the mannerisms of colloquial language. Kennedy defines mannerism as "language that excels in playing internal variations on its own verbal themes (*Dramatic Dialogue* 220). The potential misalignment between idea and utterance/expression may make mannerist language comic. The concept of artifice as introduced above may in these cases be seen to be in conflict with the received sense of the language as naturalistic. The reason is probably that this exaggerated naturalism of course will be construed as artifice sooner or later. Bernhard calls this force an "essentially suprealistic quality" (191), but I would rather use the term 'hyperrealism'. In reference to art, 'realism' is defined as close "resemblance to

what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene“ (*OED*), and the intensifying prefix ‘hyper-‘ adds to its stem the meaning of “over, beyond (...) above measure“ (*OED*). Not only Pinter's mimesis or imitation of speech is realistic in this sense. Pinter’s dramatic world, at least in his earlier plays, has a fairly realistic surface reference, for instance if compared to Beckett’s.

The contrast between artifice and hyperrealism also points towards the contrast between feeling and ridicule. Bergson states that comedy is incompatible with compassion: “Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (63). He admits however that although they will have to be forgotten in the very moment of laughing, feelings of pity may be mixed with comedy. The broad concept of rhythm in this project, and its relation to repetition, is often given ritualistic expressions in drama. The performance of rituals may bring about exactly the mentioned mixture of pity and laughter. Langer explains this in terms of history. As the primitive beginnings of clowning and religious dancing evolves into high comedy, the various outlets of the “comic rhythm” may result in “dignified drama, springing from solemn ritual, even funereal, its emotional movements too slow to culminate in humour at any point” (Langer 80). The rhythmic tempo of performance is hence an important feature in creating laughter.

Bergson explains that if the observers of a ceremony “forget the serious object of a solemnity”, those taking part in it will seem like puppets (90). As well as in relation to physical performance, these effects of ritualism may also be applied to analyse comic language. Rhythm and timing are often generally said to be a central element in verbal comedy. It seems to be a convention of performers of stand-up comedy that they in interviews emphasise timing as one of the main tools in their work. When it comes to theatre, in his discussion of the music-hall echoes in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Hall stresses the importance of timing on the part of the actors because of the rhythm of the dialogue. The

audience will only laugh if the feed, the first utterance in a comic sequence, "is correctly inflected and rhythmically precise" (122).

The normal speech in Pinter appears to be natural, but critics, and probably audiences, generally find it to be stylised, as for example Esslin (39-40), as quoted on p.1. In his discussion of several twentieth century playwrights, including Pinter, Hall (106) states: "however formed their dialogue may be, it can never be allowed to destroy the audience's belief that they are sensible to accept it as normal speech. If it lacks that conviction, they will judge it artificial". Nevertheless, Kennedy's concept of dialogue contains music, a feature an audience may regard as artifice. In my understanding this comic artifice is also a consequence of Cuddon's definition of rhyme (cf. p. 7). I will argue that the flouting of audience expectations in this respect may be used for comic effect and the contrivance of laughter. It is exactly the quality of artifice that is often perceived as funny. Bergson's concept of the comic source as "[a] mechanical element introduced into nature" (90) supports this view. Bergson suggests that for an isolated phrase to be comic "in itself" it needs an absurd idea fitted into it. Nevertheless he sees the method of the linguistic comic as basically similar to physical humour. In language the mechanical elements that signify absentmindedness are features like "ready-made formulas and stereotyped phrases" (*loc.cit.* 133). Artificial or poetic utterances may arguably be perceived as more 'mechanical' than a more colloquial utterance. This is perhaps an unconventional mixture of concepts, but it is quite applicable to, for instance, the case of excessive or exaggerated language in Pinter.

Pinter's characters speak an English vernacular at different levels of a series of variables, such as class, ethnicity, age and region or dialect. This is a central idiom of Pinter's, often located to the conventional ideas of the speech of the working and middle classes. Pertaining to ethnicity, *The Birthday Party's* Goldberg is clearly Jewish while McCann is Irish. In Pinter's early plays up to *The Caretaker* broadcast in 1960, the background of the

characters as revealed in their speech is generally working-class. From the following *Night School* on, and clearly in *The Collection*, the verbal setting is more middle class. Although a specific linguistic background signalling class is hardly intrinsically funny, if anything is, background may be portrayed or used comically on the stage, as has often been done in the British theatre tradition. I am here referring to the convention of now and then in the action inserting a working-class character in the midst of an upper class drawing room comedy. Shakespeare's Old Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* may represent an old version of this. The use of black "nannies" in American films from the first half of the twentieth century is a more recent equivalent.

However, the sociological variables are not the object of study here. 'Colloquial' is defined as, in the usual sense, words and phrases belonging to "common speech; characteristic of or proper to ordinary conversation, as distinguished from formal or elevated language" (*OED*). The characteristics of natural colloquial language will be paid attention to as far as their function as stylisation and dialogue goes. Kennedy explains that the:

broad audio-visual posture of speakers confronting one another – asking, asserting, promising and so on, within the whole 'speech act' – often arrests and demands attention as much as the speech that is individually 'characteristic' for a character. Individual speech is often secondary in dialogue written in a univocal or standard language. (*Dramatic Dialogue* 8)

Since all types of dramatic dialogue are "embraced and illuminated by the interactive concept", speech characteristic for one specific dramatic character is subordinate to the theatric impact of dialogue between characters (*ibid.*). The specific sociological style of normal speech used in each particular case is hence not given prominence in my argument.

## 1.6 Theatric Artifice

Devices for artifice also have larger, theatric implications. Susanne Langer proposes that humour has different qualities in life and in art, and thus "we tend to laugh at things in the

theater that we might not find funny in actuality” (81). Langer holds that this is why the comic techniques as used in comedy often undermine the illusion of reality on stage. Comic techniques, like absurd coincidence, stereotyped emotion and high tempo of action and speech, serve to remind the audience that the incident laughed at is fictitious. If the suffering, derision and aggression, which are inherent in most comic situations according to many theorists, are allowed to direct the audience’s feelings towards sympathy and pity, the comic device will have failed its purpose. That is, it will not bring about the comic effect, laughter. Thus, in order to have an effect many comic incidents must break the illusion (*ibid*).

Freud argues in a similar manner, although in the opposite direction, when he explains the method of making oneself comic by pretending to be clumsy or stupid: “The feeling of superiority does not arise in the other person if he knows that one has been pretending” (169). Freud is here occupied with showing that superiority is not a fundamental condition in the comic. His explanation here attempts to explain the comic situations of real life, but the theory’s base in physiology and psychology may be applicable to fictional theatre as well. Indeed, Langer acknowledges that the audience senses that theatre is illusion exactly by appreciating the comic in it. In a critique of Marcel Pagnol’s categorical linking of superiority to laughter, Langer agrees with Freud’s idea of the optional status of the feeling of superiority, but on the grounds of illusion. An audience will only look condescendingly on a dramatic character if they lose the distance from the character’s world; the comic on the contrary creates distance (Langer 77).

Laughter thus has a defamiliarising function, not only in small sequences, but also in larger movements of a play. A constantly successful dramatic illusion may destroy not only a single laugh at one point in the action, but also the play’s holistic meaning for the audience. The audience’s sympathy with what is perceived as real may focus too strongly on a detail in the play, and lose the wider perspective this incident is part of. As Langer has it, humour

evoking laughter is on the other hand a way of securing that the audience perceives the play as a whole, since it "is not what the joke happens to mean to us that measures our laughter, but what the joke does in the play" (81). A successful comic dramatic incident hence widens the audience's perspective and cognition. Langer's theory clarifies the role of pretence in laughter and explains the broader defamiliarising quality of a small incident evoking laughter.

The contrast between recurrence and deviations, or between repetition and breaks in repetition, is hence important. The potential for creating laughter must be searched for both in the breaks from normal speech into a stylised rhythmical one, and as breaks within sequences of more flowing, patterned rhythm.

In the field of non-verse drama, the breaks may be said to be instances of overtly stylised rhythm as deviations from normal speech. Frequent rhyming in a dialogue may be the clearest example of this, in drama as in real life, as has already been noted. However, the tension between speech as artifice and natural speech as the audience regards it plays a role here. For example, a character's excessive use of words, phrases and even excessive use of speech per se may evoke laughter in a given audience. The character's very persistence in a long flow of repetitive speech rhythm is then an important element in drawing audience attention to the character's excesses. The dialogue does thus not need rhythmic breaks to create comic rhythm.

On the other hand there is to be considered the literary and phonological convention that the occurrence of a break in patterned rhythm focuses on the very break. There are two groups of such breaks. One type is the instances of broken flows of naturalistic language. A repetitive speech rhythm of long duration may suddenly stop, causing an anticlimax. Secondly, larger parts of overt defamiliarising may enter the play-text. For example, pop songs and nursery rhymes used in a dramatic text form a contrast to the text's normal speech

in that they create fixed rhythms of speech (or singing). In such cases the shift from colloquial to stylised speech will form the break of the general rhythm.

### 1.7 Approach, Method and Focus

What is the relationship between stylisation and colloquial conversation in Pinter, and how does it become comic? What are the implications for the interpretation of plays of a widely defined concept of 'rhythm', as the flow of language and the broken developments within this flow? What is the significance of the rhythm of the dialogue and language of Pinter's plays? For instance, how do Pinter's pauses work in this respect? What does this type of humour signify in the understanding of a play as a whole? In my thesis I will argue that this concept of rhythm may be seen as a device for creating laughter. Still, this rhythm depends on with other dramatic devices and with more semantic or referential aspects of language for creating of comic effects. D. W. Harding stresses that rhythm can be used to convey several, different feelings; the rhythm is rather a concrete illustration of feelings suggested and evoked by other devices: "[t]he sense of the word is needed before we know whether a forceful rhythm is suggesting eager joy, determination, anger or horror, and whether a languid movement is helping to convey romantic yearning or sadness or resignation or quiet relief" (154).

My aim will be to investigate how rhythmical features in a larger sense, contribute in forming comic techniques in Pinter's dramatic speech. Apparent natural speech rhythms may be used as a forceful comic device. This realisation means that the instances of rhythm that I will search for in this thesis as applied to comic speech, are the listener's experience of the flow of, or breaks from, deliberately structured and stylised language, for instance by way of recurring phrases, words, syllables and sounds. Rhymes of all kinds and repetitions of sounds are points of departure for the close reading.

Since the poetic is central in my argument, the rhythm in Pinter's language may be categorised in a manner similar to the classification of poetic devices and metaphors, in other words, as figures of speech.

The notion of certain categories of comic speech rhythms emerged from my general reading of all of Pinter's plays, as well as from watching a limited number of performances. In Chapter Two I will establish these categories more clearly. To do this I will search for instances of comic rhythm in a wide selection of plays from Pinter's career. I will sort the examples in categories in a manner based on their special way of stylising speech rhythm. The aim of the second chapter is to provide a useful and relevant framework for the following close reading in the succeeding two chapters. In the category chapter I will therefore exclude references to the two main texts in order not to narrow the scope of the categories. The categories will also be defined partly by poetic devices that may resemble the comic techniques rhetorically, for instance literalisms or synonyms.

Actual laughter in the theatre is the contingent effect of a given comic technique in a given sequence of a produced play. This effect may only be individually experienced and verified. The objectivity of a task like this thesis lies in scrutinising how a textual element works to evoke possible laughter, and in presenting the results as coherently as possible. My discussions of the causes of laughter in Pinter will therefore be based on close readings. I will thus study the play-texts in order to strive for objectivity, albeit not to pretend that I am neutral.

In order to gain some knowledge of performance of the plays, some reviews of various productions will be consulted. However, the rhythmic and comic effects of a play's use of language can be studied in the texts. The perspective of reception of performance will therefore not be central. What will be important is to consider how the text provides signs that can be realised for the creation of rhythmic and comic effects in an intended audience.

In Chapters Three and Four I will set out to make close readings of two plays from Pinter's middle and late career. The comic rhythm in the two main texts will be sorted into categories and presented from the perspective of the categories established in Chapter Two. Pinter's first dramatic production took place in 1957 with *The Room*, and his most recent major play is *Celebration*, published and produced in 2000. That makes a span of over 40 years. Mark Batty defines 1967-82 as a Pinter period (47), and Macaulay states that "[l]ater Pinter started in 1968" ("Expansive Roles on an Intimate Scale" *e.p.*). John Stokes holds that in "later Pinter [...] from *Old Times* to *Betrayal* to *No Man's Land* to *Moonlight*" the subject of sexual rivalry is more subtly presented than in the earlier plays (38). In addition, Steven H. Gale defines a Pinter period of "memory plays", a period "essentially capped by *Old Times*", first produced in 1971 (95). The themes of sexual rivalry and memory are thus central in *Old Times*. This is also the case for *Ashes to Ashes*, a more recent play first produced in 1996. These two plays from the last part of Pinter's career will thus form a fruitful basis for discussing how the device of comic rhythm has implications for themes and ideas in Pinter plays. Although the mentioned themes may be found in the majority of Pinter's plays, I find the mentioned plays to also have some formal similarities that would be interesting to scrutinise from the perspective of comic speech rhythm. In addition, these plays are not the most frequently discussed by critics, at least not when compared to the earlier plays *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*.

In the beginning of this introduction I referred to the problems of identifying laughter with the genre of comedy. My project of categorising comic techniques may be useful in the continuous academic discussion of dramatic genre and the comic. I hope that it will contribute to clarify a little of the problem of autonomy of comic technique in relation to genre, since I will focus on technique. This is especially fruitful in the study of Pinter, who often mixes laughter into dramatic situations that would not be defined as comedy.

It has to be admitted that the categorisation of devices found in Pinter's plays is a formalistic approach, which has the danger of limiting the reading of the texts. The main source will be the selected plays, and it is imperative that the texts lead the investigation and not the other way around. The general categories must be drawn from the study of specific texts first and foremost. Secondly, external theories may enter into the discussion. This approach might reveal something about at least one aspect of how Pinter's comedy functions. A view of the 'pinteresque' should be clearer after such a study. After all, Andrew Kennedy insists that the "unique fusion of 'imitation' (of the minutiae of everyday speech) and systematic 'dislocation' (which is part of the 'shaping', with pseudo-rituals, bravura speeches, and mannered verbal games) is precisely what is most interesting in Pinter's dialogue" (*Dramatic Dialogue* 45). Kennedy thus emphasises the connection of colloquialisms and stylisation in Pinter's work. I will here try to investigate and explore this connection through my categorisation of comic and dramatic effects.

# Chapter Two: Categories of Comic Speech Rhythm

## 2.1 Categorisation

In this chapter I will argue that Pinter's rhythmic language may be sorted in several categories, mainly based on rhetorical, syntactic and dramatic devices. The placing of a given scene or textual sequence in a certain category is based on dramatic and linguistic characteristics and is not necessarily relevant for the potential comic effect of the extract. However, my approach is to explore how the rhythmic qualities of Pinter's dramatic imitation of speech have relevance for the comic effect of the plays. Consequently, the categories may help to explain the nuances in the dramatist's comic techniques. To ensure that the comic aspect is not lost from the definition of the categories, the theoretical framework described in the introduction will be kept in mind.

Thus, the comic techniques in Pinter identified through my broad concept of rhythm may be categorised in groups with certain characteristics. I will in the following describe these categories by analysing extracts from plays that fit into each category. I will draw examples from the whole scope of Pinter's career as a playwright. For each category I will select extracts I find illuminating for illustration of the specific rhythmical qualities.

All of the textual extracts I analyse are treated with attention to language and rhythm. Thus, the categories' names and main description are defined mainly by terms that say something about speech rhythm in my broad understanding of the term. As I intend to show through this thesis, particular comic effects are some of the characteristics of each category. However, the main approach in defining the categories is not comic effect or even comic technique as such. The main focus is to point to the non-semantic linguistic features of each category. That is, how do sounds form speech rhythms that, given a favourable circumstance (Freud 171-3), can be comic? Apart from perhaps the category of anticlimax and oxymoron, the names of the categories do therefore not refer to any specific comic effect.

The naming of the different categories might still seem odd. In order to define some of the categories and their subgroups I will use rhetorical terms and terminology from drama studies. Although the naming is forced, it is meant to help describe certain traits that I detect in Pinter's use of dramatic speech rhythm. To this end the use of old rhetorical terms is fruitful. However, terms like oxymoron or bathos will be used with partly new meanings in order to cover the style and scope of the separate categories.

## 2.2 Rhyme and Ritual Repetition

The most straightforward category consists of rhymes and basic repetition. As was discussed in the introduction, rhyming breaks the flow of natural speech, or in terms of modern theatre, it breaks the convention of imitating everyday conversation. As far as the audience perceives the breaks as artifice, the rhymes and repetitions have a comic potential. J. L. Styan describes the classical methods of comedy as "anti-naturalistic" and "artificial", since "the playing demands a special degree of stylized speech and movement, all apparently earnest in manner" (156). Repetition of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and syntactical structures can create not only comic feelings, but also a ritual mood. A linguistic ritual is, like comic speech rhythm, created by language that is not natural and ordinary, but stylised. A ritualistic atmosphere may evoke feelings of dignity, seriousness and sadness, but it can also become comic if the speech rhythms used to form it also break the convention of natural speech. Ritualistic language also breaks this convention, and there is thus a fine line between the comic effects and other effects of rituals. As Bergson states, the speed of delivery has significance for how a performed ritual is perceived (90). If the speed of the performance of a ritual is high, the spectators may fail to see the underlying meaning and instead focus on the form itself (*ibid*). This form devoid of meaning becomes ludicrous.

In Pinter the serious atmosphere of ritual created by language may be preserved while the speech rhythms at the same time open up for constructions that become comic as a contrast to the solemn theme. The comic potential of this category will be discussed with reference to *No Man's Land*. Kennedy identifies this play as “the nearest thing to direct linguistic satire in Pinter” (“Natural, Mannered and Parodic Dialogue” 47), as he locates several instances of rhyming in the play (*loc.cit.* 48).

In *No Man's Land* Spooner is invited to Hirst's home for a drink. Spooner talks elaborately and almost frenetically in order to get his host's attention. At first the two exchange polite phrases, but gradually Spooner intrudes on Hirst's personal life, and starts asking him about his wife. Hirst replies “What wife?” (*P3*: 336), but Spooner starts to describe her in conventional romantic terms and asks if her eyes were “hazel” (*loc.cit.* 337). Hirst states: “Hazel shit” (*loc.cit.* 338), but as Spooner picks up the phrase and starts to ponder it, Hirst tries, unsuccessfully, to hit him with a glass. Spooner proceeds to speak in a suave manner, and as Hirst labouringly tries to move Spooner starts rhyming: “Remember this. You've lost your wife of hazel hue, you've lost her and what can you do, she will no more come back to you, with a tillifola tillifola tillifoladi-foladi-foloo.” (*loc.cit.* 340). There has been no rhyming hitherto in the play, and it thus breaks the flow of the style of natural conversation. The latent conflict between the two characters serves as a contrast to Spooner's light poetry, and this has a comic effect which is forceful because of the development of the word “hazel”. Hirst's weak physical state and Spooner's excessive speaking are also contrasted for the result of laughter.

After Spooner's rhyme Hirst protests and makes a gloomy confession: “No man's land ... does not move ... or change ... or grow old ... remains ... forever ... icy ... silent.” (*ibid*). He then tries to move again, falls, and crawls out of the room. Spooner's initial rhyme thus sets off a ritualistic mood. Hirst's confession intensifies the feeling of ritual by carefully

developing the phrases and pauses towards single words. Into this mood Spoon then comments using more rhymes: “I have known this before. The exit through the door, by way of belly and floor.” (*ibid*). These simple rhymes once again create an absurd comic contrast to the dramatic conflict, but the choice of words is not playful like the first rhyme. There is a high frequency of monosyllabic words that contribute to upholding the sense of solemn ritual, but the fact that Spooner once again rhymes in this painful situation can create laughter.

When an unintentional rhyme occurs in real conversation, one speaker will normally rhyme his own lines. This is also seen in the Pinter example from *No Man's Land* discussed above. In such cases the humour of the text might not be obvious. Hence, in order to explain comic rhymes within the scope of this project, a close analysis down to the level of words and sounds is needed. The potential humour lies in the break from normal speech conventions, and as I have attempted to show, the way to understand how this humour works is by scrutinising the development from colloquial speech patterns into rhyming and repetition that stands out as extraordinary.

The category of rhyme and ritual repetition presents techniques that have complex effect. The rhyming may evoke a quite clear comic pleasure, whereas repetition creating a ritual mood may suggest to the audience that both sympathy and laughter are relevant responses.

### 2.3 Rhythmic Duologue

Pinter often structures his dialogue in a rapid exchange of lines between two characters. It is therefore natural to locate this type of verbal structure to a separate category. The second category thus deals with sequences of dialogue where lines of relatively equal length are distributed between two characters. Such sequences represent what is here meant by the term duologue.

The category of rhythmic duologue does not only cover prose exchange, but also instances where lines from songs are exchanged between two characters. Instances of singing pertain to the category of rhythmic duologue mainly because the songs used in Pinter generally have evenly patterned rhythms. Pinter also stylises musical extracts in the dialogue as exchanges of singing between two or more characters. The comic potential of singing in Pinter rests in the fact that music contrasts the general dialogue of the plays. In addition, songs often contain rhyming, and this may create a feeling of comic pleasure.

The main and larger sequences of this subcategory of rhythmic duologue are found in the play *Old Times*. There is also a short sequence in *Ashes to Ashes*. As I will make a close reading of these particular plays in their entirety in chapters three and four, I postpone the discussion of the subcategory to that part of the thesis. There are musical instances in other Pinter plays, but the discussions in chapters three and four both present and define this subcategory quite extensively. To venture into a discussion of the same features here is thus not necessary.

Rapid exchanges of speech between two characters may create comic effect because they form extensive breaks with the convention of natural speech. The flowing rhythm within the context of a fast duologue may also be broken with a comic result. For rapid duologue to have a rhythm that can thus be broken or released with a comic result, the lines of the sequence must be uttered with attention to tempo. The speed should be relatively high in order to build up the tension of the sequence towards its conclusion, and the delivery of the actors must therefore be connected to each other's speed. Hall stresses importance of timing and rhythmic precision on the part of the actors in a play, if the intention is to preserve the speech rhythms that the text demands (122).

The category of rapid exchange is an old dramatic and poetic device with roots in Classical Greek drama, also found in some of William Shakespeare's plays (Cuddon 916-17).

Cuddon defines this technique, stichomythia, as "Dialogue of alternate single lines, [...] Usually a kind of verbal parrying accompanied by antithesis (*q.v.*) and repetitive patterns" (916). Although the device is "not so common since" Classical drama (*ibid*), it can also be found in contemporary drama.

In most examples of this in Pinter the duologue is structured on adjacency pairs like question and answer, or utterance and rejection. *Moonlight*, for instance, has a couple of rhythmic duologues between two characters. One of the sequences is however probably not to be delivered at a very high speed, since it contains some pauses and is divided by a couple of longer lines. The exchange is constructed not by adjacent pairs of question and answer, but is based on repetitions of the words and even the sentence structure of the previous utterance. There is in fact one example of question and answer, but this is employed merely through intonation: "Than which? / Than which. *Pause*. Death –" (*P4*: 367). The lack and corruption of a pattern of question and answer slow down the speed. The fact that the conversation here is generally based on agreement equally removes the drive for high speed. On the other hand, the dash at the ending of the utterance signals that one character finishes the other's line at the same time as breaking him off, and this increases the speed. The characters Fred and Jake are discussing their dying father, and the following exchange starts after turns of relatively long speeches.

JAKE: [...] I shall love him and be happy to pay the full price of that love.  
FRED: Which is the price of death.  
JAKE: The price of death, yes.  
FRED: Than which there is no greater price.  
JAKE: Than which?  
FRED: Than which.  
*Pause.*  
Death -  
JAKE: Which is the price of love.  
FRED: A great, great price  
JAKE: A great and deadly price.  
FRED: But strictly in accordance with the will of God.  
JAKE: And the laws of nature.  
FRED: And common and garden astrological logic.

JAKE:           It's the first axiom.  
 FRED:           And the last.  
 JAKE:           It may well be both tautologous and contradictory.           (P4: 367-68)

Some of the associations in this sequence are quite extreme, both with respect to image and rhyme: "common and garden astrological logic". The tension of the subtext is the sons' fierce concentration to come up with positive descriptions of their father and it is revealed in instances like this. The use of a high literary style may fit the atmosphere of death, but it is often in contrast to the content of the words and phrases, for instance "On my oath, there's many a maiden will attest to that" (P4: 370). The clash between the form and the mood will probably lead to a mocking laughter at the cost of both the father and his sons. Still, the ridiculously concerned attitude this scene reveals may mix pity or sadness into the laughter. The reason for this is that the quality of the artifice and ritual may be allied to either. As was explained in the introduction chapter, Langer, for instance, states that the solemn feeling of a ritual may become comic if the speed of the words and actions is intensified (80).

An even more overt case of stichomythia is found in *The Birthday Party*, which contains scenes using the device as invasion. Technically speaking, the exchange presented here is not duologic, since it in fact is a dialogue between the protagonist Stanley and his two interrogators. However, the roles of Goldberg and McCann can be seen as merged into one. They share the role of questioner and use the same syntactic structures. The subject matter they discuss is identical, in fact McCann mostly repeats, or concludes from, the concepts of the words Goldberg initiates. McCann also addresses Goldberg more frequently than he does Stanley, and suggests lines for his companion. To the enquiry of the whereabouts of his wife, Stanley does not even agree as to the existence of a wife, but McCann accuses him by addressing Goldberg: "How did he kill her?" This prompts Goldberg into confronting Stanley with: "How did you kill her?" (P1: 43). Goldberg dominates a large bulk of the sequences of

rhythmic duologue in *The Birthday Party*, with only short interjections by Stanley. Goldberg is the one who associates and develops the subject.

The flowing associations suggest a fast speed of delivery, and the beat of the rhythm is created by the dominance of interrogative syntax and phrases, and by extensive repetition.

Occasionally Stanley provides a staccato contrast as replies to the questions:

GOLDBERG: Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?  
STANLEY: He wanted to-he wanted to-he wanted to....  
McCANN: He doesn't know!  
GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?  
STANLEY: He wanted....  
McCANN: He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!  
GOLDBERG: Which came first?  
McCANN: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?  
GOLDBERG and McCANN: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?  
*Stanley screams.*  
GOLDBERG: He doesn't know. (PI: 45-46)

The line "Which came first?" receives stress on all three monosyllabic words and functions as the last stage in the rhythmical movement released by the climactic scream. The nonsensical repetitions insist on comedy within the menacing atmosphere. The interrogation, although horrible, comes across as joking music-hall patter.

The careful stylisation, both rhythmically and thematically, likewise draws laughter from seemingly naturalistic but exaggerated concepts. If a sequence of rapid exchange is continued long enough, it in itself becomes rather anti-naturalistic. In Goldberg and McCann's exchange, the repetition of an established syntactic structure is also the main form, coupled with clichés of conformity: "You'll be reorientated. / You'll be rich. / You'll be adjusted. / You'll be our pride and joy. / You'll be a mensch. / You'll be a success" (PI: 77).

Although the extracts discussed in this chapter contain lines that do not fully apply to the conventional definition of stichomythia, the stichomythic characteristics of repetition, tension and antagonism are also central in Pinter's modern version. *The Birthday Party* from 1960 has the most extreme examples of the rapid exchange developed from the stichomythic

origins. Later instances do not employ this technique as overtly, but as has been seen, the basic linguistic elements can also be found in later plays.

## 2.4 Phatic Speech

In a Pinter duologue the two characters often question and refer to each other's words and language. This is emphasised by all the phatic sentences and phrases they use to focus the other's attention to what they are saying, in clauses such as 'look', 'you know', 'let me tell you this', 'what do you mean?' and 'what are you talking about?' A lot of the dialogue has the aim of clarifying what the other character has said earlier on. A character's extensive use of phrases like 'mind you', 'I mean', 'you see' and 'I'm saying that' makes his speech resemble colloquial language, and may evoke laughter when an audience is frequently presented with such structures. The reason for the comic effect may thus be the sheer repetition of phatic phrases, certainly if the occurrence is frequent. The short phatic phrases also function to break the rhythmic flow of longer sentences. Another cause of laughter may be that the audience discloses the subtext of the use of the phrases, like evasion or vanity. A character may for instance use phatic phrases to sound casual and try not to communicate his real intentions.

Pinter's dialogue is generally permeated by such phatic phrases, as well as by self-referential comments on this use, for instance by Richard's approval of his wife in *The Lover*: "To hear your command of contemporary phraseology, your delicate use of the very latest idiomatic expression, so subtly employed" (*P2*: 175). This trait is an important aspect of his style. It is also probably one main reason why so many find his language as mirroring colloquial everyday language. The hyperrealistic quality of Pinter's language, however stylised, contrasts him from many earlier playwrights. The stage language of writers like Henrik Ibsen, Arnold Wesker and Terence Rattigan is more logical and referential. Pinter's dialogue, on the other hand, as well as that of many of his contemporary playwrights, draws

just as much attention to the language itself as to the message conveyed by it. The hyperrealism might however be comic in that it becomes exaggerated. Kennedy explains this comic verbal effect as “idiom focussed into idiocy” (*Dramatic Dialogue* 220).

In order to study this aspect, it is important to study Pinter’s language not only from the stage, but also on the page. Phatic language may be funnier when heard from the stage, as it is incongruously self-conscious on part of the playwright. The ideas and themes in a play probably also have the strongest impression in the theatre. However, one can arguably more easily see through and identify the rhythmic techniques when reading rather than listening. Such an approach can however relate to the interpretation of a dramatic text in the context of performance. A production that presents the text with “a musician’s ear for the value of each word and pause” (Bryden *e.p.*) is based on the study of the text. The same approach can reveal insights within an academic, literary close reading, without only paying attention to actual productions. A particular performance might indeed disregard the “musician’s ear”, and singular performances cannot therefore dominate the reading in an academic setting, although it may contribute to it.

In *The Collection*, Bill uses phatic evasions to deny James’ allegations that Bill has had an affair with James’ wife, Stella. One case has a high frequency of interjections: “I mean, I wouldn’t do that sort of thing. I mean, that sort of thing ... it’s just meaningless. I can understand that you’re upset, of course, but honestly, there was nothing else to it. [...] really, I mean, I’ve no idea why she should make up all that” (P2: 124). The phatic interjections hint that Bill has to struggle to make his point, without having anything new to say. This self-referential language may be perceived as funny. Another small instance shows Harry’s use of phatic language:

HARRY: [...] Listen ... old chap ... can I be quite blunt with you?  
JAMES: *Of course.*  
HARRY: Your wife ... you see ... made a little tiny confession to me. I think I can use that word. (P2: 141)

Harry is here struggling not to provoke James, who has just cut Bill's hand with a knife. Apart from the interjections, the pauses and the pleonasm, "a little tiny", delay the potential confrontation to later. The violent situation is contrasted in a comic way to the light casual speech. As the rhythms receive comic focus, the audience may laugh, but also understand that Harry speaks in order to suppress his fear of James.

In a Pinter play the need to clarify what another person has said is closely related to the qualification of the speaker's own language. The focusing on both the other's and one's own language may reveal uncertainty. As far as the audience senses the uncertainty, the character's attempt at sounding casual will not be successful, and the helplessness may be a source for laughter.

The phatic language is used to cover the character's insecurity. This is not necessarily funny, for instance if the audience feels pity or recognition, as opposed to mockery. Nevertheless, as Langer and Bergson point out, pity or seriousness and laughter may be closely connected. In addition, the hyperrealism verges on surrealism when such colloquialisms are very frequently used. Although a high phatic frequency may be natural, it seems mannered or parodic on the stage. As a comic technique this can function in a way similar to more direct repetition. The use of phatic expressions is also a sign of a desire for control. In this case it is mostly the character's obvious need to control himself. Such language might also be used in order to control others, but the pauses and numerous rephrasings, in this extract as in many other, reveal that one character's intention of controlling the other is unsuccessful. It is also unsuccessful in covering up his desire for control over himself.

## 2.5 Extended Soliloquy

In contrast to the basic uncertainty of the phatic phrases long speeches of full syntax are more successful in gaining power. Such instances have no or very few hesitations or phatic phrases, compared to the phatic category. The short incomplete sentences in that category do not signal insecurity in the same way, at least. They help to create a pleasing and balanced rhythm. The insecurity of the sequences dominated by phatic language (as discussed in subchapter 2.4) gives way to a self-conscious zest for speech. They also seldom rephrase previous sentences or qualify the language, but rather creatively associate on and play with the subject. The language may seem to flow by the power of its own associations, and seems to take control over the character. However, this reveals a need for control over the discussion and the situation, and may mark a character as weak. Still, the characters do not come out powerless from these speeches, and he or she may even try to gain power over the others through the massive collection of excessive and exaggerative language.

Bergson's concept of a "mechanical element introduced into nature" (90) has relevance for the comic quality of excessive speech in drama. The stubborn, primal comic force of the Jack-in-the-box (105-6) can explain some of the ridiculous status of seemingly unending and repetitive speeches as well. In this respect the rhythm in such utterances are intertwined with the comic potential of the referential meaning of the words. For example, Mick's lecture of interior decoration in *The Caretaker* has a large number of sentences, but all of them are thematic repetitions. All the following phrases and words are comic repetitions that may emphasise, for example, a possible subtext of Mick's need for a room of security:

I'd have teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares. I'd have those colours re-echoed in the walls. I'd offset the kitchen units with charcoal-grey worktops. Plenty of room for cupboards for the crockery. We'd have a small wall cupboard, a large wall cupboard, a corner wall cupboard with revolving shelves. You wouldn't be short of cupboards. You could put the dining-room across the landing, see? Yes. Venetian blinds on the window, cork floor, cork tiles. You could have an off-white pile linen rug, a table in ... in afromosia teak veneer, sideboard with matt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed, a beech frame settee with a

woven sea-grass seat, white-topped heat-resistant coffee table, white tile surround.  
Yes. (P2: 58)

This excerpt contains sentences with similar types of syntax, and a lot of the words and the alliterations are repeated several times. The repetitiveness is also an effect of the extent of detail. In the listing of some of Pinter's comic dramatic devices, Margaret Rose mentions the instances where the language a character uses, totally takes control over him and flows like a stream through him without conveying much new meaning (28-30). Mick's speech above fits this description, as the repetition, and arguably rhythm, of decoration detail is unnecessary.

The very fact that it is not necessary, however, adds comic effect to the line. This comic effect of unnecessary detail is based on mannerism, defined by Kennedy as "language that excels in playing internal variations on its own verbal themes" (*Dramatic Dialogue* 220). The humour could perhaps be created without rhythmical language, but the text would not be as comic without this rhythm, partly because of the exaggeration it signals. Mick's speech also draws comic effect from its style as a parody of interior decoration clichés. Mick thus tries to take authority and present himself as a cultured person.

The category of extended soliloquy reveals the speaker's zest for language, but it also hints at the speaker's need for control and domination of the stage through massive sound. In order to gain control and authority, the speaker may use the large amount of utterances to present himself as calm and relaxed. At the same time the use of this category can reveal that the character verges on desperation, in that he cannot express himself but must block the other characters from speaking. If detected by the audience, the realisation of this contrast can bring about a mocking laughter towards the speaker.

## 2.6 Anticlimax and Oxymoron

Oxymoron is a "figure of speech which combines incongruous and apparently contradictory words and meanings for a special effect" (Cuddon 669) "so as to give point to the statement

or expression” (*OED*). The effect of this figure of speech may be comic, but in a dramatic setting it also reveals that the character using oxymoron is trying to confound and surprise the other characters. In Pinter’s dialogue this figure is thus often located within the frequent sequences where one character, in a broad understanding of the concept, breaks the rhythm of a speech or of interaction. These breaks come in settings of tension, and as the rhythm is broken, a result is a kind of anticlimax. This anticlimactic effect is both rhythmic and semantic.

In my investigation of Pinter texts I will thus look for instances which use oxymoron within a specific rhythmic development. The oxymorons worth looking for are thus the ones that are distributed in a break of a flowing speech rhythm. It must be noted that in my use the term has an extended meaning. Originally applied to one rhetorical technique, the word will here cover several techniques with comic effects that may be labelled oxymoronic. The incongruous impression an oxymoron brings about is the central feature, and this will be sought not only in figures of speech, but also in the rhythmic development of several sentences.

The broad definition of this category makes it quite extensive, and the following close reading under this category will therefore also be rather long. It would be possible to split up the category. However, in order to present my interpretation of plays it is better to keep it as one category and thus be able to discuss the category’s significance for the ideas in each play.

### **Bathos**

Bathos may be seen as a sub-group of oxymoron and is defined as a ludicrous "descent from the elevated to the commonplace in writing or speech” (*OED*). When this rhetorical figure is used here with relation to speech rhythm, the descent in style or mode is accompanied by syntactic or prosodic changes that make the utterance stand out. A bathetic example breaks

both with the subject matter and flowing rhythm. The subcategory has similarities to the extended soliloquy in that it also often deals with stretches of associations of speech. The instances under bathos break the associations deliberately in order to reach certain aims. This may result in the speech. It is not the flow of language that is focused, but rather the breaks of the flow of association. This break may be hard to find as a marked rhythmic feature, but the instances stand out semantically in that they belong under the main category of oxymoronic. One example is found in *Victoria Station*, where the taxi controller speaks to driver 274 over the radio:

I'm just talking into this machine, trying to make some sense out of our lives. That's my function. God gave me this job. He asked me to do this job, personally. I'm your local monk, 274. I'm a monk. You follow? I lead a restricted life. I haven't got a choke and a gear lever in front of me. I haven't got a cooling system and four wheels. I'm not sitting here with wing mirrors and a jack in the boot. And if I did have a jack in the boot I'd stick it right up your arse. (*P4*: 198).

The rather elevated imagery of the first part of the speech is developed into obscenity, as the controller is desperate to get the driver to take a passenger. However, the comic descent is not here breaking the speech rhythm. The many clauses starting with the first person pronoun creates an exaggerated comic repetition, at the same time as the "I" may stress the authority of the taxi controller. The repetition of clauses with similar syntax builds up a tension that is finally released by the derisive term. This illustrates that comic effects may be created by both flowing and broken speech rhythms.

The relationship between a broken rhythm and a broken association is also found in other plays. *The Homecoming*'s Max and Lenny bicker constantly. One of Lenny's methods of mocking his father is to call him "Dad". It is thus understandable that his father resents this title:

MAX: Stop calling me Dad. Just stop all that calling me Dad, do you understand?  
LENNY: But I'm your son. You used to tuck me up in bed every night. He tucked you up, too, didn't he, Joey?

*Pause.*

He used to like tucking up his sons.  
*LENNY turns and goes towards the front door.*  
MAX: Lenny.  
LENNY: (*Turning*) What?  
MAX: I'll give you a proper tuck up one of these nights, son. You mark my word. (P3: 25)

The last line here is so out of character for the irritable Max that it becomes funny when he utters it. The line is usually delivered half threateningly. The deliveries of dialogue in the 2001 London Comedy Theatre production, as well as in the 1973 film, increased this ambiguity and created laughter. The speed of the line in question was intensifying the use of words to create a comic effect from a menacing dramatic situation. However, in the Norwegian production in 2002 (*Hjemkomsten*), the line's ambiguity was lost since the hints towards incest were presented rather unsubtly both through this line and in the surrounding context. The potential caring aspect of Max' lines was omitted through the actor's tone of voice signalling mere dominance and threat. Consequently, the audience at the Norwegian production did not react with laughter at this point. A translation admittedly presents a different verbal rhythm, but the broad concept of bathetic rhythm pertaining to Max' personality shifts could still have been expressed.

A similar threatening attitude is exposed through an instance in *Betrayal*. After finding out that his wife is unfaithful with his friend, Robert coolly and logically deduces: "I've always liked Jerry. To be honest, I've always liked him rather more than I've liked you. Maybe I should have had an affair with him myself" (P4: 72). The linguistically logic is, nevertheless, contrasted with the fact that the last sentence has no reference to reality. Robert also uses a word, previously used by his wife, in a new context in order to mock her. She criticises an author's "dishonest" book, but Robert finds the author "a brutally honest squash player" (P4: 55). The speech rhythm is here the most important aspect in creating laughter, but the length of the bathetic sentence builds up tension that is released in an anticlimactic way.

### Non Sequiturs and Concessions

In *The Homecoming*, Max tells an unfinished story about his plans to do "negotiations with a top-class group of butchers with continental connections". From this he moves on to talk in some length about the nice presents he bought for his wife later that day. When he has finished talking Ruth asks him:

RUTH: What happened to the group of butchers?

MAX: The group? They turned out to be a bunch of criminals like everyone else.

*Pause.*

This is a lousy cigar.

*He stubs it out. (P3: 54-55)*

This non sequitur can of course be said to be a broken rhythm in terms of dialogue exchange, but is it rhythmical language? What is true is that Max repeats some of Ruth's words, as well as repeating a sound from 'butchers' to 'bunch', which also contains assonance and echoing of the 'tch'-sound, and becomes a kind of slant rhyme, at least. The two words both refer to the same group of people. There is thus a small rhythmical movement of syllables in this exchange. In addition, Max produces an original alliterative ending with "everyone else".

Max' words and actions here function as an anticlimax towards the background of his nostalgic narrative of benevolence, although his resentful mood here is also a sudden switch back to his normal mood. Max's story shifts from casual trade business, to domestic family life, and in the end back again to angry resentment. The non sequitur is marked by a shift of tone from happy reminiscence to resentment. This shift relies on tempo in order to bring about comic effect. Max's utterance must be exclaimed with irritation or resentment, and for this to happen, the tempo must be relatively fast compared to the actor's normal speech tempo. A slowly uttered line would probably not create much comic effect or laughter. The tempo of speech must of course be joined with pitch and tone of voice to underline the feeling, and pitch is perhaps a more important muttering device than tempo. Still, the speed cannot be slower or similar to the actor's normal or general tempo. By the use of intonation and tempo,

the actor in the London Comedy Theatre production in 2001, for example, conveyed the line's comic parallel to the resentment above, and this resulted in laughter.

In some speeches with a lot of repetitions, especially in a sequence of associations, as discussed in subchapter 2.5, the speech contains lines that function as concessions or contradiction to both the theme and also to the rhythm. The rhythmical qualities form the clearest perspective through which to search for comic qualities in instances like this.

The following dialogic extract from *Betrayal* has a more formal structure: "JERRY: That's true. It's also true that nobody talks much about girl babies leaving the womb. Do they? / ROBERT: I am prepared to do so." (P4: 50). The comedy rises from the serious style of Robert's contradiction; even his line's auxiliary is fully stressed. The rhythmical effect of the break is arguably most strongly felt in the informal instance, but the comic effect is potent in the longer and more formal examples as well.

### **Misplaced Literalism**

Yet another subgroup of the category of anticlimax and oxymoron can be found in dialogues where single words or phrases are the object of discussion between the characters. To repeat, or pick up on, the other person's words is a major technical device in many Pinter plays. This is normal also in natural conversation, and it has natural qualities in Pinter, but it is also used to create humour. In *Betrayal*, Emma is reading a new book by an author whose agent, Jerry, is the close friend of her husband Robert. Jerry is however also Emma's secret lover. The audience, and possibly Robert, detects Emma's aversion towards meeting the two men at the same time:

ROBERT: You think it's good, do you?

EMMA: Yes, I do. I'm enjoying it.

ROBERT: Jerry thinks it's good too. You should have lunch with us one day and chat about it.

EMMA: Is that absolutely necessary?

*Pause.*

It's not as good as all that.  
 ROBERT: You mean it's not good enough for you to have lunch with Jerry and me  
 and chat about it?  
 EMMA: What the hell are you talking about?  
 ROBERT: I must read it myself, now it's in hard covers. (P4: 62).

The pause gives the two characters, as well as the audience, the time to realise the awkward quality of Emma's refusal to join the two men for a literary lunch. Emma cannot reveal her real intention and uses a critique of the book as an excuse. Robert then interprets the phrase "not as good as all that" as to have some concrete referent for "all that". Although this meaning seems logical enough, Emma does only intend for it to be an evasion, and consequently expresses contempt for Robert's absurd connection between meals and good literature. More directly in terms of semantics, the humour comes from Robert's inversion of Emma's more general idiomatic expression into a literal meaning. This is an old comic form that may be labelled misplaced literalism. It consists of figurative language, figures of speech, clichés and fixed phrases used first by one character in its figurative meaning, but afterwards taken in the referential meaning by the addressee. This form is also evident in *Moonlight*:

BEL: I spoke to her in a way I had never spoken to anyone before. Sometimes  
 it happens, doesn't it? You're speaking to someone and you suddenly  
 find that you're another person.  
 ANDY: Who is?  
 BEL: You are.  
*Pause.*  
 I don't mean you. I mean me. (P4: 373)

The contrast from the quotation from *Betrayal* is that the confusion is revealed in *Moonlight*. Bel exploits the convention of using the second person singular pronoun when describing one's personal feelings in order to mask nakedness. When Andy misunderstands, Bel is locked in the rhetorical convention and uses the wrong pronoun. The source of the misunderstanding may partly be that Andy probably does not hear or focus too well on what is being said since he is dying. Thereby the play mixes comic and tragic elements. The speed and grammatical neatness of the adjacency pair "Who is? / You are." forces a comic feeling on the audience,

albeit providing sympathy for the characters as well. Misunderstandings like these often reveal the insistence of a character's voice in conflict with another's.

This category presents several rhythmic features that combine confusion and aggression. Many of the examples discussed present character's in the state of strong emotion, for instance with reference to a deathbed or the possibility of betrayal. The characters' readiness to engage in argument or discussion, and their urge to confound the listener is the general impression of the extracts under anticlimax and oxymoron. Their urge to vex is related to their need for control over the other characters. The subdivision of this category will not be used during the close readings of chapters three and four. The subdivisions are useful in this present chapter to exemplify and define different aspects of the categories and their comic techniques. Subdividing the close reading will only cause a less accessible writing, and I will therefore use the terms of the subcategories for analysing the nuances of anticlimax in the two plays.

## 2.7 Category Application

The formalistic approach of categorisation may seem to restrict the understanding of Pinter's plays. One textual extract may fit in several categories, and the boundaries between the categories should not be seen as definite or exclusive. In addition, some of the analyses of comic rhythm in this chapter are not very extensive, and rather suggest typical instances of each category. The present chapter thus becomes a little fragmented, and the significance of comic speech rhythm for the full analysis of plays is not made clear.

Nevertheless, the function of the concept of the categories in this thesis is to provide a means for identification and study of Pinter's comic language with a focus on rhythm. It is not to suggest a limited interpretation of the texts. My aim with the categorisation is on the contrary rather to understand and describe a dominant aspect of the humour in Pinter's

dialogue. The nuances of rhythmical and comic characteristics of the categories, as well as their success as approaches for studying plays, can only be fully seen during the close readings of the following chapters. I will thus move on to the close readings of two plays, trying to sort the chosen examples of comic rhythm, and at the same time examine how the comic effects contribute to the overall understanding of each play.

## Chapter Three: Analysis of *Old Times*

### 3.1 Strategies of Comic Speech

In *Old Times* (P3: 243-313) a conflict arises between Anna and Deeley as they in their different ways try to gain control over Kate, Deeley's wife. This control is at first sought through knowledge about the other. Anna and Deeley also both try to get the others to agree upon or believe their own version of the past, particularly their experiences with Kate. Deeley mostly wants to find the commonly agreed version of the past memories, whereas Anna treats memory as a means more for personal expression than as historical fact. The definition and establishment of memory within the dramatic triangle thus become an important conflict in the play. Thomas Postlewait argues that the characters in Pinter's plays are "locked into the past, unable to adapt to the present except in terms of the past" (148). Anna concedes that there are episodes she remembers that may in fact never have happened, but as she recalls them, "so they take place" (P3: 270). As Anna and Deeley engage in a struggle to possess Kate, they try to convince Kate and the other that their own relationship with her was, and is, important and close. In order to defeat the other combatant they must prevent him or her from controlling Kate. This act of convincing takes a range of different linguistic strategies. With regard to Pinter's plays in general Esslin notably stresses the aggressive and invading potential of the playwright's dialogue, and the role of comic speech inherent in this aggression:

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: [...]  
(Esslin 40)

The way the characters go about to define memory and the personality of the others can be traced through their employment of comic speech rhythms. Kate criticises their recollections

of the past and uses it against them. In the end she for her part recalls Anna as “dead” (P3: 309), and describes Deeley as buries in dirt (*loc.cit.* 311). She thus denies their claims to her, since they are “dead” to her.

How do the different techniques of comic speech rhythm point to the characters’ strategies for defeating the others and reaching their aims? By using repetition and rhyme, for example, a character creates a comic ritualistic mood as a background for giving point to, and claiming authority for, his or her utterances. The use of anticlimaxes also represents a kind of bafflement as comic associations draw attention to the speaker’s language, and consequently enable her version of the past to become the accepted one. The category of singing portrays the characters in a complex mix of linguistic battle and mutual understanding. Although the dialogue, as well as the singing, reveals that they underestimate Kate, it is also a device for defining her like they want her to be. Through the extended soliloquies Anna and Deeley consequently try to control the situation and what is accepted as agreed memories by way of blocking the other characters from speaking. Kate on the other hand insists on her own integrity not only through speech and sound, but also through silence, as is comically evident in the category of singing. Her speech is thus a less important object of study than the speech of the other characters. The way she resists domination is however part of the background for the comic, and it informs the ending of the play. The phatic category throws light on the problematic nature of speech. Since the characters pry for information from the others and at the same time try not to reveal any themselves, there is a comic double standard at work through this category. When communication proves difficult or painful, one strategy out of it is to draw attention to the language itself by use of speech rhythm.

Ronald Bryden commends the employment of speech rhythm in the premiere of the play thus: “Peter Hall directs the comedy with a musician’s ear for the value of each word and silence which exposes every layer of the text” (*e.p.*). All the categories present a contrast

between the comic struggle and what is at stake for the characters; the need for a close connection with Kate is sought fulfilled and at the same time frustrated by the use of comic speech rhythm. The rhythms of Anna and Deeley are after all also directed at intimidating each other, and this aspect of the comic effect also influences the character's approach towards Kate. However, the play especially at the end presents Kate as resistant towards Deeley and Anna's strategies. Their use of speech rhythms is thus rendered futile, and their very innervation of speech in the entire play becomes ludicrous and comic, albeit desperate.

### 3.2 Rhyme and Ritual Repetition

The category of rhymes and repetition covers quite general instances of such devices, and the significance of its comic effects may therefore pertain to other categories as well. It is still useful to separate overt rhyming and marked repetitions of words, phrases and sentences, in order to concentrate on such basic forms of comic technique. The general effect is ritualistic, and it is interesting to see how this works in *Old Times*, both within one character's utterances and through interaction. Since the conflict centres on which character's utterances take authority, the characters create ritualistic moods to support their need for authority and control. The contingent comic rhythms in their speech focus the audience's attention on their strategies for control. However, although the comic rhythms are results of the repetitions and the linguistic rituals, the rhythm may still function to break the feeling of authority the character tries to create.

In the opening of Act I Deeley wants to know if Anna, the expected guest, was his wife's best friend when she was young. Kate questions the relevance of his curiosity, and Deeley rephrases his question:

DEELEY: Do you think of her as your best friend?  
KATE: She was my only friend.  
DEELEY: Your best and only.  
KATE: My one and only. (P3: 247)

Deeley desires to define his wife's memories in his own language, and such an appropriation is perhaps understandable. However, the even rhythm of the syntax in each line, as well as the rhythm created by repetition in the ending of the lines, and the synthesis of words, render Deeley's wish in a mocking light. The repetition of "best", "friend" and "only", and Deeley's adaptation to Kate's correction may cause laughter since it is creative. Deeley makes a synthesis of Kate's words in "Your best and only". The last word makes the word "best" become superfluous, but the main comic source lies in the fact that the line is a corruption of the more common phrase "one and only". Kate then appropriately corrects Deeley on this. The wordplay is creative and may be funny, but it also says something important about the characters' needs.

The two last utterances also form a sense of ritual that is developed further. Deeley's convention of trying to gain knowledge through rephrasing his and Kate's speech becomes a pattern in the dialogue. Deeley's insisting urge for knowledge about the other characters permeates the play, and although the quoted sequence comes early on, the humour is still evident. Deeley's drive for control is quite clear, and as he satisfies audience expectations of this again and again, the revelation of this personal trait becomes comic. In his energetic pursuit to pin Anna down, Deeley draws further unwarranted conclusions simply by rephrasing his own sentences to contain new meaning:

KATE: If you have only one of something you can't say it's the best of anything.

DEELEY: Because you have nothing to compare it with?

KATE: Mmnn.

*Pause.*

DEELEY: (*Smiling.*) She was incomparable.

KATE: Oh, I'm sure she wasn't. (P3: 247)

Kate is vague and evasive about her former roommate, and she thereby suggests that Anna is not very important for her anymore. Deeley does not see this; his wife's evasion on the other hand motivates him to pry, possibly since he is threatened by the notion of the close

friendship of the two women in the past. This threat is given a concrete image on stage, as Anna stands muted in the dimly lit background during the first eleven pages of the text. Contrasted with Kate's irritable reply Deeley's creative repetition becomes comic. His curious creativity develops the concept of nothing to compare with to mean 'incomparable'. Strictly morphologically speaking he could be right in doing so, but the meaning of the word 'incomparable' is not equivalent to the previous phrase. It is therefore understandable that Kate reacts to this. Her last reply functions as an anticlimax against Deeley's intellectual displacement. This comic contrast presented through speech rhythm reveals Deeley's prying strategy.

While Kate is in the bathroom at the beginning of Act II, Deeley and Anna sit in the bedroom discussing Kate's hygiene. Deeley breaks the convention of colloquial dialogue by making a rhyme, a poetic device that here evokes the comic impression of artifice:

Of course she's so totally incompetent at drying herself properly, did you find that? She gives herself a really good *scrub*, but can she with the same efficiency give herself an equally good *rub*? I have found, in my experience of her, that this is not in fact the case. You'll always find a few odd unexpected unwanted cheeky globules dripping about. (P3: 292)

The emphasis in the text ensures that the comic potential of the rhyme is preserved. The comic technique lies in combining the serious and elaborate style with rhyming and superfluous synonyms. This speech rhythm becomes comic since the topic, the need to discuss the drying capability of a grown woman, is quite absurd. Deeley uses the absurdity to present Kate as his possession, and the sequence thus illustrates Deeley's need for showing Anna that he is in intimate control of Kate. Anna's repetitions also reveal her condescending attitude towards Kate. The following repetition of weekdays at the end of several short clauses presents Kate as quite naive:

One day she said to me, I've slept through Friday. No you haven't, I said, what do you mean? I've slept right through Friday, she said. But today is Friday, I said, it's been Friday all day, it's now Friday night, you haven't slept through Friday. Yes I have, she said, I've slept right through it, today is Saturday. (P3: 263)

The rhythm of Anna's speech is slightly different from the one of Deeley quoted above. Deeley mixes long and short sentences including clever and witty rhymes, and elsewhere he also uses more extreme effects like vulgarities to draw attention. Anna repeats sentences or syntactical structures dealing with similar words or synonyms, and the length of her clauses does not vary much. Her speech rhythms thus do not imitate colloquial language as strongly as Deeley's. Anna's style and her mysterious memories of Kate can instead create a sense of ritual, which gives authority and credibility to what she is expressing. The audience does therefore not perceive her attitude to be as frenetically insisting as that of Deeley. Anna's style rests in her self-confidence, as she simply seems to give her account of a past incident. Her story thus resists questioning and ignores disbelief.

Against the background of the absurd disagreement the speech rhythms become a comic illustration of Kate as naive. The speech also constructs Anna as a person Kate needs for guidance, whereas the image of Kate's strangeness suggests that Anna understands her on another level than Deeley does. Deeley on the other hand condescends Kate more directly, and although he too constructs himself as Kate's superior, he speaks in more physical terms, for instance about her body. Anna also patronises Kate, but in addition her speech alludes to a secret psychological connection between the two women. She thus aptly admits to Deeley when he asks her how Kate was "in passion" in the past: "I feel that is your province" (P3: 304). Kate is construed as a child in each case, but Anna claims to understand and relate more to this image than Deeley does.

Deeley's repetitions often come through interaction with the other characters. He goes on to suggest that he and Anna help Kate dry herself. The unconventional proposal is discussed in a detailed manner that increases the absurd nature of the concept:

DEELEY: I've got a brilliant idea. Why don't we do it with powder?  
ANNA: Is that a brilliant idea?  
DEELEY: Isn't it?

ANNA: It's quite common to powder yourself after a bath.  
DEELEY: It's quite common to powder yourself after a bath but it's quite uncommon to be powdered. Or is it? It's not common where I come from, I can tell you. My mother would have a fit. (P3: 294)

Anna's focus on "brilliant" marks Deeley's choice of words as comic for the audience. In addition, Deeley's repetitions within a structure of logical discussion further strengthen the force of the absurd topic. Anna, whose question focuses on the ludicrous link between "brilliant idea" and drying powder, coolly puts off Deeley's enthusiasm. As Deeley answers Anna's disagreement, he invokes an image of his mother supervising him when drying his wife. The underlying erotic tension adds force to the comic feeling, and in the context of mixing taboo and absurdly logical argumentation, Deeley highlights his insecurity: "Isn't it?" and "Or is it?" Significantly, these short clauses break the flowing speech rhythm of the context, in a way that is comic and that illuminates the conflict between Deeley and Anna. The feeling of ritual inherent in the repetitions may give his words authority, but the authority is undermined by the arguing interaction. Deeley's repeated sentences instead qualify and question the ideas they express with ironical distance in a way quite different from Anna's self-confirming reiterations.

The humour and speech rhythms point to the need of Anna and Deeley for control over Kate as well as over each other. It is mostly Deeley's speech that directly evokes laughter because he makes striking images and employs linguistic structures that often include breaks with the rhythms of the near context. In this Deeley speaks with a more hyperrealistic quality than the other two, who use a more formal style. In addition, Deeley's comic utterances within this category are mostly located to sequences of interaction, and his claim to Kate and his strategies for control are here challenged and criticised. Consequently his strategies become relatively clear to the audience as well as to the other characters. Anna on the other hand presents her claim to Kate through speech structures that are more solemn and self-confident. In addition, her topics are often strange and vexing, and her speech thus often

evades interaction. It is hence more difficult to challenge her claims. Her speech still uses comic rhythms, however, since it breaks the convention of colloquial speech, but the comic effects do not reveal Anna's strategies as easily as Deeley's style does his. Anna thus succeeds more than Deeley here, at least in terms of whom the critical laughter of the audience is directed at.

### 3.3 Rhythmic Duologue

*Old Times* contains two sequences of singing, and these are the most clearly stylised instances of rhythmic duologue in the play. I will therefore here concentrate on discussing these sequences. As there is one sequence of singing in each act, these extracts may also illustrate the development of the interaction and the dramatic situation that the play presents. The singing in *Old Times* may create laughter because it breaks with the flow of the colloquial speech in the play. This is not to say that the singing alienates the audience, or that it is not naturalistic; the musical reminiscing during a reunion of old friends can well be. The comic potential rather defamiliarises the language of the songs. What is significant for the comic effects is not only the semantic meaning of the words, but rather the singing as interaction through sound. The comic effects of the sounds illustrate the struggle for control between the characters and the role of memory in this struggle. However, the semantic content of the song lyrics is important for analysing the character's need for defining and patronising Kate.

One of the functions of the singing is to illustrate the isolation of Kate and the fact that the other two treat her as an object for possession. Only Anna and Deeley sing although all three characters are present on stage during both sequences, in fact the singing in Act II clearly is meant to describe Kate. In stage effect Anna and Deeley thus exclude Kate from their interaction in the musical scenes. As Kate is muted her character draws attention as a mysterious presence on stage, and this strange aspect of Kate has a pleasing potential for the

audience throughout the play. In his review of the Theatre Royal 1985 production, Irwing Wardle finds, that Kate's small amount of speech gives her a "silent impenetrable charm" (*e.p.*). Such a charm might represent, in Freud's term (173), an accompanying circumstance for comic effect. The audience may also perceive as absurd the two other characters' treatment of Kate in this respect. This effect is emphasised on several occasions elsewhere since Anna and Deeley often refer to Kate in the third person even when she is present.

The onset of the first of the two song sequences further illustrates the condescending attitude towards Kate. Triggered by Anna's description of Kate twenty years ago as "delightful" to live with, Deeley makes a reference to the song 'Lovely to Look at, Delightful to Know' (*P3*: 264). Kate says that she does not know the song, but Anna, who shared a room with Kate when they were young, insists that they "used to play them, all of them, all the time" (*ibid*). Although Anna's main focus is to stress for Deeley that her experience with Kate is as profound as his own, or even more so, she too ignores Kate in a way that can sound absurd.

In the first singing sequence (Act I, *P3*: 265-67), Anna goes on to exchange lines from several pop evergreens with Deeley. The motivation for singing was the mention of the songs in the conversation, and the overt effect is to make a nostalgic illustration of fragmented memories. On an indirect level the effect is to stress the conflict between Anna and Deeley. The song extracts do not form a medley or conventional duet, since authentic songs are mixed in what can rather be named a song collage. The style of the collage gives an impression of interruption as the two singers try to defeat each other in remembering different songs for each line:

DEELEY: (Singing.) Blue moon, I see you standing alone...  
ANNA: (Singing.) The way you comb your hair... (*P3*: 265)

As they sing with reference to Kate, the sequence becomes a mutual challenge. By way of romantic serenades Anna and Deeley woo Kate's for her attention and interest. As a challenge

to each other they try to come up with songs that can symbolise the strength of their own relation with Kate. When Anna lived with Kate they used to play “all of them” (*loc.cit.* 264), and this memory might make Deeley’s relation with Kate less important. Thus he promotes the importance of his own role in Kate’s life by showing that he too remembers as many songs as Anna does.

The fact that the lines in the beginning of the sequence do not rhyme with the other person's lines, since they are taken from different sources, underlines the conflict. Gradually there is a higher degree of co-operation between Anna and Deeley, however. Deeley for instance completes the chorus of the authentic song ‘I Get a Kick out of You’ after Anna has sung the three first lines of it. Anna also rhymes some of Deeley's lines from other authentic songs:

DEELEY:     (*Singing.*) When a lovely flame dies ...  
ANNA:       (*Singing.*) Smoke gets in your eyes.  
[...]  
DEELEY:     (*Singing.*) The smile of Garbo and the scent of roses ...  
ANNA:       (*Singing.*) The waiters whistling as the last bar closes ...     (*P3: 266-67*)

But after Deeley goes on to yet another song, "Oh, how the ghost of you clings ...", there is a pause, as Anna does not conclude: "*Pause.* [DEELEY:] They don't make them like that any more. *Silence*" (*loc.cit.* 267). In a similar manner, one character may rhyme with his or her own lines, as they sometimes sing several lines from one song in one flow. In these cases the other character does not follow. The instances where one character rhymes his or her own lines reveal points of imbalance in the interaction. As one character sings several rhyming lines from one particular song, he or she intensifies the battle over Kate. Singing several lines makes sure that the other character cannot sing and hence lay claim to, or influence, Kate.

As well as a dominant part of their conversation, the lyrics of the songs express a feeling of nostalgia. The conversation reveals, however, that their individual memories are not necessarily compatible with the others’. The failed invitation to co-operate through song

focuses on the secluded and private nature of the characters' memories and on the break in their communication. The mixture of lines from different songs also resists satisfying the audience by denying them closure or rhyming. Thereby the song collage invites the audience to detect the dramatic significance behind the singing. The intentions of Deeley and Anna may be the same for both unrhymed and rhymed sequences, but the shifts from song to song inform the audience that something is at stake for the characters.

In Act II only one of the songs from the collage in Act I is selected. Watching Kate walking into the room fresh from her bath and smiling at them, Deeley and Anna start to sing. This time the song is not an association from the dialogue; it is rather an illustration of the others' associations around Kate and her physical presence. This scene thus becomes a strong and focused image of the absurd condescending attitude towards Kate that is evident in the entire play. The smiling, silent Kate contrasted on stage with the two parental figures that try to control her through singing may easily bring about laughter:

DEELEY:     *(Singing.)* No, no, they can't take that away from me ...

*KATE walks down towards them and stands, smiling. ANNA and DEELEY sing again, faster on cue, and more perfunctorily.*

ANNA:       *(Singing.)* The way you hold your knife-

DEELEY:     *(Singing.)* The way we danced till three-

ANNA:       *(Singing.)* The way you've changed my life-

DEELEY:     No, no, they can't take that away from me. (Act II, P3: 295-96)

In contrast to the earlier song collage, the play here satisfies the audience by staying with one particular song, and the result can be a favourable condition for laughter. This sequence also communicates better with Kate, since she reacts to the music and turns and looks at the singers. This reaction works as a comic contrast to the strategies of the other two. By the end of the sequence the minor detail of punctuation – dashes contrasted to three dots – also more strongly points to co-operation. The level of co-operation between Anna and Deeley is stronger here than in Act I, since they sing one line from the authentic song each. Their

similar intentions of controlling and possessing Kate are thus more in focus than their conflict with each other.

Kate's smiling may signify that she is open for influence, but it can also mean that she is self-contained. After all, she never takes part in the actual singing in the play. Kate often presents herself as partly inaccessible through silence, and this attitude is given a strong expression here. Wardle notably commends the actress in the Theatre Royal 1985 performance for conveying the isolation of "silence and dazzling smiles", which presents her as the stronger character in the play (*e.p.*). The theme of the song implies that a relationship is over although the memory remains, and seen in the light of the entire play it emphasises the relativity of memory. Although Deeley and Anna seek to use this relativity to define Kate within their own understanding, they here possibly realise that Kate does not need them as much as they need her. The stage directions suggesting a fast and perfunctorily mode of delivery may be Anna and Deeley's response as they realise their desperate situation. In this they have something in common. Nevertheless, since they rhyme their own lines, they are also presented as isolated from each other. The potential comic effects of the frenetic rhyming and singing contribute to conveying the desperation to the audience.

The understanding between Anna and Deeley is expressed in very few instances of the normal dialogue, and the understanding of the singing is also predominantly linked to the past. In the present, on the other hand, the isolation of the characters is more immanent. As they sing of "The memory of all that ... / No, no, they can't take that away from me ..." (*P3*: 296) they remember or imagine Kate as she was, or as they want to remember or imagine her. At the end of the last musical sequence quoted on the previous page, Deeley even repeats this chorus by speaking it, as there are no stage directions for singing here. Although it may be true that no one can steal them, he understands that his memories are irrelevant for interaction with Kate in the present. The recitation stresses his desperation.

The sequences of singing in *Old Times* have the effect of enforcing the feeling of combat or competition. The song collage especially emphasises the two characters' need to describe and define in their own terms and words. However, Kate's self-containment and mysterious silence may present her as someone it is not easy to define, let alone control. In this respect the singing shows that Anna and Deeley have something in common in that they both try to control Kate, and both seem to fail at the end. The shared experience may be mirrored in the shared singing. The comic effect of singing as artifice is stronger in the first sequence of the song collage, since it constantly breaks the rhythm of the context. It is significant that the song collage comes in the Act I, as Anna and Deeley here try each other out, whereas the singing exchange in the second act consists of only one song. Anna and Deeley are here less eager to fight and more eager to be comforted. However, Kate is the one they both want to approach, but as Kate does not participate this need remains unfulfilled. The strategy for control through condescension becomes tragicomic. The content and the even rhythm of the second sequence give the audience the feeling of pleasure that may be a favourable condition for laughter, but the singing rhythm is broken by prose when the singing ends. Through the musical exchanges the comic potential of the rhythm thus presents the urge to possess in a ludicrous, but also sad, way.

### 3.4 Phatic Speech

In Pinter's plays the phatic language is related to the character's employment of specific phatic phrases like 'you know' or 'do you see?' The phatic function of language that is relevant for the presentation of *Old Times* is just as much expressed in the characters' general habit of qualifying the utterances of themselves and the others. Phatic clarifications often serve to illustrate the characters' need for describing and defining the other characters, particularly Kate, in their own language. More specifically they may reveal that a character is

curious or insecure towards another character's personality or identity. The phatic category also illustrates the characters' fear that their need for control and shared memory will be revealed. To draw attention to the language by way of comic speech is a strategy for evading self-revelation in the play.

It is therefore natural that Kate, who tries to resist the two other characters' attempts at defining her, should try to be vague, hence causing the others to question her language. Anna commends Deeley on his wife's cooking and the two start to discuss food. After a little while Kate joins the conversation:

*Pause.*

KATE: Yes, I quite like those kind of things, doing it.

ANNA: What kind of things?

KATE: Oh, you know, that sort of thing.

*Pause.*

DEELEY: Do you mean cooking?

KATE: All that thing. (P3: 259)

Kate's deliberate attempt at mystifying the other characters can sound comic for the audience, since the phrases using "thing" have no obvious referent, and since the phatic phrases of Anna and Deeley are repeated. The short sentences and clauses suggest a high speed of utterance for each line in isolation, even though the sequence contains a pause. The repeated phrases including "thing" create an atmosphere of nonsense and superficiality, although they may also provide Kate with a sense of dignity and self-containment. Kate is sure of herself and of her strength to define who she is, and does therefore not need to explain herself to either of the two others. As Kate detects the others' need to understand and control her, she is able to evade their prying.

Anna's speech also contains a similar quality. Compared with Deeley's eager curiosity, Anna's repetitions seem more dignified and self-conscious. Anna joins the couple to discuss Kate's present interest in cooking, but Anna soon starts to reminisce about the past:

We weren't terribly elaborate in cooking, didn't have the time, but every so often dished up an incredibly enormous stew, guzzled the lot, and then more often than not sat up half the night reading Yeats.

*Pause.*

*(To herself.)* Yes. Every so often. More often than not.

*ANNA stands, walks to the window.*

And the sky is so still.

*Pause.* (P3: 260)

This contemplative and quiet manner does not seem to give room for laughter. The repetition sounds formal and expresses certainty of the truth of the matter, as well as shifting the topic of the conversation to the past. Differently from Deeley, Anna has a firsthand experience with most of the past memories referred to in the play, since she and Kate were friends before Deeley even met Kate.

Nevertheless, they both knew Kate twenty years ago, and as is the case in the exchanges of singing earlier discussed, their memories of past lives in London sometimes coincide, although indeed rarely. Anna and Deeley are the ones doing most of the talking, and often, instead of including Kate in the conversation they refer to her in the third person. Kate reproaches them:

KATE: You talk of me as if I were dead.

ANNA: No, no, you weren't dead, you were so lively, so animated, you used to laugh –

DEELEY: Of course you did. I made you smile myself, didn't I? Walking along the street, holding hands. You smiled fit to bust.

ANNA: Yes, she could be so ... animated.

DEELEY: Animated is no word for it. When she smiled ... how can I describe it?

ANNA: Her eyes lit up.

DEELEY: I couldn't have put it better myself.

*DEELEY stands, goes to cigarette box, picks it up, smiles at KATE. KATE looks at him, watches him light a cigarette, takes the box from him, crosses to ANNA, offers her a cigarette. ANNA takes one.*

ANNA: You weren't dead. Ever. In any way.

KATE: I said you talk about me as if I *am* dead. Now. (P3: 272-3)

Kate intends the “were” to represent the subjunctive aspect of the verb ‘to be’, but Anna takes it to be used in the normal, indicative past of ‘to be’. It is typical for Anna to try to link

everything that is said to the past, but Kate corrects the misinterpretation at the end of the sequence. Anna's misinterpretation is poignant and relevant for the entire play, but also for this specific exchange. Anna and Deeley deny Kate's accusation by suggesting qualities for Kate in the past that contrast a metaphorical meaning of dead as in "dead personality". It is true that it takes some time before Kate corrects them, but the audience is given the possibility to understand Kate's initial subjunctive verb in her meaning since the entire context of the play supports it. Hence, the audience may also find a comic quality in Anna and Deeley's creative invention of images and memories contrasting death. After all, from Kate's perspective at least, the images are superfluous and meaningless.

Anna sounds secure and assertive in her repetitions of syntax: "you weren't [...] you were [...] you used to". Deeley agrees with Anna and continues her defence to Kate's accusation, but when Anna repeats her formal "animated", Deeley seems to become irritated and he interrupts her: "Animated is no word for it." He moves on to search for an alternative way of describing Kate: "how can I describe it?" and he accepts Anna's cliché that Kate's "eyes lit up": "I couldn't have put it better myself". The phatic self-questioning shows that they are eager to please Kate, but their very effort becomes comic, since they try so hard to refute a view that they wrongly believe Kate is holding. In addition they once more relate exclusively to each other in the way that Kate originally reacted to; they forget Kate's presence in referring to her in the third person. Deeley afterwards in a way connects to Kate as he smiles to her, but this is in a silent way that may suggest condescension.

Anna then wants to close the topic: "You weren't dead. Ever. In any way." Through the short, incomplete phrases she expresses that she is successful in both denying Kate's accusation and also in defining Kate even more. In the last utterance, however, Kate denies that Anna is right in this. Kate's rephrased accusation stresses that Anna and Deeley cannot relate to Kate in a relevant way in the present, although they manage to conjure images of her

as lively in the past. The eagerness to describe Kate in her past motivates the use of phatic language. The irony of the two levels of understanding in this scene is thus conveyed through the speech rhythm the phatic language creates.

Kate carries the irony further when she repeats the image of death for her own purpose of resisting the attempts at domination and stressing her own integrity. At the end of the play she says to Anna: “But I remember you. I remember you dead” (*P3*: 309), and she also recalls a sexual game with Deeley where she “plastered his face with dirt” (*loc.cit.* 311). Thus Kate turns Anna and Deeley’s games of language and memory against them in a final irony that mocks their strategies.

There is a double standard at work in this category between getting knowledge about the others and not reveal anything about oneself. As Kate resents being defined by the two others, the phatic category provides them with a means for hiding the need for control. At the same time it lets Anna and Deeley confront each other’s claim to Kate by drawing attention to their own words.

### 3.5 Extended Soliloquy

Although the condescension of Kate evident in the dialogue of Anna and Deeley may reveal that they underestimate Kate, the category of extended soliloquy uses techniques that demand great force of exertion. With the aim of overwhelming the other characters with mere speech, the speaker has to concentrate to deliver long sequences of associations with an absurd effect. Through blocking the others from speaking, the speaker can more easily exercise control. The comic speech rhythms here illustrate the way the characters go about to exercise domination through such exertion of speech. The very exertion of language becomes an image of characters in tense combat and with a strong, almost desperate interest for control and self-expression.

The examples from this category are often located to contexts in Pinter plays where I find increased tension between characters, and this is also the case in *Old Times*. To the recently treated statement of Kate in Act I that Deeley and Anna talk of her as if she were dead, Anna protests: “How can you say that? How can you say that, when I’m looking at you now, seeing you so shyly poised over me, looking down at me – “ (*P3*: 273). Deeley suddenly breaks Anna off with “Stop that!” (*ibid*), as he seems to dislike the connection Anna establishes with Kate through their looking at each other. The special female relationship excludes Deeley, since it exists also in the silence of body movements initiated by the dialogue, whereas Deeley is more dependent on speech to express himself and connect with the women. It is true that Deeley also uses vision to relate to the other two. For instance there is a reference to a past incident where he “gazed” up Anna’s skirt (*loc.cit.* 289 and 309). This represents Deeley’s undaunted lust contrasted to Anna’s use of her own “gaze”, presented above, to establish a more equally and psychologically based relation to Kate.

Anna’s style is based on a rather archaic and formal choice of words, repetitions of words, synonyms and syntax, like for example “shyly poised over me, looking down at me –“. As has been mentioned earlier, the ritualistic effect of her speech may draw the two women together, especially in stressing their mutual knowledge of the past. Deeley resents this, and is particularly aggressive here in cutting off Anna’s sentence. It is almost as if he suspects Anna of trying to hypnotise Kate through vision. After a pause Deeley starts a long speech:

Myself I was a student then, juggling with my future, wondering should I bejassus saddle myself with a slip of a girl not long out of her swaddling clothes whose only claim to virtue was silence but who lacked any sense of fixedness, any sense of decisiveness, but was compliant only to the shifting winds, with which she went, but not *the* winds, and certainly not my winds, such as they are, but I suppose winds that only she understood, and that of course with no understanding whatsoever, at least as I understand the word, at least that’s the way I figured it. A classic female figure, I said to myself, or is it a classic female posture, one way or the other long outworn.

*Pause.* (*P3*: 273-4)

Almost the entire speech is devoted to describing the girl, who is obviously Kate, but the narrative is quite uninformative. The basic aim of the speech is simply to block Anna's possibility for speaking to Kate. Deeley understands that if Anna is allowed to develop their special relationship, she is likely to insert more influence over Kate than he is. Thus the semantic content of Deeley's repetitions and rephrasings becomes meaningless and sounds rather ludicrous. That the speech is simply a means of physical control is mirrored in its high frequency of short clauses, such as "with which she went, but not *the* winds, and certainly not my winds, such as they are". The clause "wondering should I bejusus saddle myself with a slip of a girl not long out of her swaddling clothes whose only claim to virtue was silence but who lacked any sense of fixedness" functions as a forceful contrast to the short clauses. The line, especially as it contains a swearword, sounds almost threatening, but the hints, especially "bejusus", to Deeley as a stage Irishman mix a comic feeling into the threat. His name also points to him being Irish. Apart from this the stylisation opens up for a high speed and a staccato manner of delivery. Combined with the semantic nonsense this adds a comic effect to the tense dramatic situation. Deeley is eager, even desperate, to stop Anna from communicating with Kate on their special level. His comic style and rhythm of speech stress Deeley's fear of such verbal interaction. The speech as an expression of his fear can call for the audience's sympathy, but his frenetic fervour may raise laughter, and these qualities are intertwined. Nicola Barker accordingly finds Deeley "funny/pathetic" in the performance at Wyndhams Theatre in 1995 (*e.p.*).

Anna typically speaks more about Kate than about herself. A typical extended soliloquy on her part takes place within one of the re-enactments of a past conversation between Anna and Kate. When Kate says she wants to walk across the park (*P3*: 281), Anna advises against it:

The park is dirty at night, all sorts of horrible people, men hiding behind trees and women with terrible voices, they scream at you as you go past, and people come out

suddenly from behind trees and bushes and there are shadows everywhere and there are policemen, and you'll have a horrible walk, and you'll see all the traffic and the noise of the traffic and you'll see all the hotels, and you know you hate looking through all those swing doors, you hate it, to see all that, all those people in the lights in the lobbies all talking and moving ... and all the chandeliers ...

*Pause.*

You'll only want to come home if you go out. You'll want to run home ... and into your room ...

*Pause.* (P3: 281-2)

Anna's frenetic speech of the horrors of parks is clearly exaggerated, almost to the degree of panic. Although it describes some images that are unquestionably frightening, "men hiding behind trees and women with terrible voices, they scream at you as you go past" (*loc.cit.* 281), Anna also argues absurdly toward the end that even "all those people in the lights in the lobbies [...] and all the chandeliers" can scare Kate. Anna's associations are developed throughout the extract in a way that shows that the act of associating is more important than the content. The conjunction 'and' permeates the speech, and through this device Anna conjures one striking image after another. The style of syntax is repeated in a comic way, but the effect is also ritualistic: "and there are shadows [...] and there are policemen [...] and you'll see all the traffic [...] and you'll see all the hotels". The ritualistic mood is typical for Anna's method of persuading the others to believe in what she is saying. Now and then she adds forceful but short phrases where she repeats important information: "you hate it, to see all that,". Her speech rhythm is developed through her need to create horrible images, but as the images she can come up with become gradually more mundane and detailed, like "and all the chandeliers", the effect may be laughter from the audience. The use of alliteration, for instance "in the lights in the lobbies", may give the audience a feeling of pleasure that reinforces the comic effect.

In her frenetic speech set in one of the past memory enactments Anna tries to persuade Kate to stay with her inside their apartment for the evening. Anna thus expresses an urge to take control over Kate's life as well as trying to keep her inside so that Anna's influence on

her will be stronger. This urge is revealed through Anna's strategy of overwhelming Kate with absurd and horrible images. The comic quality of the insistent speech rhythm focuses the interest of the audience at Anna's underlying intention. In one sense she uses a similar strategy to Deeley, but in another way it is also different from Deeley's since he distances himself from Kate. Deeley's extended soliloquy above refers to Kate in the third person in order to describe her for Anna, he even uses the general phrase "a girl" (*P3*: 273). Deeley shows no interest in what Kate has to say. Anna on the other hand refers to Kate in the second person in a text that tries to persuade her to succumb and agree to what she is saying: "you know you hate looking". Anna also uses the present tense although her speech too refers to a memory or past event, while Deeley by comparison uses the past tense for description of past time. The result of the difference is that Anna's speech has a much stronger potential for convincing and hypnotising Kate. Accordingly, after Deeley's speech there is a silence followed by a reply from Anna (*P3*: 277), but after Anna's soliloquy Kate reacts to Anna's words (*loc.cit.* 282).

Like all extended soliloquies, the ones in *Old Times* are directed at keeping other characters silent. Since Kate in general speaks less than the other two, Anna and Deeley's speeches in this category are mainly used to silence each other in order to lay claim to Kate. Their different ways of speaking, exemplified by their use of speech rhythm, receive different responses from Kate. Along with the general impression of the play, Anna's speech rhythms more successfully relate to Kate and gain her interest. Thus Anna's employment of extended soliloquy is more likely than Deeley's to control Kate.

### 3.6 Anticlimax and Oxymoron

Oxymoron by definition combines incongruous and contradictory terms for a special effect (Cuddon 669), or "so as to give point" to a statement (*OED*). The point of the use of

oxymoron is the speaker's intention to confound and surprise the other characters. The strategy to confound is often expressed through speech rhythms that suggest anticlimax in tone and rhythm. My use of the term oxymoron is therefore here broader than the conventional meaning, and in addition linked to rhythmic anticlimax. Anticlimaxes within longer stretches of dialogue may in fact function as a kind of syntactic oxymoron. In *Old Times*, the one of Anna and Deeley who controls the conversation also has potential for dominating Kate, or at least for convincing the other of their claim to Kate. Kate is the general object of most of the conversation, although the topic ranges from cooking to film-making on the surface level. Anna and Deeley use the general topics as background for creating anticlimaxes and oxymorons in order to confound the others. The vexation may result in the listener being unable to continue the topic, and with the coherence lost the listener cannot as easily define Kate for his or her own purpose. In the process of combat Anna and Deeley also try to define the opponent in their own words. These strategies of comic bafflement take form through speech rhythm.

Deeley is the character that most clearly shows the urge to describe another person in detail without in fact knowing the person. Before Anna's arrival Deeley wonders whether Anna is a vegetarian (*P3*: 250) and later he includes her absent husband as well: "We had a vegetarian dish prepared for him" (*loc.cit.* 278). Anna consequently corrects him:

- ANNA:           He's not a vegetarian. In fact he's something of a gourmet. We live in a rather fine villa and have done so for many years. It's very high up, on the cliffs.  
DEELEY:        You eat well up there, eh?  
ANNA:           I would say so, yes. (*P3*: 278)

The casual style of Deeley's last line shows his attempt to make small talk. Normally, an utterance like this would contain the word 'live' rather than "eat". The focus on details is in accordance with the context of the conversation, and "eat" is a synecdoche of "live". The construction nevertheless becomes ludicrous because of its deviance from normal speech

conventions. Some oxymoronic connections like this seem to result from the characters' synonymic associations. Even if they are not extreme associations, they still connect words in ways that are striking and may result in laughter. In this case, Deeley's desire to create an absurd non sequitur mirrors his urge to control the dubious role of Anna in Kate's life. However, the intention to vex is not realised since Anna restrains herself and answers in a relevant and casual manner.

Deeley's search for control is not obvious here, but his tendency to describe an unknown character, be corrected and then to modify his description is characteristic. However, the need for control later becomes clearer, and thus has a clearer comic result. Deeley has visited a specific town in Sicily and wonders if Anna lives there, and when she affirms "Just outside", Deeley adds self-confidently "Just outside, yes. Very high up. Yes, I've probably caught a glimpse of your villa" (*P3*: 278). This happens in spite of the fact that Anna has not previously mentioned anything concerning the altitude of the place, or that she in fact lives in a villa. The almost frenetic way Deeley pries into Anna's life can function comically. His comic rhythm here reveals his method for satisfying his curiosity. He goes on to use speech rhythm to gain authority, but the end of his speech reveals his ambivalent feelings for Anna:

My work took me to Sicily. My work concerns itself with life all over, you see, in every part of the globe. With people all over the globe. I use the word globe because the word world possesses emotional political sociological and psychological pretensions and resonances which I prefer as a matter of choice to do without, or shall I say to steer clear of, or if you like to reject. How's the yacht? (*P3*: 278-9)

With an elaborate and formal style Deeley draws attention to himself as an intellectual. The metalanguage and lecturing manner render the speech quite ludicrous. Combined with the fixed phrases are synonyms and parallelisms that create an overwhelming effect of exaggerated information. Part of the comic effect of Deeley's language comes from his abrupt shifts between a vulgar and a formal style. The structuring of long and short sentences finally

culminates in “How’s the yacht?”, which is totally irrelevant if compared to the subject of the rest of the speech, and also because there has been no mention of a yacht hitherto in the text. The rhythm of the last sentence compared to the rest of the speech conveys Deeley as extremely curious. The last sentence is the shortest one in the speech, it is its only question, and it consists of only monosyllabic words. It therefore breaks with the speech convention of the context. Through its very quality as absurd anticlimax it points to the theme of control in the play.

Anna also makes striking connections of words sometimes, but her way of expressing herself is not through extreme associations or swearwords, as is the case with Deeley. She neither shifts her style like him. What identifies Anna’s speech is her archaic style, for instance in: “How wise you were to choose this part of the world, and how sensible and courageous of you both to stay permanently in such a silence” (*P3: 257*). This is perhaps not necessarily comic. Still, Anna’s language creates a solemn atmosphere into which she tries to include Kate, and if the solemnity is exaggerated it can evoke laughter. Deeley picks up Anna’s archaic words and thus her unconventional language receives focus from the audience. Shortly after the yacht speech there is an example of this:

DEELEY: Don’t you find England damp, returning?  
ANNA: Rather beguilingly so.  
DEELEY: Rather beguilingly so? (*To himself.*) What the hell does she mean by that? (*P3: 279*)

Deeley expresses his confusion explicitly, whereas the two women in turn do not so readily admit if his strategies at vexing them are successful. Deeley’s line spoken “to himself” may also add a comic feeling to the confusion, partly because he uses swearing. Anna’s archaic speech functions to emphasise her representation of the past. Her method for controlling Kate consists mostly of recalling shared memories from their life in London. On a detailed level even her choice of words may set back the time, as seen when Deeley comments on another archaism: “The word lest. Haven’t heard it for a long time” (*loc.cit. 257*). In a profound way

Anna confuses Deeley at the same time as she manages to draw attention to her version of the past. Deeley reveals much more of his feelings and thinking through his words, whereas Anna is more successful in relating to Kate.

The previous examples discuss anticlimax and oxymoron in a broad meaning on the level of paragraph or dialogic exchange. The text however contains other instances that apply to the conventional definition of oxymoron. Earlier in the play, Anna presents a condescending attitude towards Kate in associating her with cooking:

ANNA:        You have a wonderful casserole.  
DEELEY:      What?  
ANNA:        I mean wife. So sorry. A wonderful wife.  
DEELEY:      Ah.    (*P3: 258*)

What makes Deeley react is the mix of linguistic registers. “Wonderful” and “casserole” are not compatible within the context, and the result is bathos. Anna confuses the word ‘casserole’ with the word ‘wife’, and this stresses a stereotyped view of gender roles in marriage. By emphasising the traditional status of the marriage of Deeley and Kate, Anna hints that their relationship is not the one of equals. The special connection between the two women on the other hand represents a contrast to the relationship between man and wife. The woman relationship takes explicit form in the three flashbacks in the play (*P3: 281-4, 297-8 and 300-1*). Here Anna and Kate talk to each other as if living in London twenty years ago. Deeley significantly cannot function on this level of past time; if he speaks here he clearly relates to the present time. The result is that the women ignore him or that he changes the setting back to the present, thus breaking their special interaction.

Like Anna’s example above, Deeley connects gastronomic and sexual registers, and the effect may be similar to Anna's apparent condescension towards Kate: “Well, any time your husband finds himself in this direction my little wife will be only too glad to put the old pot on the old gas stove and dish him up something luscious if not voluptuous” (*P3: 279*). Here Deeley’s penchant for the vulgar creates a rhythmic virtuosity. Through the delivery of a

long sentence a comic effect may easily be derived from the absurd adjectives at the end. The consonance at the end intensifies the effect of the oxymoron, and in addition, since the words are almost synonyms, one of them becomes superfluous and hence has a comic potential. An absurd connection with a synonym is even more ludicrous than simply one absurd word. The dramatic result is that Deeley presents himself as a sexually aggressive male. The exaggeration becomes comic, but its jovial and witty manner also makes it difficult for the women to protest against it. Deeley's control over his wife in this respect does not undermine Anna's claim to dominance over Kate. Deeley's status as a dominating husband may rather weaken his control. His means of dominance is direct and obvious, and by way of definition and explanation, not by conversational exchange.

Deeley even tries to control Anna through description. He brags about his career in order to interrupt Anna from describing her home on Sicily (*P3*: 280). Kate shows interest in Anna's home, but Deeley tries to draw her attention towards himself and his work of making films on the island. This reveals Deeley's urge to present himself as a globetrotting director, and the absurd insistence on this becomes laughable, especially since Kate pays him no attention and continues to ask about Anna's home (*ibid*). Deeley does not give up, however. His pretentious attitude is combined with the vulgar when he goes on to talk about his work in the film industry. The last noun phrase in the following sentence creates a break in the rhythm and semantics of the context: "As a matter of fact I am at the top of my profession, as a matter of fact, and I have indeed been associated with substantial numbers of articulate and sensitive people, mainly prostitutes of all kinds" (*ibid*). The word "prostitutes" creates a bathetic contrast to the rest of the sequence of professional film-making. The syntax builds up to the rhythmic release of the contrastive word by repeating the phrase "as a matter of fact" as well as carefully patterning long and short clauses. In particular the penultimate clause refers to high class. However, the semantic unity of the sentence is finally breached by the last, short

phrase. Kate's following line includes a careful stage reference: "(*To ANNA.*) And do you like the Sicilian people?" (*loc.cit.* 281), and increases the comic feeling of the sequence. The comic speech rhythm thus presents Deeley's unsuccessful attempt at drawing attention, as well as Kate's self-confidence.

Deeley's failed effort to control the situation represents a double anticlimax and may function comically in the same way as Freud explains that an increased expenditure of effort is comic (168). Although he here writes in physical terms about innervation, his theory might not only be applied to dramatic action, but also to the spoken action of dramatic dialogue. Deeley once more tries to undermine the conversation of Anna and Kate since he has "been there", and that there is "nothing more in Sicily to investigate" (*P3*: 281). Kate, on her part, persists in paying her husband no attention and repeats to Anna: "Do you like the Sicilian people?" (*ibid*). To this Anna does not reply, but simply "*stares at her*" (*ibid*). The women's refusal to relate to Deeley does not necessarily evoke laughter, it rather presents a mute contrast to Deeley's comic sounds. Deeley's staccato syntax, oxymoron and quick semantic deviations from the subject present his desperation in a mocking way. It is only Deeley who reveals that he is confused by oxymoronic language, while the two women simply ignore his or the other woman's strange associations. It is therefore appropriate that after Kate's repetition, Anna stares at her during a long silence. Then she initiates one of the frequent reminiscing scenes in the play, where the two female characters enact an episode of their life in London twenty years ago. Deeley is again excluded from participating in the memory scene. Although there also exists a conflict between the women, they are more self-contained than the man and they interact with each other in a way that he cannot.

The general oxymoronic effect of giving point to utterances (*OED*), also has comic effect that presents the theme of the play. Macaulay's review of the Wyndhams Theatre

production in 1995 notably stresses the implications of the pointed language for both comic effect and the impression of tension:

There is, for example, a constant sense of artifice in the air – in facial expressions, body movements, as well as line readings – but what this reveals, gradually, is the surreal tension of the play’s dreamworld. I have never known Act One to be so funny; numerous single words and lines are pointed to become newly barbed or farcical. (Macaulay, “‘Old Times’ Given New Meaning” *e.p.*)

The category of anticlimax conveys the combative attitude of Anna and Deeley, and the combat has the form of a game of wit and humour expressed through speech rhythm. This game, however, proves difficult to handle, since in order to dominate Kate the two others must connect with her on a level of sympathetic understanding. Deeley has the most problems with this since he communicates through the more extreme associations. His bathetic constructions are more strikingly comic, but also easier to see through. Anna can thus restrain herself not to reveal confusion. Her use of anticlimaxes and oxymoron through archaic language does not as much represent a conflict with the sympathetic level. Her bathetic language also more successfully baffles Deeley and hence blocks him from the contest of domination.

### 3.7 Chapter Conclusion

The humour in *Old Times* has the general function of illustrating the power games between the characters. In particular Deeley shows signs of uncertainty towards the others. In his pursuit to dominate the conversation, defeat Anna, control Kate and prevent both of them from speaking, he uses strategies that are more aggressive and seem more obviously connected to his aims. His comic speech rhythms reveal his fervour and insistence, and contrast him from the more sympathetic verbal interaction of the two women.

Nevertheless, the women’s strategies are also presented through speech rhythm, as its comic potential focuses the attention of the audience. When Deeley tries to participate in the

re-enactments of the past, he breaks the sense of the past and draws the women back into the present. The women engage more readily in conversation with each other, while Deeley is occupied with understanding them, defining them through words and thereby controlling them. When Deeley speaks to either of the women, their responses to him do not seem as important to him as his own words. It is for instance he who utters the most strikingly absurd and comic lines, evidently in order to draw attention to himself.

Although the women, and especially Anna, also draw attention to their words by the use of rhythm, the women's lines are more balanced than Deeley's, and they are not so clever in terms of raising laughter. It is certainly true that Anna in her search for control utters lines that sound funny and may result in laughter from the audience, but the nature of the comic techniques are not as strikingly clear. This ambiguity is Anna's strength. Anna's language creates a more solemn feeling that may vex Deeley and at the same time sympathise with Kate. Deeley's comic speech marks him as unable to connect to Kate's past in the way Anna can. In the end, though, Kate clearly denies the claims of both Anna and Deeley. Their need for connection and control both of the past and the present is dissatisfied and hence sad. Audience sympathy is however mingled with mirth because they have witnessed the innervation with which Anna and Deeley have pursued their aims.

The study of comic speech rhythm is thus an interesting approach for revealing the differences and similarities between the characters' interests. Their strategies for success as well as the way they try to defeat the others have comic relevance that informs the reading of the themes of the play. The categories of speech rhythm point to different aspects of the strategies. The stylisation of linguistic structures and speech rhythms does not only have comic effects, it also expresses how the characters relate to the concepts of control, domination and relationships, as well as to the role of memory in these concepts. The comic

potential of the stylisation is intertwined with these other concepts, as it illustrates and embodies them.

## Chapter Four: Analysis of *Ashes to Ashes*

### 4.1 Strategies of Comic Speech

The role and nature of memory is an important theme in *Ashes to Ashes* (P4: 389-433), as in *Old Times*. Throughout *Ashes to Ashes* Rebecca is suggesting to her husband, Devlin, to have witnessed some atrocity or ethnic cleansing. The text frustrates the interpretation that Rebecca's stories refer to the Jewish holocaust, since the setting and the age of the characters deny that they could have experienced World War II (*loc.cit.* 391). Rebecca also admits that nothing "has ever happened" to either her or her friends (*loc.cit.* 413). However, her way of presenting the atrocities as everyday events confronts Devlin and the audience with problems of credibility. Devlin cannot accept Rebecca's blurred, or even non-existing, border between individual and collective imagination, and between past and present. Instead, he seeks a commonly agreed truth in Rebecca's stories, but when it is hard to find there, he tries to force her to agree upon one. The audience, on their part, may be forced by the unsettling stories to interpret Rebecca's speech as having not merely political implications. For instance, Mark Batty argues that the play is "centred on the fluctuations of control, support and individual emotional needs in its male/female relationship – standard Pinter concerns" (57). The larger, political issues Rebecca addresses thus form a background for presenting the couple's domestic problems of self-expression and understanding. What one character needs or wants to express is not necessarily accepted or understood by the other. In this situation comic speech rhythms become means for expression and coping with the problems, as well as for evasion and a relief from conflict.

Rebecca's insistence on relating the horrible images that haunt her memory or imagination is for the most part presented through her whimsical and colloquial language. She sometimes seems almost delighted to relate bits of her terrifying "past", as is revealed through

her use of phatic speech: “Oh, yes, there’s something I’ve forgotten to tell you. It was funny” (P4: 416). The colloquial speech rhythms become a comic contrast to the background of the atrocities. Rebecca’s style also functions as a comic comment on her relationship with Devlin. She seems to use comic rhythms consciously to draw Devlin’s interest. In addition to colloquial speech Rebecca also uses language where repetition and syntax form a ritualistic atmosphere. Ritualistic language generally embodies the conflict between seriousness and ironical detachment. In *Ashes to Ashes* it becomes a comic contrast to the colloquial style, at the same time as one may expect a ritual mood to also express sadness.

Through Rebecca’s mix of ritualistic and comically surprising language, and through her acts of storytelling, it becomes clear that she wants Devlin to understand and sympathise with her. Her comic style does not have the intended effect, however. Whether or not it is her intention to be unclear and dubious, the result is to vex both the audience and Devlin. For the audience the mysterious Rebecca may become a source for laughter, but as for Devlin, he reacts with strategies for controlling and defining her. His strategies are also expressed through his comic speech rhythms.

There is thus a comic clash between the hinted atrocities and the speech rhythms of Rebecca’s narrative and of Devlin’s confused interjections to this narrative. Like *Old Times*, *Ashes to Ashes* portrays characters uncertain of the nature of their relationships. Apart from expression, language represents a means for evasion and hiding needs, and also for unsettling the other characters. The political background may be elaborated on through the play, but its mysterious nature is not settled. Thus the characters’ uncertainty and isolation towards each other also remain. While the strategies for handling uncertainty in *Ashes to Ashes* often become comic for the audience, the characters also use humour consciously in these strategies.

## 4.2 Rhyme and Ritual Repetition

The rhymes and ritual repetitions are for the most part uttered by Rebecca, and the sequences that fit this category reveal Rebecca's urge to communicate with Devlin by way of repetition. In this she is successful to the extent that Devlin takes part in the rhythms. Devlin does contribute to the ritualistic rhythm, particularly as seen in the first quotation below. However, the category of rhymes and repetition is a complex source for humour, since ritual created on the stage has the possibility of mixing laughter with pity and sadness. The contingent laughter of this category in *Ashes to Ashes* is consequently stifled from time to time. Rebecca uses the complex nature of ritual to express both serious and absurd ideas about herself and her relation to Devlin. Where Devlin takes part in the ritual rhythm, one would expect the rhythm to evoke laughter more clearly than in instances where the ritual rhythm is based solely on Rebecca's utterances. The reason is that when two characters create a ritual there is also room for comic contradiction and quarrelling, whereas one individual's rhythm is more dignified and calm, and thus leaves more room for thoughtfulness. This problem shows that Rebecca's aim of engaging Devlin in an understanding conversation through comic rhythms may easily fail.

In the opening scene of *Ashes to Ashes*, the menacing atmosphere does not only come from the hints to atrocities, but also from Rebecca's recollections of a former lover. Rebecca tells Devlin about the sado-masochistic experiences she had with him:

REBECCA: He put a little ... pressure ... on my throat, yes. So that my head started to go back, gently but truly.

DEVLIN: And your body? Where did your body go?

REBECCA: My body went back, slowly but truly.

DEVLIN: So your legs were opening?

REBECCA: Yes.

*Pause.*

DEVLIN: Your legs were opening?

REBECCA: Yes.

*Silence.* (P4: 397)

The most important sources for contingent laughter in this extract are the subject of sado-masochism and Devlin's questions. Into Rebecca's detailed story it is comically strange that Devlin inserts just as detailed questions about how the lover moved Rebecca's body about. It is true that since this takes place in the beginning, the audience does not know the nature of the relationship of the two characters. That Devlin may be a concerned husband is nevertheless possible, since the setting is a middle-aged couple in a living-room. In addition, all Devlin's lines in the three first pages are questions. Devlin's recurrent questioning tells the audience that he is, in fact, concerned. The fact that Devlin does not reveal explicitly to Rebecca that her story unsettles him gives the exchange an absurd atmosphere. Like Rebecca, Devlin immerses himself in the details of the story, and even influences Rebecca to go into further details.

Within this atmosphere, the rhythmic features of the dialogue do not necessarily bring about laughter. The many repeated sentence structures create a solemn and ritualistic mood, for instance as in "my head started to go back"/ "My body went back". This is also the case with the phrases "gently but truly" and "slowly but truly". All four words in these two phrases rhyme each other. The fact that they are disyllabic may slow down the speed of utterance, and thus the solemn feeling is not broken by these phrases. The repetition of the word "truly" is focused, since it is the last one in each phrase. Rebecca absurdly opposes its meaning to "gently" and "slowly". The audience may respond to this technique with laughter. The calm setting is indeed created partly by the distribution of speech rhythm. Devlin's verbosity and the comic aspects of the speech rhythms in turn unsettle the solemn feeling.

The complex linguistic comedy also unsettles each character's self-control towards the other. Rebecca clearly wants Devlin to know her memories, as she spends much of the play speaking about them. Her solemn language may be aimed at gaining dignity and drawing Devlin's interest. However, her effort now and then turns her speech into comic outburst of

less dignified language, or even mock-dignified such, like in P3: 397. A reason for the comic outbursts may be that Rebecca feels that her solemn mood is distancing Devlin from her.

Although she in one way needs to distance herself from him in order to gain dignity, she also wants his understanding and closeness. Thus she breaks the mood with comic rhythms.

Devlin, on his part, tries not to sound shocked by Rebecca's story, but his very speech acts reveal that concerned is precisely what he is. The urge to cover his feelings and sound casual in turn leads Devlin not to respond to Rebecca's invitation, but to respond to her humour as a challenge for him to come up with his own bulk of witty speech and clever language. If Rebecca's humour is an invitation for a deeper sense of communication, Devlin does not respond to this.

Rebecca's strategy of getting Devlin to respond to her needs seems to be central also in the following quotation. The sense of ritual is not as strong as in the previous sequence, but the repetitions and rhymes point to a similar interpretation. Towards the end of the play, Rebecca closes one of the many accounts of her memories: "I watched him walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers" (P4: 419). After a silence, Devlin is unwilling to respond to the unsettling story and changes the subject to the family of Kim, Rebecca's sister. This subject is discussed for the following four pages. Towards the end of this discussion, Devlin inquires about Kim's husband, who earlier left her but now wants to return:

REBECCA: She'll never have him back. Never. She says she'll never share a bed with him again. Never. Ever.

DEVLIN: Why not?

REBECCA: Never ever.

DEVLIN: But why not?

REBECCA: Of course I saw Kim and the kids. [...] (P4: 422)

Rebecca's rhyming "never" with "ever" does not only create two comic exaggerations. The first rhyming is quite relevant to the meaning although the point is made clear without the rhyme. However, when Rebecca answers Devlin's question "Why not?" with a repetition of

the rhyme, the exaggeration becomes absurd. This may be exactly what Rebecca is aiming at. As Devlin is not willing to respond to her memory stories and would rather discuss her sister, Rebecca tries to draw his interest towards her, by creating absurd rhymes. In a way she tries to impress Devlin with her speech, so that he will focus on that instead of on other matters. This is however unsuccessful, as Devlin continues to request a logical answer, and Rebecca once more denies this request. Instead, she delivers a rather frustrated remark about how Devlin can even wonder whether she has visited her own sister (*ibid*).

The notion of comic speech as a way of deeper communication for Rebecca is developed further. A little later, Devlin asks Rebecca about the genre of a film she saw after visiting Kim, and Rebecca answers that it was a comedy:

DEVLIN: Uh-huh? Was it funny? Did you laugh?  
REBECCA: Other people laughed. Other members of the audience. It was funny.  
DEVLIN: But you didn't laugh?  
REBECCA: Other people did. It was a comedy. There was a girl ... you know ... and a man. They were having lunch in a smart New York restaurant. He made her smile.  
DEVLIN: How?  
REBECCA: Well ... he told her jokes.  
DEVLIN: Oh, I see. (P4: 423)

This passage is a comment on Pinter's plays in production and on the critical debate around the problem of comedy and the comic in his plays. The word "comedy" in the beginning and end, as well as the other repetitions, makes this exchange a pleasing and neatly rounded audible movement. Rebecca's mention of jokes hints at her view of the positive role of comedy. Rebecca does not seem to find the contingent result of the comic, laughter, as important as the act of telling jokes itself. The image of a man making a woman smile is what she focuses on, and this level of communication and understanding seems to be what she wants in her own relationship. Hence her releases of comic speech rhythms try to connect with her mate. Rebecca seems to acknowledge the problems of such a connection, however. Her experiences in the theatre about another watcher who "never laughed once, he just sat like

a corpse” (P4: 424) may imply that she sees lack of humour in Devlin, another male, as one of the sources for their problems.

After a silence Devlin twice tries to “start again” (*ibid*) and to relocate Rebecca’s attention to the present time and place, as opposed to “Dorset” (*ibid*), where one of Rebecca’s remembered visions takes place. Devlin thus is unwilling to, or incapable of, understanding Rebecca’s metaphoric description of their relationship and her suggestion that he is difficult to connect with. Rebecca on her part does not believe that it is possible to “start *again*” (*loc.cit.* 425); she instead suggests that they can “end again” (*ibid*):

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.  
*Silence.* (P4: 425)

Within the context of Rebecca’s attempt at connecting to Devlin, the concept of ending adds a gloomy perspective to the relationship. The repetition of “end” does not seem to evoke laughter, but the exaggerated use of “again” does. As Rebecca firstly explains that they have indeed ended she repeats “again” three times. The effect of this is basically to emphasise the serious allegation. However, when she argues that it is possible to end once more: “And we can end again”, she takes care to repeat the word in a separate phrase. This time the ungrammatical, short phrase functions to exaggerate, and Rebecca even moves the exaggeration further. The penultimate phrase in her first line in the sequence is developed by an extra repetition. Since Rebecca in the first place repeated “again” three times, she seems to find three repetitions appropriate in the last instance as well. The fact that the last repetition is made in a separately punctuated utterance renders Rebecca’s need for repetition comic. Devlin reacts to Rebecca’s use of the word “end”, but her extreme use of “again” argues that

this is the word she would rather have him focus on. Rebecca's humour is lost on Devlin once more, and instead he criticises her for her choice of words.

Although laughter may often contain elements of sadness and pity, it may also diminish if these qualities are too strong in a given scene. A slow speed of utterance is a key device by which the solemn or serious mood of ritual language can be secured. Part of the ritualistic language in this play evades comic effect. This may be said about any Pinter play, as even Pinter himself makes clear: "I can't think of any play of mine in which there are really any laughs at all in the last ten minutes" ("Writing, Politics and *Ashes to Ashes*." 76). However, *Ashes to Ashes* includes a special dramatic device towards its end that rids the production of comic feeling. This technique deserves attention because it challenges the concept of contingent comic effect in rituals.

As seen above Rebecca tries to create both sympathy and humour by ritual language, or rather she tries to evoke sympathy through humour. By the end of the play this is no longer possible, and an anti-naturalistic device enforces the lack of comic effect. The play ends with Rebecca's five page long last account of the atrocities (*P4*: 429-33), and for the first time one of Rebecca's memories is related in the first person. An echo that repeats the last phrase of each sentence is added, while Rebecca relates how the "I" had a baby wrapped in a shawl to hide it from her persecutors. As the baby cries out, "the man" calls her back:

REBECCA: He stretched out his hand for the bundle  
ECHO: for the bundle  
REBECCA: And I gave him the bundle  
ECHO: the bundle  
REBECCA: And that's the last time I held the bundle  
ECHO: the bundle  
*Silence.* (P4: 430-31)

The speech rhythm here evades a comic effect, as the echo slows down the speed of the sequence. The ritual feeling created by the performance is secured to a sad mood. Rebecca's lines are not metrically identical, and this is also the case with the echo, and Devlin does not

speak. There is hence no room for rapid duologue, since such a comic technique depends on the speed of delivery. That Devlin is silent also signifies that he does not try to interact with or understand Rebecca anymore, and that her attempt of drawing his sympathy through humour has failed. The stalemate situation is also expressed in the previous scene (*P4*: 428), where Devlin enacts the sado-masochistic ritual Rebecca described at the beginning of the play, which took place with her lover. Rebecca does not react to Devlin's commands, possibly since the sado-masochistic story is not a relationship model for her, but rather another striking image used to draw Devlin's attention. Devlin misunderstands and concentrates on brutal masculinity instead of listening.

Although Rebecca wants sympathy, sympathy may be easiest gained in a mood of seriousness, sadness or calm repetition. This is exactly the kind of mode that is difficult for the couple to engage in. Rebecca frustrates the use of this mode by her comic use of ritual, and Devlin seems incapable to connect with a serious attitude that leaves room for naked sadness by leaving clever wit and humour out. The humour is surely often a device for understanding for them, but from time to time Rebecca seems to need a mode without an ironical distance, and this need is not satisfied.

### 4.3 Rhythmic Duologue

Normally in the play it is Rebecca who takes the most playful attitude towards Devlin's and her own language, whereas Devlin is more terse and critical of Rebecca's speech. In the sequences of rhythmic duologue, on the other hand, the two characters have a more similar role, since they are given approximately the same space for speaking in these scenes.

Although the conflict between them is more dramatically overt in this category than elsewhere, the characters here both play with language in a similar manner. The category of rhythmic duologue thus stresses the combative nature of their relationship, but also the fact

that the two characters want to communicate and possibly understand. The humour and wit they express serve to criticise, but also to suggest a detachment and comic relief from their struggle together.

Pinter's self-referentiality not only comments on the playwright's use of comic technique, but also on his use of language as such. In the beginning of *Ashes to Ashes*, Devlin asks Rebecca specific questions about the former lover and then cuts himself off and asks if she feels she is being hypnotised (*P4*: 397). The reason for Devlin's questions may be that all his lines so far in the play have contained some kind of repetition or slight rephrasing of a previous line uttered by either of the two. Although Rebecca has answered Devlin's prying questions relatively complacently up to this point, the answer to his apparent self-critique about hypnotism starts a dialogue of short, abrupt exchanges between them.

- REBECCA: When?  
DEVLIN: Now.  
REBECCA: No.  
DEVLIN: Really?  
5) REBECCA: No.  
DEVLIN: Why not?  
REBECCA: Who by?  
DEVLIN: By me.  
REBECCA: You?  
10) DEVLIN: What do you think?  
REBECCA: I think you're a fuckpig.  
DEVLIN: Me a fuckpig? Me! You must be joking.  
*REBECCA smiles.*  
REBECCA: Me joking? You must be joking. (*P4*: 397-9)

In the quoted passage, Rebecca plays with Devlin's language instead of answering him in a relevant way. The dialogue has several poignant rhythmical qualities. The first three lines are monosyllabic and establish a certain beat that is expanded through lines four to six. Paired with this developing beat is the connection between similar sounds or similar ideas throughout the sequence. Examples can be "when – now - no" and "no – why not - who". Almost every line responds to a sound in one of the two previous utterances. Since the

situation in which the sounds are uttered is a quarrel, the fast exchange becomes a pleasing and comic contrast to the serious atmosphere.

From line ten the pattern of mono- or disyllabic lines is abandoned, but the sound echoes continue throughout the cited sequence and all words are still monosyllabic. Up to this point the rhythmical qualities may probably have some comic effect, since the exchange of short lines builds up tension. The dominance of monosyllabic words creates a playful and light comic mood. In fact, the only disyllabic word with normal stress is “really” in line 4. The tension is in turn released in the strong derisive term “fuckpig”. The climactic effect of this word is enhanced by both syllables receiving stress. A spondee is often used in this way to slow down the speed of a line (Cuddon 903). Although the exclamation seems resentful, Devlin’s reaction to it as well as Rebecca’s following smile and words show that the deliverance of the word should be more playful than hateful. The obscenity is even incorporated into the repetitions of the entire context. The playfully critical “fuckpig” and Devlin’s “joking” in “Me a fuckpig? Me! You must be joking” are finally connected synthetically in Rebecca’s reply “Me joking?” Although the three last lines of the exchange cited probably would have a comic function without its incorporation in the overall echoing of sounds, the construction of the syllabic rhythm from the start increases the comic result of the release.

As discussed in the introduction chapter, the speed of the delivery of comic lines is important. If the comic potential of the text is to be expressed, the actors often need to keep a high tempo, both with regard to their own lines and with regard to the flow of the dialogue. Hall stresses the importance of tempo in the exchange of feed and punch-line in order to raise laughter (122). Langer (80) and Bergson (90) hold that repetition and ritual may change the evoked feeling from solemnity to humour when the speed moves from slow to fast. The extract from *Ashes to Ashes* also depends on the speed of delivery. The sequence of rhythmic

duologue here helps the actors to keep a rapid tempo through a structure of adjacency pairs. That is, the exchange is structured in questions and answers, and the characters share both questions and replies between them. A high tempo builds up the tension of the sequence towards its conclusion, and the delivery of the each actor must therefore be connected to the other's speed.

This feature creates the comic feeling of an absurd game of words. The challenges and defences are almost thrown back and forth between the characters, and the pleasing assonances and nonsense discussion form a comic contrast that may evoke laughter at the expense of the troubled relationship portrayed on stage. The trouble partly stems from the characters' different view of comic language. Rebecca's whimsical style is what brings Devlin to confront her use of language in rapid duologues. At the same time the comic conflict ironically becomes a dramatic image of understanding, however limited, since the characters are presented as equally strong. Rebecca's smile when Devlin throws "fuckpig" back at her illustrates this double significance of the rhythmic duologue.

As in *Old Times* the characters of *Ashes to Ashes* join in singing, but in the latter play there is only one short extract of a song, starting with the phrase of the play's title. After arguing about the meaning of the word 'end', Devlin and Rebecca alternate in singing the four lines:

REBECCA: No. You can end once and then you can end again.

*Silence.*

(*singing softly*) 'Ashes to ashes' -

DEVLIN: 'And dust to dust' -

REBECCA: 'If the women don't get you' -

DEVLIN: 'The liquor must.'

*Pause.*

I always knew you loved me.

REBECCA: Why?

DEVLIN: Because we like the same tunes.

*Silence.* (P4: 425-26)

The singing may signal that the communication between the two has improved, as they contribute in presenting a shared message. Music represents a contrast to the speech of the play where, as has been shown, the characters question and resist each other's language and topics. The singing scene may therefore defamiliarise the lyrics of the song, although it is naturalistically credible and relevant as a reminiscing device. The play has no other instance of music, but such singing can be a normal activity in a couple's home. It still stands out as a break with the convention of natural speech. Hence, the rhythm of the song contrasted with the rhythm of speech is significant for the theme. Whereas imitation of normal speech in this play expresses a tense dramatic situation of conflict, a song with traditional rhyming cannot as easily signal conflict. A song may rather represent a momentarily relief of verbal tension between the characters. Instead of qualifications of the other's words the characters here engage in a tight, rhythmical interaction. Such a dramatic relief is pleasing to the audience and hence may function comically. In his discussion of the generation of comic pleasure Freud after all states that it can be encouraged by "any other pleasurable accompanying circumstance as though by some sort of contagious effect" (173).

Devlin's final remark about the reason for Rebecca's love emphasises the impression of understanding. However, as an expression of such, the song has limits. Rebecca does not reply to Devlin's remark as there is a silence after it, and Devlin eventually has to go on talking. The understanding is also undermined by the alternate rhyme scheme. The lines that rhyme are both Devlin's and this may insulate his lines from Rebecca's, thus weakening the level of communication. As the song is exchanged rapidly, and since it rhymes and contains well-known phrases, it adds to Rebecca's whimsical style of communication and narration. The light and pleasing quality of singing may also represent a comic contrast to the serious semantic content of the lyrics.

As a song, the quatrain stands out formally, and it also contains references to the subjects of the play. The song is an authentic burlesque on the Anglican burial sentence. The references to death as well as the sense of threat evident in the third line permeate the entire text. As shown above the problems of communication and understanding are ambiguously treated in the song's dramatic and rhythmical effects. The sinister atmosphere of a battle between the sexes is emphasised by Rebecca singing the line about women as a threat to men.

The dramatic technique of rhythmic duologue thus makes a pointed illustration of the problems of need for, and frustration of, communication. In these sequences the dominance of the two characters is equal, since the time of utterance is the same. Devlin's general role of interrogator is also evident in the fast duologues, but the dramatic effect is also that the audience sees the similarity of the characters, and of their positions. Their verbal strength mostly takes different expression, but in sequences of rapid exchange no one is stronger than the other. The overtly stylised rapid exchange and singing evoke comic pleasure in the audience and illustrate the relationship not only as a conflict, but also as mutual understanding, however limited.

#### 4.4 Phatic Speech

As was argued in 2.4 and 3.4, Pinter's characters qualify the discourse, both with regard to their own and the other character's language. Devlin is the character who most obviously signals the need for qualification. This is expected in *Ashes to Ashes* since Devlin has to come to terms with Rebecca's unsettling memories or dreams. The qualification of language is thus a feature that permeates the whole play, and is not exclusively located to the phatic category. However, this category clearly reveals the characters' tendency to criticise the other, and especially their tendency to try to control the situation through language. The phatic category thus represents a pointed comic comment on the characters problems of expressing

themselves instead of creating clever word connections and playing with language. However, the element of play is diminished in the phatic category, something that reveals that the linguistic awareness of the characters sometimes dominates the exchange and frustrates real interaction. However serious, the audience may perceive this pathology of speech as comic. Extensive use of phrases like ‘mind you’, ‘I mean’, ‘if you see what I mean’ and ‘I’m saying that’ makes speech resemble colloquial language, and a result in performance may be laughter when the audience is frequently presented with such structures.

As has been noted, Devlin repeatedly changes the subject of the conversation throughout the play. These changes mostly take place after silences in the dialogue. Rebecca also repeatedly utters sentences that serve to change the topic. Several times throughout the play she uses slightly different utterances with a similar phatic content. These utterances clearly illustrate Rebecca’s need for expression, for instance “By the way, there’s something I’ve been dying to tell you” (*P4*: 409). Devlin’s changes try to focus Rebecca’s attention towards the present setting and thus he tries to evade discussing her unsettling, incongruous memories. Rebecca’s recurring phatic changes do exactly the opposite; they provide a means for Rebecca to continue telling Devlin more about herself. The phatic changes both serve to introduce accounts of everyday incidents from Rebecca’s present life, as well as to introduce her memory stories. Because both past and present are referred to by the phatic changes, the mysterious past memories are presented in the same way, and the memories seem therefore as likely to have happened as the present incidents.

This device has comic effects that are based on both the play’s structure and on semantics. The phatic changes work as a device for structuring the text into sections, where each section contains at least one past or present story. As this happens several times during the play, the audience comes to expect a new story for each of these phatic changes. For each time a phatic change is used to introduce a past memory, there is a comic contrast between the

partly terrifying images and the casual sound of the phatic sentence. The phatic changes thus mix humour and menace in this respect.

Whether or not phatic language is evidence for the speaker's uncertainty, it definitely expresses problems or struggles in the act of communicating and expressing oneself. The tragicomic humour is a result of these problems. However, in the end the comedy is removed and only menace and sadness are left. The story told in the duologue between Rebecca and the echo in the end is not introduced by a phatic change (*P4*: 429), and this fact supports the view presented in Part 4.1 that the echo sequence is not using speech rhythms to create laughter. Rebecca is here not searching for an appropriate way of expression. Instead of a searching for or a playing with words, an echo emphasises the semantic content of her words.

The category of phatic speech does not deal with the most strikingly comic types of language. Use of phatic language in Pinter's drama is mainly a device for creating a hyper-realistic sound in the dialogue, and contingent comic effects depend on the acting and production in order to be realised. Where phatic speech is heavily distributed in dialogue, however, the text provides a source for creating laughter at exaggeration, but the comedy is dependant on what the comic language signifies for the dramatic situation and the characters within it. Phatic speech can for instance reveal the character's obsession with the act of speaking. The first of Rebecca's phatic changes does not introduce the story until later on, but is followed by an argument through phatic language:

REBECCA: Did I ever tell you about that place ... about the time he took me to that place?

DEVLIN: What place?

REBECCA: I'm sure I told you.

DEVLIN: No. You never told me.

REBECCA: How funny. I could swear I had. Told you.

DEVLIN: You haven't told me anything. You've never spoken about him before. You haven't told me anything.

*Pause.*

What place?

REBECCA: Oh, it was a kind of a factory, I suppose.

DEVLIN:       What do you mean, a kind of factory? Was it a factory or wasn't it?  
                  And if it was a factory, what kind of factory was it?       (P4: 403-4)

This extract significantly shows some of the problems of communication between Devlin and Rebecca. The repetitive style illustrates Devlin's irritation and Rebecca's unconcerned attitude as a serious conflict. However, the same speech rhythm may also work to create laughter in the audience. Rebecca insists that she has told Devlin, and this persisting but whimsical attitude may be comic, but it also reveals that Rebecca has an unfulfilled need for Devlin to identify with her thoughts and feelings. Through the phatic phrases she attempts to include Devlin in her memories, regardless of what the case really is.

Rebecca's telling Devlin about her lover's occupation later ends the first story section. Here, Rebecca's strategy of speaking casually takes a grotesque form that may work to evoke laughter:

REBECCA:     [...] He did work for a travel agency. He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers.

*Pause.*

DEVLIN:       Did he?

*Silence.*

REBECCA:     By the way, I'm terribly upset.

DEVLIN:       Are you? Why?

REBECCA:     Well, it's about that police siren we heard a couple of minutes ago.  
                  (P4: 406-7)

Here a menacing story in fact ends the first section, and Rebecca starts a new section with another phatic change. The content of Rebecca's account is serious enough, but her casual and detached style creates a grotesque humour. The link between travel agency and murder on a railway station is unsettling, but it is extreme and surprising, and this may cause laughter. Into the serious context Rebecca makes another casual remark and changes the subject. This contrast is still evident when the cause of Rebecca's distress is revealed to be a "police siren".

The characters also use phatic language within longer speeches. Devlin in particular has a tendency to permeate his utterances with phatic phrases and clauses. Like Rebecca,

Devlin uses phatic language in order to sound casual. The style he uses is easier to see through than Rebecca's style, though, at least when the concentration of phatic speech is high:

Listen. This chap you were just talking about ... I mean this chap you and I have been talking about ... in a manner of speaking ... when exactly did you meet him? I mean when did all this happen exactly? I haven't ... how can I put this ... quite got it into focus. Was it before you knew me or after you knew me? That's a question of some importance. I'm sure you'll appreciate that. (P4: 409)

Devlin clearly uses phatic language to cover his insecurity. This is not necessarily funny, for instance if the audience feels pity for or recognition with him, as opposed to mockery.

Nevertheless, as Langer (80) and Bergson (63 and 90) point out, pity or seriousness and laughter may be closely connected. In addition, the over-using of such colloquialisms creates a hyperrealism that is comic and can be linked to other types of repetition in terms of comic effect. The use of phatic expressions is also a sign of a desire for control. In this case the desire is mostly the character's obvious need to control himself and not reveal too much of his thoughts. Such language can also be used in order to control others, but the pauses and numerous rephrasings in this extract reveal that Devlin's intentions of controlling Rebecca are unsuccessful. His phatic speech is however also unsuccessful in covering up his desire for control over himself.

Phatic speech does not so much form jokes or focused comic sequences, in the ways the other categories do. The category of phatic speech may work more in terms of revealing character flaws and obsessions, rather than presenting ludicrous and striking comedy. The comic effects located to this category depend on exaggeration and that the audience recognises the techniques throughout the play. Phatic speech emphasises Devlin and Rebecca's character traits and their willingness to qualify and argue about language in itself. To the degree that these aspects are also presented through the other categories, the category of phatic speech adds to the general comic feeling of *Ashes to Ashes*.

## 4.5 Extended Soliloquy

Extended soliloquies in Pinter show the speaker's need for verbal dominance. By succeeding to speak alone for a relatively long time, the character may hinder the expression of the other characters. The verbal interaction thus breaks down and is replaced by a veil of words. This does not mean that a character is self-expressive through an extended soliloquy. The cause for the long speech may be exactly the opposite. When a character finds it difficult to control the dialogue, a soliloquy is a solution, although other characters are present on stage.

Devlin, for instance, uses his speech for this goal when he once more reacts to Rebecca's comic and absurd connections of words:

DEVLIN: [...] I'm letting you slip. Or perhaps it's me who's slipping. It's dangerous. Do you notice? I'm in a quicksand.

REBECCA: Like God.

DEVLIN: God? God? You think God is sinking into a quicksand? That's what I would call a truly disgusting perception. If it can be dignified by the word perception. Be careful how you talk about God. He's the only God we have. If you let him go he won't come back. He won't even look back over his shoulder. And then what will you do? You know what it'll be like, such a vacuum? It'll be like England playing Brazil at Wembley and not a soul in the stadium. Can you imagine? Playing both halves to a totally empty house. The game of the century. Absolute silence. Not a soul watching. Absolute silence. Apart from the referee's whistle and a fair bit of fucking and blinding. If you turn away from God it means that the great and noble game of soccer will fall into permanent oblivion. No score for extra time after extra time after extra time, no score for time everlasting, for time without end. Absence. Stalemate. Paralysis. A world without a winner.

*Pause.*

I hope you get the picture.

*Pause.*

Now let me tell you this. [...] (P4: 412-13)

Alliterations and repetitions of words, phrases, clauses and sentence structures define a speech rhythm for the passage. The laughter here rises from the artifice of poetic clutching of images and words that form an exaggerated association on the subject. The style is a mixture of long and short clauses, as well as single words and phrases punctuated like grammatical sentences. This forms a colloquial rhythm that increases the comic contrast between the quite serious metaphoric meaning and the literal meaning. For instance, the sentence towards the end, "If

you turn away from God it means that the great and noble game of soccer will fall into permanent oblivion” creates a grotesque comic synthesis between faithfulness to God and soccer stadiums. At the same time this sentence points to the theme of the entire paragraph through a striking poetic image.

Eventually, Devlin indirectly admits the redundant use of language: “I hope you get the picture”. The comic effect is double. The speech is quite clear on its topic of God in quicksand, but the level of useful information is very low. In this way “the picture” is easy to get, but the exact relevance of the understanding is comically questionable. As in other instances, the whole passage as well as this very line signals the acute self-consciousness of Pinter’s dramatic language. The overall effect of the gloomy passage on the audience is nevertheless that Devlin struggles to control Rebecca. Extreme images reveal this desire and render the unstoppable speech as absurd and ludicrous.

The two pauses at the end strengthen the comic potential of the sequence. Since they delay new lines after an already extensive utterance, the pauses reveal that Devlin’s need for speech is not satisfied. He is not sure of the impression his speech has had on Rebecca. As was argued in Chapter Two with reference to Bergson (105-6), the extended soliloquy can be compared to physical comedy and the mechanism of a steel spring. This mechanism can be found in Devlin’s suppressed and released lines of speech and his use of pauses, which together form an analogy of the comic spring effect. The frenetic accumulation of speech may result from the fact that Rebecca’s story and language intimidate Devlin. A specific example of this is seen in the beginning of the quoted sequence, as Devlin reacts to Rebecca’s connection between “quicksand” and “God”. Devlin’s whole speech forms an irritated expression of his reaction to Rebecca’s comic connection, and it develops as flowing and broken associations with the sole aim of making sound. In a way Rebecca thus manages to draw Devlin’s interest through her use of comic language. Devlin’s interest, however, stems

from intimidation and irritation, and his reply, although also comic, does not create understanding but dominance.

When Rebecca tells Devlin about her memories she is self-confident with regard to the validity of her stories. She is also confident about her desire and right to tell Devlin about the memories. As mentioned in Part 4.4, Rebecca is upset because she misses “that police siren” (*P4*: 407). Although Devlin responds “What about it?” (*ibid*), Rebecca simply repeats twice that she is upset before she moves on to reproach Devlin for his lack of interest:

Well, I’m just terribly upset.

*Pause.*

I’m just incredibly upset.

*Pause.*

Don’t you want to know why? Well, I’m going to tell you anyway. If I can’t tell you who can I tell? Well, I’ll tell you anyway. (*P4*: 408)

Rebecca wants Devlin to seek to understand her and perhaps comfort her. Like her husband, she wants to influence the interest of the other character as she invites him to talk about her emotions. However, although Rebecca wants Devlin to ask her questions about herself, it is not necessarily in order for Devlin to gain insight. The connection between police sirens and sadness is poetic, but it still represents an odd and vexing distraction from the important subject. Rebecca also ignores the fact that Devlin shows some interest here, and instead she stresses her distress and goes on to suggest that he does not understand her, but that she will speak “anyway”. Through presenting herself as a victim, Rebecca manages to dominate the speaker role in this sequence. The act of going on speaking seems here more important than verbal interaction.

Her reason for doing this may be that she wants to control Devlin by confusing him with her calm posture as she speaks of a mysterious past. This strategy becomes clearer a little later on:

Oh yes, there’s something I’ve forgotten to tell you. It was funny. I looked out of the garden window, out of the window into the garden, in the middle of summer, in that house in Dorset, do you remember? Oh no, you weren’t there. I don’t think anyone

else was there. No. I was all by myself. I was alone. I was looking out of the window and I saw a whole crowd of people walking through the woods, on their way to the sea, in the direction of the sea. [...] It was such a lovely day. It was so still and the sun was shining. And I saw all these people walk into the sea. The tide covered them slowly. Their bags bobbed about in the waves. (P4: 416)

Rebecca relates one of her memories to Devlin, and her narrative gradually gives him new information. However, the narrative is not developed in a quick and straightforward manner. Now it is Rebecca who uses an evasive style in order to dominate the speaking role. She repeats her information in phrases like “out of the garden window, out of the window into the garden”, and the switching of the words “garden” and “window” may create a room for laughter. The pleasing but redundant game with words is comic.

However, it gradually becomes clear that “ushers” drown the crowd (*ibid*), in phrases like “on their way to the sea, in the direction of the sea”. Here the two phrases end in the same sound or word, and this creates a sense of ritual that is solemn or sad. The narrative is quite explicit, and as the sense of mystery is removed, there is less room for comic confusion. Nevertheless, at the very end of the sequence, the colloquial “bobbed about in the waves” functions as an absurd contrast to the serious revelation. It also illustrates Rebecca’s problematic attitude towards her own stories. It is as if her need to relate them makes her suppress her fears of their content. In order not to present herself as weak, or rather not to have to delve into the horrors of the stories, she chooses a style of evasion and comic repetition.

The rhythmical implications of Devlin and Rebecca’s strategies have a comic potential that influences the interpretation of the performance. As is the case in the general style differences between the two characters, Rebecca’s use of extended soliloquy is more complex than Devlin’s. While Rebecca treats the memories as if they were everyday events, her speech also contains phrases that create a solemn sadness. Rebecca’s aim is to influence Devlin’s interest without revealing her deepest feelings. Devlin is confused by her style and tries to

respond in an equally casual manner, but at the same time his speech functions to criticise Rebecca's complex humour. This conflict becomes comic in terms of the revealed double agenda of the characters, but sad in point of view of the relationship.

#### 4.6 Anticlimax and Oxymoron

The technique of oxymoron combines incongruous terms in order to give point to a statement (*OED*, and Cuddon 669), and this rhetorical figure often works as anticlimaxes in both dramatic dialogue and speeches. The speech rhythm is an important device for stylising anticlimaxes for comic effect. In my broad meaning of the words, anticlimaxes and oxymoron in Pinter's drama can confound the other characters when used within one character's speech. Within verbal interaction, the aim of anticlimaxes is also to confront or disagree overtly with the previous speaker. Both strategies are prominent in the relationship of the two characters in *Ashes to Ashes*, particularly in illustrating the conflict between self-expression and sympathy with the other character.

As earlier discussed under the phatic category, Rebecca claims that the fading sound of a police siren makes her feel insecure (*P4*: 408). Thus she mixes words from different registers that are not normally compatible. Eventually Devlin comforts her by arguing that she will soon hear it again. Using the metaphor Rebecca has established, Devlin develops it into a rhythmical synthesis:

Sure. They're very busy people, the police. There's so much for them to do. They've got so much to take care of, to keep their eye on. They keep getting signals, mostly in code. There isn't one minute of the day when they're not charging around one corner or another in the world, in their police cars, ringing their sirens. So you can take comfort from that, at least. Can't you? You'll never be lonely again. You'll never be without a police siren. I promise you. (*P4*: 409)

The speech has a similar rhythmical structure as the sequence from *P4*: 412-13 discussed under the category of extended soliloquy. The device that underlines this ridiculous

connection is clearly the repetition of the same sentence structure and words. In addition, because it is ridiculous, it is an inversion of logical patterns of associations.

A break comes with the tag phrase “mostly in code.” This is redundant information, and the level of detailed description is more specific than in the rest of the sequence. The sentences around it have similar sounds and syntax, and the tag breaks this pattern through the rhythm and specific information. The metaphor is developed into a relevant message in the last three sentences, but the detailed description of the police threatens the metaphoric interpretation and focuses on the concrete level. This gives the speech a prosaic comic feeling as a contrast to the poetic meaning. As Devlin towards the end explicitly interprets his own metaphor he utters the message first and the metaphor afterwards. The metaphor is thus presented in a comic way, and the similar structure of the two sentences may strengthen this comic feeling. In addition, “again” and “siren” form a kind of consonance rhyme. Devlin here admittedly tries to comfort Rebecca. Macaulay stresses that the role of Devlin “works best when, for all his narrowness, we feel – if only at times – his tender concern for Rebecca’s psychological welfare and his sensitivity” (“Expansive Roles on an Intimate Scale” *e.p.*). However, the play’s “tragedy lies in his baffled inability to follow her imaginative involvement with scenes of horror” (“Expansive Roles on an Intimate Scale” *e.p.*). Part of what creates this tragedy is ironically enough the comic effect created by sounds. This effect renders Devlin’s sympathy to be not fully sincere, since he makes fun of Rebecca’s language.

In many cases of oxymoronic speech, incomplete syntax is often evident in phrases focusing redundant information. As Devlin refers to Rebecca’s memories, the haunting images unsettle him and he has to release this feeling by a comic break in his own speech rhythm: “A little while ago you made ... shall we say ... you made a somewhat oblique reference to your bloke ... your lover? ... and babies and mothers, et cetera. And platforms.” (*P4*: 413). The “et cetera” contributes to the flow of association, and shapes the text as a list

that should be delivered rapidly. The flow is subsequently broken off by another new entry to the list, “And platforms”, which Devlin utters in order to gain time and dominate the speaker role. The words “your bloke”, “lover”, “babies” and “mothers” refer to relationship and family. The word “oblique” on the other hand gives this context a formal or high style. When the “et cetera. And platforms” is inserted into this style, a bathetic shift is created. Through bathos Devlin can distance himself from the troubling ideas of Rebecca’s former lover in itself, as well as of the troubling idea of a baby murderer.

Rebecca’s anticlimactic rhythms do not form non-grammatical sentences like Devlin’s punctuated phrases. The associations she creates are formed in more correct ways, and use means different from Devlin’s cut and quick style. Rebecca’s oxymorons are not as pointed and striking as Devlin’s in terms of rhythm, but speech rhythm and breaks in this rhythm are still used to present her versions of anticlimax. There are also similarities in the two characters’ way of association.

For example, Rebecca makes concessions to her own utterances. Where Devlin’s concessions are often cut short in terms of sentence structure and punctuation, Rebecca sometimes uses pauses to structure concessive oxymoron: “It was when I was writing a note, a few notes for the laundry. Well ... to put it bluntly ... a laundry list” (*P4*: 410). The redundant information in the last sentence and its formally incomplete structure need to be delivered with a relatively high speed. The pauses or hesitations signalled by the dots divide the phrase into three parts and define its internal rhythm. Alliteration and the fact that the last two words should carry stress create a staccato feeling which underlines the comic contrast to the previous sentence. In this instance the poetic rhythm is rather quite deliberately constructed as artifice when compared to natural and colloquial speech, even though the phrase in question sounds colloquial. The reason for this is that the stylisation of the two sentences is somewhat extreme, as the last line is not very likely to occur after the first one in

most natural contexts. The break of normal speech conventions is thus subtle, but the stylisation of it is one of the factors that create laughter. One would expect the phrase “to put it bluntly” to compare words of high style to a low style, but the subject of laundry can hardly in itself contribute to a high style. The utterance thus becomes something of a reversed bathos. The audience’s expectation that some bathetic vulgarism is to follow “to put it bluntly” is not satisfied, and thus Rebecca here reveals her need to surprise Devlin in order to draw his interest. Her failure to produce a striking image renders this need unfulfilled.

In most instances in the play, Devlin is the one who qualifies and underlines the truth of what he is saying. Rebecca does not use this technique as strongly and thus an audience probably finds her more self-contained or self-confident throughout the play, but like Devlin she makes some speeches with one marked sentence standing out. Her examples of this intensify the line of association on a given theme. In a way it is a metonym or synonym that does not concede or contrast, but rather emphasises one superfluous detail. She describes her former lover’s employees thus: “They would follow him over a cliff and into the sea, if he asked them, he said. And sing in a chorus, as long as he led them. They were in fact very musical, he said.” (*P4*: 405). The repeated clause structures are here not necessarily broken or incomplete as is often the case with Devlin’s similar technique. Although the comedy here relies on the redundant semantics rather than on repetitions, it may be argued that the speed of the last sentence must be uttered faster than the rest of the sentences in the near context in order to give the last sentence comic emphasis.

Contrasting or conflicting dialogue can be oxymoronic or bathetic in a broad sense as far as it is stylised as anticlimax through its speech rhythm. One of the clearest and simplest examples of this type of rhythmical humour in a Pinter play takes place in *Ashes to Ashes* in one of the instances where Devlin reproaches Rebecca for her use of strange images:

DEVLIN: You can’t sit there and say things like that.  
REBECCA: I can sit here. (*P4*: 411.)

In terms of semantics, the humour comes from ‘misplaced literalism’, an inversion of an utterance’s idiomatic meaning into a literal one. Rebecca’s reply is matter-of-fact and expresses disagreement by way of pretending not to understand Devlin’s figure of speech. A more informative reply for Rebecca would probably be something like ‘Yes, I can’. The conceptual argument of “there” and “here” hence creates a feeling of artifice and absurd contrast that can evoke laughter, since the whole utterance is irrelevant.

The anticlimactic speech rhythm emphasises the semantic aspect of the humour. As the reply is formed as a direct equivalent of the first part of the question, the very absence of a reply to the second part creates some of the anticlimactic humour. All words in the last line are monosyllabic, and Rebecca’s line is shorter than Devlin’s. These features create a firm and quick beat in the last line, which thereby is contrasted to the first one. This rhythmic break presents Rebecca’s line as impertinent and stubborn, and it becomes a comic anticlimax to Devlin’s demand. The fact that the last line is thus stylised as artifice is arguably what adds the strongest comic feeling to the exchange for the audience, both as the language of a playwright and of a character in a play.

The comic effect created through a syntactic break is also present in the succeeding discussion, where the argument over words is developed. The misplaced understanding of the word “sit” is not yet settled, and Devlin frenetically makes further, far-fetched associations: “I’m saying that you’re not entitled to sit in that chair or in or on any other chair and say things like that” (*P4*: 411). With a parody of the discourse of law and scientific definitions, Devlin seeks to control and define Rebecca’s language. On the surface, the superfluous quality of the information and the sheer length of the sentence can make the audience regard it as funny. Rebecca’s previous line “I can sit here” (*ibid*) tries to limit the understanding of the words to the literal level, and Devlin criticises her for not allowing a metaphoric level, as well as for her defamiliarising focus on language itself. Rebecca’s strategy is to draw Devlin’s

attention and to emphasise her own identity, but Devlin does not see this strategy and cannot engage in it.

The stylistic and syntactic predilections of the two characters are more or less different with regard to anticlimax and oxymoron. The results are the feeling of two different agendas and the sense that the characters do not fully succeed in relating to each other. However, the characters' motivations for engaging in discussions with anticlimactic rhythms and bathetic breaks are equally strong. The anticlimaxes thus show that the need for interaction and knowledge can frustrate sympathy between the characters. In this way the category presents stage images in a manner similar to the category of rapid duologue, where the major dramatic impression likewise is that of eagerness to argue.

#### 4.7 Chapter Conclusion

Whereas the different categories all portray the struggle and relationship between the two characters, the use of speech rhythm under each category differ slightly as to detailed comic effects. A focus on the characters in conflict is the direct effect of the category of rhythmic duologue, since the bulk of speech reserved for each character here is relatively the same. However, the category presents the conflict as quite playful. The category of phatic speech reveals the characters' eagerness to communicate, but it is also a comic illustration of the fact that the characters frustrate their communication through their use of speech rhythm. The eagerness to engage in a struggle over comic words is in particular the concern of the category of anticlimax. Here the serious problems and conflicts of the relationship are not as focused; the speech rhythms rather draw attention to the comic linguistic virtuosity of each character. Devlin's reasons for using these types of comic technique are directed at hiding his mind from Rebecca, whereas Rebecca's uses the category to draw Devlin's attention and sympathy towards her feelings and thoughts. However, speech examples from *Ashes to Ashes* located to

the categories of ritual repetition and extended soliloquy have more complex rhythmical qualities than the other categories. The latter two may either evoke laughter or not suggest a comic feeling at all, depending on subtle shifts in the rhythms and images. Some instances in these categories may even both create laughter and stifle it.

A large part of Devlin's speech is in the form of questions, whereas Rebecca for the most part answers Devlin. The play thus presents Devlin as prying and interrogative. However, Rebecca's language shows that she invites Devlin's interest, and that she wants to make him curious of her language and consequently of herself. As far as Devlin's mode of sentence structure goes, Rebecca is hence successful. In terms of real and mutual understanding, however, the result is more uncertain.

Rebecca's memories are expressed at the end of the play by speech rhythms that create a solemn and sad atmosphere where the comic potential is diminished. Devlin's speech is not ambiguous in this respect, and he is consequently silenced by Rebecca's final solemn rhythm. This illustrates the communication problem between the two. As her echoed lines at the end exclude Devlin from interacting they illustrate that the couple cannot communicate when sad feelings are too clearly expressed. They only interact through the detached and ironical style of wit and humour. Rebecca invites Devlin to learn about her memories and thereby to know her better, but in order to relate to him she has to use a casual and whimsical style. This style vexes Devlin. In his urge to surpass Rebecca in linguistic humour and striking images, and thus be the stronger one, he frustrates sympathy and understanding and chooses linguistic domination. Bergson holds that indifference is laughter's "natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (63), and this notion can explain why Devlin is not able to sympathise with Rebecca's comic speech rhythms.

The study of categories of comic speech rhythm reveals interesting features of *Ashes to Ashes*. The different categories illustrate different aspects of the play's theme of

communication, and of the ways the characters use speech rhythm to connect and dominate. The comic potential of speech rhythm at the same time invites and frustrates interaction, and the rhythm thus becomes an ironic comment on the theme of need for sympathy.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

In my study of some of Pinter's plays I have searched for the comic significance of his stylisation of speech rhythm in a broad understanding of the term. For this end I have developed five main categories that define different types of constructions and structures of speech rhythm. The concept of comic speech rhythm has been a useful method for scrutinising details of comic effects and techniques. Originally, the basic aim of the method of categorisation was to separate various rhythmic features and details of the texts in order to give them close attention. This approach has however been a fruitful means also for revealing comic significance for the meaning of the plays, as is exemplified by the close readings of *Old Times* and *Ashes to Ashes*.

Both plays present characters in the process of gaining control and negotiating their relationships. The characters' strategies for this end are presented through their use of speech rhythm. The comic effects of their rhythms embody the fervour and determination they invest in their strategies. Anna, Deeley and Devlin are the characters who most strongly seek dominance. Through their use of comic speech rhythm they are at times presented as desperate. The two male characters in addition express themselves through more striking associations and rhythms than the women, and are thus rendered more desperate to the audience. Anna also seeks control, but she pursues it through a sympathetic understanding with Kate. Anna thus embodies a more profound control of speech rhythm in that she resists Deeley's attempts at domination and communicates better with Kate.

This has to do with Anna's treatment of memory. The female characters in both plays are self-confident in their view of the past as a means for dominance and self-expression. The male characters are more insecure in this respect. They do not as easily manage to treat memory as individually construed, and instead seek commonly agreed versions of the past.

The narrated and enacted recollections made by the women may be quite loosely based on reality, but are nevertheless presented with authority and may thus confound the men.

Even if Anna's language embodies authority and control, Kate's self-confidence resists control by others, and both Anna and Deeley are thus defeated. Rebecca also has the quality of resistance towards control, and she and Kate thus represent a comic and ironical contrast towards the attempts and approaches from the other characters in each play. Both Kate and Rebecca use speech rhythm in this act of resistance. However, as Kate's resistance relies partly on silence, she seems more self-contained than Rebecca, whose rhythms reflect her urge to both withdraw from Devlin's dominance and at the same time to invite his interest. Rebecca's dependence on comic speech rhythm is thus stronger than Kate's. Rebecca and Kate do not express a similarly strong attitude of aggression and invasion as the other characters do. However, Rebecca engages in the linguistic battle almost as readily as them. To the degree that Rebecca takes part in the verbal conflict with Devlin, the functions of her rhythms become the more similar to those of Devlin, Anna and Deeley. This is particularly evident in the category of anticlimax and oxymoron. Still, what most strongly forms the dramatic image of Rebecca's character is her complex and ambiguous use of verbal humour.

The plays thus convey the use of comic speech rhythm as aggression as well as a more positive way of interaction. In *Old Times* the characters mostly use the comic techniques for defeating the others. They employ comic speech rhythms with the aim of lowering the defence of the others, so that the speaker more easily can exercise his or her control. The laughter of the audience may be directed at the comic language in itself, or even at mocking the characters. However, the humour in *Old Times* does not only represent a negative power. The category of rhythmic duologue at times reveals a playful attitude towards the conflicts and combats of the play. This category provides the audience with a comic relief from the serious nature of the conflicts. *Ashes to Ashes* also conveys a more positive quality of comic

rhythm, but in a slightly different and more complex way. Rebecca in fact uses comic speech rhythms to make Devlin connect to or sympathise with her. As has been shown, Devlin does not answer this call for sympathy through comic language, for him humour is rather a strategy for aggression as he tries to match Rebecca's style. *Old Times* also presents images of sympathy, as in Anna and Kate's ritualistic re-enactments of memories. However, these characters do not seem to use humour consciously as a major means for the sharing of sympathy. The effects of the speech rhythms, as well as the characters' attitudes towards the rhythms, are thus slightly more complex and ambiguous in *Ashes to Ashes*.

Parts of the close reading may seem limited, since the categories partly define the form it is presented in. The main weakness of my project lies in the connection made throughout the thesis between various outlets of speech rhythm and contingent comic effects. The reason for this problem is not that speech rhythm is not a comic device; in fact this study shows that it can be. The problem is rather that other effects of speech rhythm are neglected. These other effects do not lie within the main scope of my thesis, but they still deserve attention in further study. I have, however, discussed a few instances of non-comic speech rhythm, particularly in the reading of ritual repetition in *Ashes to Ashes*.

Rhythm is clearly a device that enforces the comic quality of Pinter's language. However, as my close readings reveal, rhythm is seldom autonomous in creating laughter. Speech rhythm does not suggest ideas and themes, it can however be used to stress them. As Harding argues, one rhythmic feature can be used to stress several ideas or feelings (154). Hence, in the study of comic effect in Pinter's drama, one cannot separate the rhythm from the semantic content of speech. In this thesis the revealed comic effects illustrate themes in a particular way, or even possibly illuminate new aspects of themes and ideas. Although the concept of the categories can limit the understanding of a play as a whole, it at the same time provides a method for tracing a play's main themes in different parts and details of the text.

At least some parts of my close reading suggest that the approach is fruitful in revealing aspects of Pinter study that have not yet received enough attention. Such an aspect can for example be found in the case of Rebecca's ambiguous use of comic rhythm to draw sympathy in *Ashes to Ashes*.

The study of Pinter's comic speech rhythms may also provide insights relevant for performance of his plays. As Esslin argues, Pinter's stylisation of speech construes his dialogue as speech acts that suggest body movements for the actors (40). The auditory aspect of Pinter's language is similarly also important for suggesting a mode of delivery that stresses the comic aspect of the dialogue. Thus the study of comic speech rhythms is of interest for performance since they embody and emphasise ideas in Pinter's plays. The connection between laughter and speech rhythm studied in this thesis illustrates the problem of the comic and laughter in the theatre. The plays present themes that are not necessarily ludicrous per se; they may in fact rather be sad or gloomy. However, as has been argued, the form through which the themes are presented may result in laughter. Langer argues that many comic techniques of drama must break the illusion in order to evoke laughter (81). When the audience perceives the artifice of rhythmic stylisation, laughter becomes a possible reaction. The comic break of theatrical illusion forces the audience to search for the meaning inherent in the break, and the comic techniques thus serve a purpose in the interpretation.

The characters' strategies in Pinter's drama partly take form through the speech rhythm of the dialogue. Although the rhythm depends on semantic content and the themes of the plays for creating laughter, the stylisation of speech rhythm in its colloquial, formal and ritual aspects has a contingent comic effect. Serious and tragic thematic concerns can oppose the comic pleasure of speech rhythm. The result is either to stifle the laughter, or to form a contrastive counterpart against which laughter is created from the comic potential of the rhythm. Ideas and rhythm thus work together. The stylisation of speech rhythm embodies the

ideas and interests of a play. In this way the comic implications of speech rhythm influence the interpretation of Pinter's plays.

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