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Research Article

A STRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO HAROLD PINTER'S *THE DUMB WAITER*

Halit ALKAN*

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ABSTRACT


Structuralism is an approach that seeks to decode the encoded whole consisting of a system to explore a textual work's deep structure from the surface structure. This study analyses Harold Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter" (1960) according to the structuralist approach. The harmony of the play's deep structure performs on binary opposition between Ben and Gus who repeat mechanical behaviours and conversations since they are imprisoned for a while in a narrow space. Concrete mechanical elements such as the lavatory and the dumb waiter also repeat the same activities. Although the play is over, the melody continues since Ben and Gus are given no role other than being hitmen and victims. As for the deep meaning, individuals who appear as a functional part of the mechanism show the possibility that the oppressive mechanism may become inoperable as a result of questioning the mechanism.

Key Words: *structuralism, mechanism, Harold Pinter, The Dumb Waiter*

Harold Pinter'in *Gitgel Dolap* Eserine Yapısalcı Bir Yaklaşım

ÖZET

Yapısalcılık, bir metnin yüzey yapısından derin yapısına ulaşmak için bir sistemin kodlanmış bütünü kodunu çözmeye çalışan bir yaklaşımdır. Bu çalışma, Harold Pinter'in "Gitgel Dolap" (1960) adlı oyununu yapısalcı yaklaşımla inceler. Derin yapıda oyunun uyumu Ben ve Gus arasında ikili karşıtlık üzerine kurulu olup, dar bir uzamda belli bir süreliğine hapsedildikleri için mekanik davranışlar ve konuşmalar tekrarlar. Sifon ve gitgel dolap gibi somut mekanik öğeler de aynı faaliyetleri tekrarlar.

*  Assist. Prof. Dr., Mardin Artuklu University Faculty of Letters Department of English Language and Literature, Mardin / TÜRKİYE, alkan.halit@yahoo.com

Oyun bitmesine rağmen oyunun ezgisi devam eder çünkü Ben ve Gus'a tetikçi ve kurban olmaktan başka bir rol verilmez. Oyunun derin anlamına gelince, mekanizmanın işlevsel bir parçası olarak görünen bireyler mekanizmayı sorgulamaları sonucunda baskıcı mekanizmanın işleyemez duruma gelebileceğini gösterir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *yapısalcılık, mekanizma, Harold Pinter, Gitgel Dolap*

Introduction

Structuralism¹ is an approach that seeks to decode the encoded whole consisting of a system to explore a textual work's deep structure from the surface structure (Lane, 1970: 14-15). Ferdinand de Saussure handles language as self-sufficient, consistent and understandable (1976: 106). Saussure argues that language should be considered as a system consisting of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations and that it should be examined with a synchronic approach (Vardar, 2001: 43).² Russian formalism is a reaction to the symbolic and social perspective in literature. As a phenomenon, 'form' in Russian formalism can be studied by itself as integrity and the envelope of content (Eichenbaum, 1965: 112). In any act of verbal communication, Roman Jakobson, a Russian formalist, expresses the following six functions: sender, message, context, contact, code, and receiver (1971: 95). Claude Levi-Strauss analyses women and men as interrelated elements to establish a general system of unconnected incidents (1963: 87). Each myth is regarded as a word revealing the structure of language.

Researchers focus on the narrative analysis of folk tale, myth, epic, short story or novel in order to take up subject of the story, the theme, characters and actions. Being a meaningful whole, the text that expresses the mood of an author consists of the events that make up the

¹ The theory of structuralism is retrieved from the article by Alkan, 2016.

² Quotations from Turkish references were translated into English by the author of this study.

story in order to present characters in action. The meaning of the text depends on the meaning of its parts. And the meaning of each part is formed by the events happening in its place in relation to the whole (Pettit, 1975: 42-3). The text's meaning is revealed by syntagmatic constraints in relation to paradigmatic contrasts.

Scholars such as Vladimir Propp, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Noam Chomsky, and Roland Barthes have made important contributions to structuralism. After examining the content of Russian folk tales, Vladimir Propp classifies the action's seven spheres as follows; villain, donor, helper, princess, dispatcher, hero, and false hero (Alkan, 2016: 65). Propp also speaks of thirty-one functions whose order is always the same for the characters' actions in Russian folk tales because all fairy tales are of one type structure (2005: 22-3). According to Algirdas Julien Greimas, it is necessary to perceive differences in order to understand the world, universe, people and objects. Perceiving the differences between two object-terms means comprehending these two object-terms and the relations between them. The structure also arises from the relationship between these two terms. One cannot understand white without black, light without darkness, small without great (Uçan, 2020: 73). For the action in the narrative plot, Greimas determines six actants on three oppositions axis such as wish, communication, and force as follows: subject/object, sender/receiver, and helper/opponent (1983: 207). Noam Chomsky suggests surface structure and a deep structure for each sentence. The surface structure provides explanations for the meaning in the deep structure which is the main form of the meaning of the sentence. Surface structure provides surface meaning, and deep structure provides deep meaning (Chomsky, 1965: 16). Roland Barthes regards structuralist action as an intellectual process which is applied in a systematic way. In order to find an object's laws that are not obvious, he disintegrates the object and reconstructs it; however, that object turns into an intellectual object (Barthes, 1972: 214-5). The invisible system can perform as

wholeness on itself in which each part has a connection both with the next part and the whole.

In order to understand the structuralist analysis of the play in this study, it would be helpful to explain the following main terms of structuralism. Saussure defines the linguistic sign as a complex whole formed by the auditory image, which is called the signifier, and the concept, which is called the signified. “When we call ‘tree’, the concept of ‘tree’ appears in the mind of listeners, and these two together create the sign. The complete sign is established when the correct signifier meets the correct signified” (Saussure, 1976: 61). A language, which is a social system and provides communication between people, is also a set of signs (Rifat, 2000: 10). Binary opposition means two theoretical opposites in relation to differences such as cooked/raw, and man/woman (Leach, 1973: 36-7). Homology refers to binary opposition between both two object or people and two relationships (Hawkes, 1989: 53). Synchronic linguistics refers to a language’s position in a certain time (Culler, 1973: 8). Paradigmatic relation refers to the relation among language units that can substitute one another on the vertical axis, but cannot meet in the same sentence (Aksan, 1977: 116). Harmony is the vertical or paradigmatic axis of music. Syntagmatic relation refers to the horizontal relationships among language units in which every unit is in appropriate relation with not only the following part but also the whole. In order to establish a sentence, words are put in order from left to right. Melody refers to linear musical tones which are on the horizontal or syntagmatic aspect (Levi-Strauss, 1963: 212). In short, on vertical axis, there is word item of synchronic linguistics in paradigmatic relation which has harmony of music. On horizontal axis, there is word order of diachronic linguistics in syntagmatic relation which has linear musical tones.

In terms of the structuralist approach, this study tries to analyse Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) in a synchronic manner. In

other words, it focuses only on the text, namely the play, disregarding the writer's biography and the period in which it was written. It deals with the relationships among the elements in the text's structure which looking at it as a closed system, and identifies closed signs' paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations relying upon binary oppositions in the text's surface structure. It tries to make them explicit signs in order to get the deep structure. Thus, the surface structure provides the deep structure. Based on two hitmen living in England in the twentieth century, the aforementioned play expresses the helplessness of the individual in the system in which s/he is forced to live (Yüksel, 2011: 119). The play reflects hierarchical domination in which those who threaten are threatened, murderers are slaughtered and potential rebels are destroyed (Gordon, 1990: 100). Thus, the play is about power, obedience and threat.

A Structuralist Analysis of *The Dumb Waiter*

In the surface structure of the play, there is a plot focusing on two men, Ben and Gus who are in shirts, trousers and suspenders, waiting for something or someone in the basement. The play takes place in a room in the basement, completely isolated from the outside world, with nothing but two beds and a chair. There are two doors in the room. The door on the left opens to the kitchen and the sink, that is, the inner space, while the door on the right opens to the outer space. In terms of syntagmatic relation, while Ben reads the newspaper, Gus is busy with going in and out of the kitchen and lavatory. Gus keeps asking questions while Ben remains silent. In terms of paradigmatic relation, there is homology of relationship between Ben and Gus as follows:

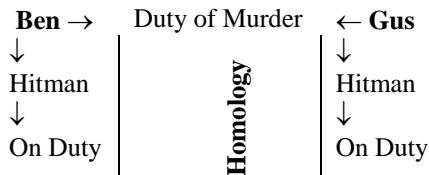


Figure 1: Homology of Relationship Between Ben and Gus

Ben and Gus are two hitmen working for the same organization and are at the bottom of the strict organizational hierarchy in order to fulfil the assigned duty of murder. Therefore, they are waiting in a room in the basement for a message to kill a victim, but this is a job they cannot control and are manipulated by other forces. Their duty requires a great deal of secrecy because they have to carry out the orders without being seen or heard by anyone. As Ben is Gus's superior, the organization contacts Ben. While Ben is content with as much information as the organization wants him to know, Gus wants to reach information that goes beyond his own borders. The on-going conflict between the two throughout the play stems from this difference.

The play is based on both behavioural and verbal repetitions between Ben and Gus. The most important repetition of Gus, who is bored of waiting for the victim in the first part of the play, is to go to the lavatory many times by leaving from the door on the left. Although Gus pulls the lavatory chain many times off, the lavatory does not flush. However, throughout the play, the lavatory, which did not flush before despite the intervention by Gus, suddenly flushes off left. The repetition of Ben is to read newspaper. In the newspaper, he reads that a 30-year-old man crawled under a lorry while he wanted to cross the road. Gus, who has a sceptical personality, does not believe in the news. On the other hand, Ben says "*it's down here in black and white*" (Pinter, 1990: 130). Ben does not question what might be right and what might be wrong. Gus, who wants to reach knowledge that goes beyond his limits, repeats the same questions throughout the play: "*I want to ask you something*" and "*what time is he getting in touch?*" (Pinter, 1990: 130, 132). The moment Gus starts asking questions, Ben keeps silent and continues reading the newspaper, changing the subject, or giving evasive answers. The 'newspaper' is a tool Ben uses to escape Gus's questions, complaints, and communication efforts.

Ben and Gus wait for their victims in a room at the 'basement' that does not even have a 'window'. They spend the night in 'uncomfortable beds', on 'dirty sheets', 'without blankets'. Gus complains about their condition: "*He doesn't seem to bother much about our comfort these days*" (Pinter, 1990: 137). This sentence, which shows that the current condition is getting worse, takes the reader to the existence of a third person. The organization is not mentioned directly in the play, but reveals itself through Wilson, who does not appear in the play. It is Ben who represents the organization and the rules of organization in the play. The course of conflict between Ben and Gus in the first part of the play is as follows: Gus asks questions, complains, tries to communicate with Ben while Ben ignores these efforts by dealing with his newspaper, staying quiet, urging Gus to make tea, giving evasive answers, or telling him to at least shut up (Önder, 2005: 61). Gus does not have matches to make tea. The organization deprives the individual, but Ben obeys while Gus reacts to this condition.

In the second part of the play in order to end the conflict between Ben and Gus, the organization shows its existence with its external interventions. When an envelope including matches is sent under the door, Gus does not question its reasons because he can now make the tea he wants to drink. There is a meaningless discussion between Ben and Gus about the phrase of putting on the kettle or lighting the kettle. Ben reminds him that he is Gus's superior: "*Who's the senior partner here, me or you?*" (Pinter, 1990: 142). Ben does not question the organization's authority and does not want its own authority to be questioned by Gus. In this sense, Gus not only poses a threat to the organizational hierarchy with his questions, but also undermines Ben's authority by continuing to ask questions. This ongoing conflict between Ben and Gus stems from Ben's attempt to preserve his authority, consequently organizational hierarchy. The preservation of this hierarchy, which forms the basis of the organization, means the continuation of the organization, thus the continuation of Ben's authority. The existence of one means the existence

of the other. Gus, on the other hand, endangers this relationship. The organization gives order to Wilson who relays to Ben who is superior to Gus. In this sense, there is a symbiotic relationship between the organization and Ben: Organization → Wilson → Ben → Gus

Even though the matches they need are sent under the door in an envelope, their situation of 'deprivation' continues because the gas has gone out. Ben and Gus do not have a shilling for the gas meter. Therefore, they cannot light the stove. Gus, who wants to drink tea, complains about the situation. This time the organization sends the dumb waiter to intervene in this situation. A dumb waiter, a serving-hatch, is an automatic device used in some restaurants to deliver the orders to the kitchen section below and the prepared meals to the top. While Ben and Gus are waiting for the message about the victim, Gus brings a piece of paper about food out of the dumb waiter. Ben sends up all the food Gus brought with him so that they are not revealed, but the demands of the above continue. Ben automatically chooses the way to fulfil orders. Ben is a 'dumb waiter' programmed to carry out an order, no matter where it comes from. Just as the dictionary meaning of the word 'dumb' reflects, he remains silent. Just as Gus cannot control the lavatory's flushing, Ben cannot control the dumb waiter. Ben just follows orders and do not ask any questions. Therefore, there is binary opposition between Ben and Gus as follows:

Ben	Gus
Superior	Subordinate
First-hand Information	Second-hand Information
Accepting	Complaining
Submissive	Rebellious
Passive	Active

Figure 2: Binary Opposition between Ben and Gus

The organization tells their complaints through the tube into Ben's ear. Gus wants to know the truth about the dumb waiter, complains about their poor conditions, and asks questions. However, Ben accepts

the situation and obeys the command regarding orders, remains silent against Gus's communication efforts. Gus crumples up the order list by the dumb waiter saying, "*WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?*" (Pinter, 1990: 162). Despite the organization's rules, Gus finds the answers he searches for. Gus also realizes that the matches were sent by the organization because they have even been listened. The dumb waiter is sent to prevent Gus from thinking and from finding the answers to his questions. Gus has acted against the rules and hierarchy of the organization. When Gus goes to drink water by leaving the door on the left one last time, Ben is informed through the tube of the dumb waiter that the victim will soon enter through the door on the right that opens to outer space. The door on the right opens to the outer space and Gus comes in. Gus goes out by leaving the door on the left as the murderer and re-enters the door on the right door as the victim because he is not wearing his jacket, tie and gun. It is not understood how Gus reaches the outer space from the kitchen, which has no exit, and how he has entered through the door on the right to outer space, that is, the street door. Ben and Gus come face to face. The final stage of gradual deprivation that the organization is pursuing is Gus's death sentence. This duty is given to Ben because he is the one who obeys the rules of the organization and therefore deserves to live. However, the play ends before it is found out whether Ben will fulfil this duty.

Ambiguity is essential in Harold Pinter's plays, and this ambiguity is often left unresolved. Pinter always keeps the reader's or audience's curiosity alive, and presents the incredible instead of the inevitable by breaking these expectations (Misra, 1992: 28-9). Pinter is against the play having a definite form because it goes against the principle of ambiguity, which is the basis of his view of life and art (Knowles, 1995: 16-7). The conflict in this play appears when the outer force breaks in the room and threatens the security of the dwellers. This intervention results in a reversal of the balance of power displayed at the beginning of the play (Gordon, 1990: 96-7). In the outer world, there are

only foreign forces, but there is warmth inside and people feel safe in the room.

In the surface structure lavatory, dumb waiter, inside and outside are closed signs. In the deep structure, they become explicit signs as follows: While the signifier is lavatory, the signified is an uncontrollable mechanism. While the signifier is dumb waiter, the signified is social system. While the signifier is inside, the signified is illusion and safety, and while the signifier is outside, the signified is reality and danger:

Inside is a room standing for the familiar, illusion, safety and light.	Door is a bridge between outside and inside.	Outside is intruder standing for the unknown, reality, danger and darkness.
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Figure 3: Explicit Signs in the Deep Structure

Ben and Gus are in a room in the basement, completely isolated from the outside world. Ben has the illusion that the situation is satisfactory because they are safe in the room; however, Gus does not share the same illusion but pretends to. Behind the door to reality in outer space, there are 'unknown' events, and if this door opens, the danger from the outside will come to the inner space and shatters the illusion inside.

Conclusion

The signs in reaching the deep structure are the repetitions that continue throughout the play. Since Ben and Gus are imprisoned in a narrow space for a certain period of time, they repeat limited movements and discuss the same issues over and over. In other words, Ben and Gus repeat the mechanical behaviours and reactions. Ben constantly reads the newspaper while Gus goes constantly in and out of the kitchen. They are always alert for instructions from Wilson. Concrete mechanical elements such as the lavatory and the dumb waiter repeat the same activities. However, Ben and Gus cannot control these mechanical devices. Here, the dumb waiter refers to the social system which is used for all

organizations in the world referring to profit through destruction that Ben defends while Gus criticizes. Just like automatic devices, Ben and Gus have based their existence on being parts of a mechanism that they cannot understand and control. Ben and Gus, who function as compatible parts of the automatic mechanism, are negatively affected by factors they cannot control and are increasingly deprived of their right of a humane life. There are binary oppositions in the personality traits of Ben and Gus. Reacting to deprivation, Gus begins to question the mechanism by disrupting the automation, but Ben continues to function as a compatible part of the mechanism. In order to intervene in the situation, the organization first sends an envelope including matches under the door in and then runs the dumb waiter. As a result, the part that causes the malfunction of the mechanism must be deactivated. Since Gus opposes the mechanism he is a part of, the organization decides to kill him. The organization orders Ben, who is compatible in the mechanism, to kill Gus, who is incompatible, and Ben is expected to do it automatically.

The harmony of the play's deep structure operates on binary opposition between Ben and Gus. Ben will have to live with the suspicion that if he kills Gus, the new hitman who will replace Gus may also kill him. If Ben does not kill Gus, the mechanism will kill them both. For the first time, by stepping out of automation, Ben starts to think for himself as a human being, not a piece of machinery. Although the play ends, its melody continues since Ben and Gus are allowed only to become a hitman or a victim. Whatever the hitman, Ben, decides, he is now in Gus's position as the victim. As for the deep meaning of the play, the organization or mechanism represents all systems that lead people to reluctant adaptation. The mechanism deprives both compatible and incompatible people. For this reason, the play reveals how these systems alienate, exploit and destroy human values. Individuals, who appear as functional parts of the mechanism and under control, show the possibility that the oppressive mechanism may become inoperable as a result of questioning the mechanism. In other words, a person who thinks and

questions may one day put an end to exploitation, oppression and violence.

Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Structuralism is an approach that seeks to decode the encoded whole consisting of a system to explore a textual work's deep structure from the surface structure. In terms of the structuralist approach, this study tries to analyse Harold Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter" (1960) in a synchronic manner, focusing only on the play. It deals with the relationships among the elements in the text's structure which looking at it as a closed system, and identifies closed signs' paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations relying upon binary oppositions in the text's surface structure. It tries to make them explicit signs in order to get the deep structure. The aforementioned play expresses the helplessness of the individual in the system in which s/he is forced to live. It is also about power, obedience and threat. The play reflects hierarchical domination in which those who threaten are threatened, murderers are slaughtered and potential rebels are destroyed.

The most important signs in reaching the deep structure are the repetitions that continue throughout the play. Since Ben and Gus are imprisoned in a narrow space for a certain period of time, they repeat the mechanical behaviours and reactions. Ben constantly reads the newspaper while Gus goes constantly in and out of the kitchen. They are always alert for instructions from Wilson. Concrete mechanical elements such as the lavatory and the dumb waiter repeat the same activities. However, Ben and Gus cannot control these mechanical devices.

Lavatory, dumb waiter, outside and inside in the surface structure are closed signs. In the deep structure, they become explicit signs as follows: While the signifier is lavatory, the signified is an uncontrollable mechanism. While the signifier is dumb waiter, the signified is social system. While the signifier is inside, the signified is illusion and safety. While the signifier is outside, the signified is reality and danger. When the door which is a bridge between outside and inside opens, outside comes inside through the door and shatters the illusion inside.

Ben and Gus, who function as compatible parts of the automatic mechanism, are negatively affected by factors they cannot control and are increasingly deprived of their right of a humane life. There are binary oppositions in the personality traits of Ben and Gus. Reacting to deprivation, Gus begins to question the mechanism by disrupting the automation, but Ben continues to function as a compatible part of the mechanism. In order to intervene in the situation, the organization first sends an envelope including matches under the door in and then runs the dumb waiter. As a result, the part that causes the malfunction of the mechanism must be deactivated. Since Gus opposes the mechanism he is a part of, the organization decides to kill him. The

organization orders Ben, who is compatible in the mechanism, to kill Gus, who is incompatible, and Ben is expected to do it automatically.

The harmony of the deep structure operates on binary opposition between Ben and Gus. Although the play ends, its melody continues since Ben and Gus are allowed only to become a hitman or a victim. Whatever the hitman, Ben, decides, he is now in Gus's position as the victim. As for the deep meaning of the play, the organization or mechanism represents all systems that lead people to reluctant adaptation. The mechanism deprives both compatible and incompatible people. For this reason, the play reveals how these systems alienate, exploit and destroy human values. Individuals, who appear as functional parts of the mechanism and under control, show the possibility that the oppressive mechanism may become inoperable as a result of questioning the mechanism. In other words, a person who thinks and questions may one day put an end to exploitation, oppression and violence.