Unwording the Word: Interpreting the Language of Samuel Beckett's Prose

József Andor

(Department of English Linguistics, University of Pécs, e-mail: andor.jozsef@t-online.hu)

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was a writer, poet, dramatist, critic, art critic, stage director and musician. In 1969 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, with the following characterization of his merits: "*for his writing, which – in new forms for the novel and drama – in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation*". In the award ceremony speech presentation by Karl Ragnar Gierow of the Swedish Academy, the appreciator failed to provide any understanding of what was meant by "new forms in the novel and drama" in the above characterization. The aim of this plenary talk is to attempt to fill this gap in appreciating Beckett's literary art via analysing his radically new methods applied in textual creation and style in the progress of development of his prose, with special emphasis on the mode of linguistic representation used in the third volume of his (so-called) Trilogy, *The Unnamable*. Literary critics all agree that Beckett's relation to and application of language was radically new, unique, did away with all earlier forms of literary representation, especially those of Victorian prose writing, both in content and textuality.

Concerning his character, he was a highly eccentric, introvert figure, with queer behaviour, whose degree of self-esteem was outstandingly high, similar in this respect to his close friend, the Dutch painter Bram van Velde. Both of them tended to refuse realistic representation in art, holding the view that painting and literature alike should try to represent 'nothingness'. In their opinion, music was a type of art more suitable for achieving this aim than literature and painting both conceptually and emotionally, and also technically. Beckett's creations of prose are entirely plotless, overwhelmingly monologic expressions of inner thinking and speech. He applied fragmentation as a method of structuring his texts. Technically, he advocated the use of 'unwording' as a method of purifying the content of linguistic expression(s), resulting in the destabilization of linguistic structure. The notion of the 'unwording' refers to dissolving the content-based saturated meaning of lexical items, which leads to the delexicalization of lexical content.

In this way, the textual representation of his prose largely misses the functioning of plot-creating lexical items, constructionally used as keywords. Paragraph indentation of texture is frequently non-existent, resulting in the non-functionality, consequently the destabilization of thematic progression. The text-organizing status of scenic-, scriptal- and frame-based types of knowledge, therefore, remains deeply hidden in his textual structures. These technical text-constructional manoeuvres, paired with imprecisions in the organization of connexity relations, greatly reduce the degree of cohesion, constringence, and the execution of coherence creation of his texts. (On these norms of text construction see the textual-semiotic models of Teun van Dijk and János S. Petőfi). Exploration of these textual issues constitutes the theoretical bases of argumentation presented in this lecture.

Related to the above issues, the following types and/or modes of linguistic imprecision can be traced in Beckett's usage of language:

- reduction, modification, and/or neutralization of the lexical content of words,
- frequent usage of telegram style of sentential representation,
- word piling,
- occurrence of a large number of neologisms,
- using free association as a form/technique of thematic representation,
- destabilization of meaning in the form of a large number of repetitions and syntactic irregularities,
- no identifiable plots,
- abundance of internal monologues,
- usage of subsentential inner utterances,
- no paragraph structuring,
- no sentence initial capitalization,
- unnatural usage of lexical collocations,
- manifestation of imagistic impressions,
- large number of recurring thematic topics,
- unreasonable occurrence of frame shifts; hardly any degree of frame retention,
- frequent usage of too short vs. long sentences.

Following this, analysis of a selection of textual samples taken from *The Unnamable* and other, shorter prose works of Beckett's is presented to demonstrate representation of the above listed, linguistically-related manoeuvres he applied in his texts.

Interestingly, according to the symptomatology of psychiatrist Nancy Andreasen as well as that of the fourth and fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM 4 and 5*), several of these (mainly) linguistically-based imprecisions, or manoeuvres of textual representation are symptomatic of schizophrenic discourse structure/structuring. Clarifying to what extent some of them might naturally be characteristic of Beckett's idiolect, or – on the contrary – if they were used purposefully in the prose works of his oeuvre, requires further, multidisciplinary investigations.

There is no agreement among critics on identifying in precisely clear terms the literary trend and style where Samuel Beckett belongs. According to some, he was a surrealist, perhaps even a fauvist, whereas others tend to call him an expressionist, an absurdist, or simply a modernist. In closing the lecture I attempt to add my own view to the multiplicity of such contemplations.