

Analysing Language in a Script

When analysing your play, you should look closely at any linguistic devices and look at the meanings that these convey. This sheet is intended to help you understand what type of devices to look out for and the possible effects. The extract of text is taken from Oliver Goldsmith's play *She Stoops to Conquer*.

ACCENT

The pronunciation of letters and sounds, attributable to a region or area of a country. This playwright clearly wants to show a particular accent by the use of such words such as 'ay'. Always try to work out what accents would best suit your characters. An accent can not only reveal a character's origin, but can also imply their social class. Accents also prompt stereotypes.

TONY → Ay, I'm your friend, and the best friend you have in the world, if you knew but all. This riding by night, by the bye, is cursedly tiresome. It has shook me worse than the basket of a stage-coach.

HASTINGS. But how? where did you leave your fellow-travellers? Are they in safety? Are they housed?

TONY. Five and twenty miles in two hours and a half is no such bad driving. The poor beasts have smoked for it: rabbit me, but I'd rather ride forty miles after a fox than ten with such varment.

HASTINGS. Well, but where have you left the ladies? I die with impatience.

TONY. Left them! Why where should I leave them but where I found them?

HASTINGS. This is a riddle.

TONY. Riddle me this then. What's that goes round the house, and round the house, and never touches the house?

HASTINGS. I'm still astray.

TONY. Why, that's it mon. I have led them astray. By jingo, there's not a pond or a slough within five miles of the place but they can tell the taste of.

HASTINGS. Ha! ha! ha! I understand: you took them in a round, while they supposed themselves going forward, and so you have at last brought them home again.

TONY. You shall hear. I first took them down Feather-bed Lane, where we stuck fast in the mud. I then rattled them crack over the stones of Up-and-down Hill. I then introduced them to the gibbet on Heavy-tree Heath; and from that, with a circumbendibus, I fairly lodged them in the horse-pond at the bottom of the garden.

SIMPLE SENTENCES

Short, snappy sentences with one main subject, for example, *the cat sat on the mat*. These can imply anger, impatience, anxiety, excitement etc or they can reveal a lack of education or imagination. In this extract they are used to imply Hastings' annoyance and impatience.

DIALECT

Dialect is the name given to words that are specific to a certain region or group of people. For example, Yorkshire people sometimes use the dialect word 'brew' when referring to a drink. It is an informal, casual way of speaking. In this extract we see words of dialect such as 'mon.'

COLLOQUIALISMS AND SLANG

The use of informal, chatty language. In its strongest form, can include swearing. This can imply a familiarity between characters, a relaxed character, anger, a lack of education, youth, lack of respect etc. In this extract we can see a few examples of colloquialisms, especially from the character Tony, he uses phrases such as 'By jingo' to show his informality.

REPETITION

A playwright may use this as a stylistic device to emphasise a topic or meaning or to create rhythm. A character may use repetition to show a preoccupation with something or anger. If you see an example of repetition, you need to consider how it would be said, would it become louder as the words are repeated?

THE EFFECT OF PUNCTUATION

Punctuation can create rhythm and tempo to a piece of text. It can also imply emotions such as anger or grief. Punctuation can shorten or lengthen sentences which reveals a lot about the speaker. You should always analyse a page in terms of punctuation. If you look at this passage, Tony's constant use of exclamation marks shows how amusing he is finding this situation and his informality. Whereas Hastings' use of question marks shows his confusion.

Exploration Notes: the eight elements

The following pages look in more detail at the eight elements that you are required to write about in your Exploration Notes. Each section draws on examples from the plays listed on pages 18–19 to explain what each element means in a drama and theatre context and to show you how you can apply what you read here to the plays you are exploring.

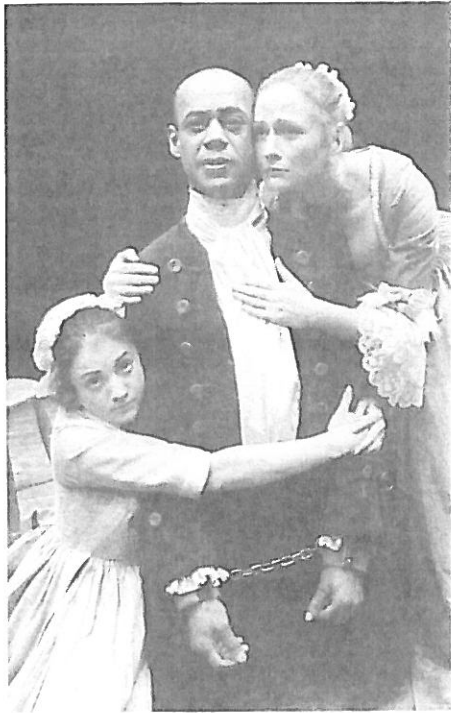
Language

The phrase ‘the language of drama’ is often used (just in the way ‘the language of music’ or ‘the language of film’ are used) to mean all the ways in which drama communicates – through visual elements such as set and costume, as well as through physical elements such as movement and mime. This section is concerned only with the spoken word on stage. Later sections deal with other elements of ‘theatrical language’.

To help you understand what kinds of features you should be looking for in the language of your plays for Unit 1, read through the extract below from *The Beggar’s Opera*, then read the information on the next page.

This extract is from Act 2 Scene 13 of *The Beggar’s Opera* by John Gay (1728). Macheath (a highwayman) has been imprisoned and condemned to death. Polly is married to him and Lucy is pregnant by him. Each woman feels that she has a better claim on him than the other.

- MACHEATH:** Was there ever such an unfortunate villain as I am?
- LUCY:** Was there ever such another villain?
- POLLY:** O Macheath! Was it for this we parted? Taken! Imprisoned! Tried! Hanged! I’ll stay with thee till death. No force shall tear thy dear wife from thee now. What means my love? Not one kind word – not one kind look! Think what thy Polly suffers to see thee in this condition.
- MACHEATH:** (*Aside*) I must disown her. The wench is distracted.
- LUCY:** Am I then bilked of my virtue? Can I have no reparation? Sure, men were born to lie and women to believe them! O villain! Villain!
- POLLY:** Am I not thy wife? Thy neglect of me, thy aversion to me too severely proves it. Look at me. Tell me, am I not thy wife?
- LUCY:** Perfidious wretch!
- POLLY:** Barbarous husband!
- LUCY:** Hadst thou been hanged five months ago, I had been happy.
- POLLY:** And I too. If you had been kind to me till death, it would not have vexed me. And that’s no very unreasonable request (though from a wife) to a man who hath not above seven or eight days to live.
- LUCY:** And art thou then married to another? Hast thou two wives, monster?
- MACHEATH:** If women’s tongues can cease for an answer – hear me.



In an extract such as this, you might explore some of the aspects considered below and see what these communicate about the characters. You may not find all of these elements in your texts; look at the examples from different plays over the next few pages to see what other features of language you might look for in your plays.

How much each character says

It's useful to look at the characters who appear to be dominating the dialogue and ask if this means that they are more powerful in the situation on stage (or feel that they are more powerful). Lucy and Polly dominate this section of the scene as they compete with each other in insulting Macheath. Characters who say the most are not always the most powerful, however. Often silence can be more powerful.

Punctuation

Punctuation often provides clues about the feelings and intentions behind words. For example, Polly's and Lucy's early speeches are full of exclamation marks and question marks. The exclamation marks (always a sign of intensity) show their strong feelings towards Macheath. The number of unanswered questions suggests that they are giving Macheath little opportunity to answer – although he probably has little that he is able to say in his defence.

Rhetoric

The term 'rhetoric' covers a wide range of uses of language which we associate with making speeches. We preserve the word in 'rhetorical question' – the kind of question in a speech which requires no answer. Polly's 'Was it for this we parted?' is a rhetorical question; we know that she is implying the answer 'No'. Where else in this extract can you see similar rhetorical questions?

Repetitions

Another type of rhetorical device is repetition, for example in Polly's 'Not one kind word – not one kind look'. The word 'villain' is used four times (each character uses it, but Lucy's and Polly's meaning is more aggressive and insulting than Macheath's self-pitying use). 'Wretch' and 'monster' provide some variety of insult later on. There is also an interesting repetition of rhythm and grammar, when Lucy's 'Perfidious wretch!' is echoed by Polly's 'Barbarous husband!' This indicates how they are beginning to work together as a team, as it has become clear to them that Macheath will not simply choose one of them. Note the exclamation marks as well.

Asides

Asides are lines or short speeches delivered directly to the audience; the convention is that the other characters on stage cannot hear them. Often this has the effect of making the audience feel privileged and closer to the character. Here, for example, we may feel that Macheath is a lovable rogue, being 'got at' by the two women. Sometimes, especially in melodramas, asides have the opposite effect, letting the audience know the villain's evil plans.

Activity 5

Now read the extract below from *Equus*. This is a much more modern piece and the language is very different from that in *The Beggar's Opera*.

It's clear that Frank dominates the dialogue. But what can you tell about his character from the way he speaks? Dora (Frank's wife) and Alan have much less to say; what can you tell about their relationship with Frank and with each other from the way they speak?

Make notes on the use of language in this scene. Then compare your points with the notes at the top of the next page in Activity 6.

This extract is from Act 1 Scene 6 of *Equus* by Peter Shaffer (1973). Frank is the father of the 17-year-old Alan. Alan and his mother, Dora, have just bought a television for the first time. Frank has come home to find them watching it.

FRANK stands up and enters the scene downstage on the circle. A man in his fifties.

FRANK: *(To ALAN)* It may not look like that, but that's what it is. Absolutely fatal mentally, if you receive my meaning.

DORA follows him on. She is also middle-aged.

DORA: That's a little extreme, dear, isn't it?

FRANK: You sit in front of that thing long enough, you'll become stupid for life – like most of the population. *(To ALAN)* The thing is, it's a swiz. It seems to be offering you something, but actually it's taking something away. Your intelligence and your concentration, every minute you watch it. That's a true swiz, do you see?

Seated on the floor, ALAN shrugs.

I don't want to sound like a spoilsport, old chum – but there really is no substitute for reading. What's the matter; don't you like it?

ALAN: It's all right.

FRANK: I know you think it's none of my beeswax, but it really is, you know... Actually, it's a disgrace when you come to think of it. You, the son of a printer, and never opening a book! If all the world was like you, I'd be out of a job, if you receive my meaning!

DORA: All the same, times change, Frank.

FRANK: *(reasonably):* They change if you let them change, Dora. Please return that set in the morning.

ALAN *(crying out):* No!

DORA: Frank! No!

Activity 6

Compare your comments on the extract from *Equus* on the previous page with the following points:

Frank talks assertively, in statements; he is convinced of the correctness of what he is saying and treats opinions as if they were facts ('there really is no substitute for reading'). He uses old-fashioned jocular expressions ('none of my beeswax', meaning 'none of my business') which make him seem outdated, like some of his views. A word like 'swiz' (or 'cheat') is old-fashioned 'polite' slang. In a similar way, he calls his son 'old chum'. Dora and Alan are reduced to monosyllabic responses in the face of his uncompromising attitudes.

Using language for a purpose

In real life, we are always using language for a purpose – to praise, to insult, to persuade, to amuse, to encourage, to threaten, and so on. When you're acting a role in a play, you need to find the character's purpose. The words and the way they're put together into phrases, sentences and whole speeches will relate to a specific purpose in a specific situation in the play. You need to understand what you are saying very clearly, so that you can say it with real purpose and conviction.

Language in plays is for speaking out loud. This makes it different from language in novels, magazines, and so on. Hesitations, rewordings, sudden breaking-offs, ungrammatical phrases and sentences – these can reflect a character's thought patterns.

Activity 7

Read the extract opposite from *Our Country's Good* and answer these questions.

- a) Think about the situation. Ralph is an officer in the army. His job is to be in charge of the convicts who have been transported to Australia as punishment for their crimes in England. Meg is a convict. On the surface, he is in a position of power and she has none. How would you expect her to be talking to him?
- b) What do you notice about the kind of language that Meg uses? Look at the individual words. Do you recognise all of them? If you don't, why might that be? What about her grammar? How does she address Ralph?
- c) How is Ralph's language different from Meg's? Do his words and expressions reveal his attitude to her? How does he address her?
- d) Overall, how does the use of language show what is going on in the scene between them? Looking at the balance of power between the two characters, how does each use language to gain power over the other?

In RALPH's tent. MEG LONG is very old and very smelly. She hovers over RALPH.

- MEG: We heard you was looking for some women, Lieutenant. Here I am.
- RALPH: I've asked to see some women to play certain parts in a play.
- MEG: I can play, Lieutenant, I can play with any part you like. There ain't nothing puts Meg off. That's how I got my name: Shitty Meg.
- RALPH: The play has four particular parts for young women.
- MEG: You don't want a young woman for your peculiar, Lieutenant, they don't know nothing. Shut your eyes and I'll play you as tight as a virgin.
- RALPH: You don't understand, Long. Here's the play. It's called *The Recruiting Officer*.
- MEG: Oh, I can do that too.
- RALPH: What?
- MEG: Recruiting. Anybody you like. *(She whispers.)* You want women: you ask Meg. Who do you want?
- RALPH: I want to try some out.
- MEG: Good idea, Lieutenant, good idea. Ha! Ha! Ha!
- RALPH: Now, if you don't mind –
- (MEG doesn't move.)*
- Long!
- MEG: *(frightened, but still holding her ground)* We thought you was a madge cull.
- RALPH: What?
- MEG: You know, a fluter, a mollie. A prissy cove, a girl.

This extract is from Act 1 Scene 5 of *Our Country's Good* by Timberlake Wertenbaker (1988). The young Lieutenant Ralph Clark has arrived with the first group of convicts to be transported to Australia. He wants to impress his Captain by producing a play with a cast of convicts and has arranged auditions for them. Meg turns up uninvited.

Types of language in drama

Language is subtle and can express all sorts of shades of meaning. There are a few obvious 'rules'; for example, if a character shouts, he or she may be angry, frightened, in pain, frustrated, shocked or in many other states of mind. As a student of drama, you have to be sensitive to various features of the language which help you to analyse the characters, their relationships and the situations in a play. Playwrights choose their words carefully and with purpose; you need to pick up the clues to see what these purposes are.

The areas on page 36 will help you to think about language in drama, and to identify the types of language in the plays you are exploring.

↙ **NATURALISTIC – NON-NATURALISTIC** ↘

Naturalistic	Non-naturalistic
The language imitates the features of recognisable, everyday speech, especially of characters whom we would recognise as being working-class or middle-class.	The language may be literary – highly organised and polished, carefully balanced, using a range of vocabulary not in everyday use by most people. It may be stylised or ‘heightened’ in various ways to achieve particular effects.
<p>Example:</p> <p>She’s not going back to teach school! In fact I’m willing to bet you that she never had no idea of returning to Laurel! She didn’t resign temporarily from the high school because of her nerves. No, siree Bob, she didn’t! They kicked her out of that high school before the spring term ended – and I hate to tell you the reason that step was taken! A seventeen-year-old boy – she’d gotten mixed up with!</p> <p><i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> by Tennessee Williams, Scene 7</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>It will be done. I will whisk these waters into a turmoil And the Aegean shores will be littered with the Grecian dead. Go now, Goddess Athene, to great Mount Olympus and From those heights you may watch the Greek fleet sink into oblivion. Be warned you mortals who violate the temples of the gods And the sacred tombs of the dead for in these acts lie your own destruction.</p> <p><i>The Trojan Women</i> by Euripides, Prologue</p>

↙ **INFORMAL – FORMAL** ↘

Informal	Formal
Links with naturalistic. May make use of slang, swearing, omit words, employ ‘ungrammatical’ sentences. Sentences are often simple in structure, although they may be rambling.	Uses Standard English, with conventional grammar. Uses ‘educated’ vocabulary. Sentences are usually longer, more complicated and more carefully organised.
<p>Example:</p> <p>Yeah, but nah – it ain’t that. It’s like that space-dust shi- space-dust stuff – s’only way I can say it. S’like poppin’ in my head – fizzy, know what I mean. Sparklin’. You know that stuff? Space-dust.</p> <p><i>Prayer Room</i> by Shan Khan, p.21</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>What is a statesman’s responsibility? To ensure the rule of law. But the citizens must be taught to obey that law of their own will. I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannise over a group of animals.</p> <p><i>Our Country’s Good</i> by Timberlake Wertenbaker, Act 2 Scene 2</p>

↙ **PROSE – VERSE** ↘

Prose	Verse
Prose is the medium of most modern drama. Words are in the order of normal speech. Lines can be of different lengths on the page. Although prose speeches may use different speech rhythms, they do not normally use a regular rhythmical pattern. Prose is used for naturalistic dramas (although at times for non-naturalistic dramas as well).	Verse and poetry are different, although poetry is usually in the form of verse. Dramas in verse are usually ‘heightened’, taking them away from naturalism. Verse features repeated rhythms and often employs rhyme. Most of what Shakespeare wrote is in ‘blank verse’ – unrhymed lines with an underlying rhythm and a standard length.
<p>Examples:</p> <p>See the extracts from <i>Our Country’s Good</i> and <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> above.</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p>See the extracts from <i>The Trojan Women</i> (above) and <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (below).</p>


LITERAL - FIGURATIVE

Literal	Figurative
<p>In literal language, the words say what they mean plainly; there can be little disagreement about the surface meaning. If a character says 'I am going out and I may be some time', the surface meaning is clear. The context in which a line like this is said may give it dramatic meaning, however. (This is the line said by Captain Oates as he left the tent on Scott's Antarctic expedition. He had chosen to go outside and die so that the others stood a chance of survival without him.)</p>	<p>Figurative language makes use of 'figures of speech' – ways of using language more creatively and inventively. There are many 'figures of speech'; they often have specialised names. The use of images (metaphors, similes, personification) is common, but look out for understatement, exaggeration, puns, euphemisms, epigrams, aphorisms and paradoxes, as well as the use of irony.</p>
<p>Example:</p> <p>This is Mary Warren's deposition. I – I would ask you to remember, sir, when you read it, that until two week ago, she were no different than the other children are today. You saw her scream, she howled, she swore familiar spirits choked her; she even testified that Satan, in the form of women now in jail, had tried to win her soul away...</p> <p><i>The Crucible</i> by Arthur Miller, Act 3</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Come, night; come, Romeo; come, thou day in night; For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night Whiter than new snow upon a raven's back. Come, gentle night; come, loving black-browed night; Give me my Romeo; and, when I shall die, Take him and cut him out in little stars...</p> <p><i>Romeo and Juliet</i> by William Shakespeare, Act 3 Scene 2</p>

The world of the play

All plays, from pantomimes to tragedies, create their own 'worlds' with their own atmospheres and 'rules'. Reading, watching and acting in plays open the doors to these 'worlds' and we enter into them in our imagination. Language experts tell us that people 'see' their world through their language (for example, the more words you have for different types of snow, the more types you are able to perceive). By studying the language used in a play (naturalistic, formal, poetic, dialect, etc.), you can understand more about the world of the play and how your character fits into it, if you're acting a role.

For directors and designers, studying the language is important too. The kind of world which is being created by the language needs to be reflected in the visual elements of the play, for example, and in the way you encourage the characters into their roles and help build their relationships with each other and with the audience.

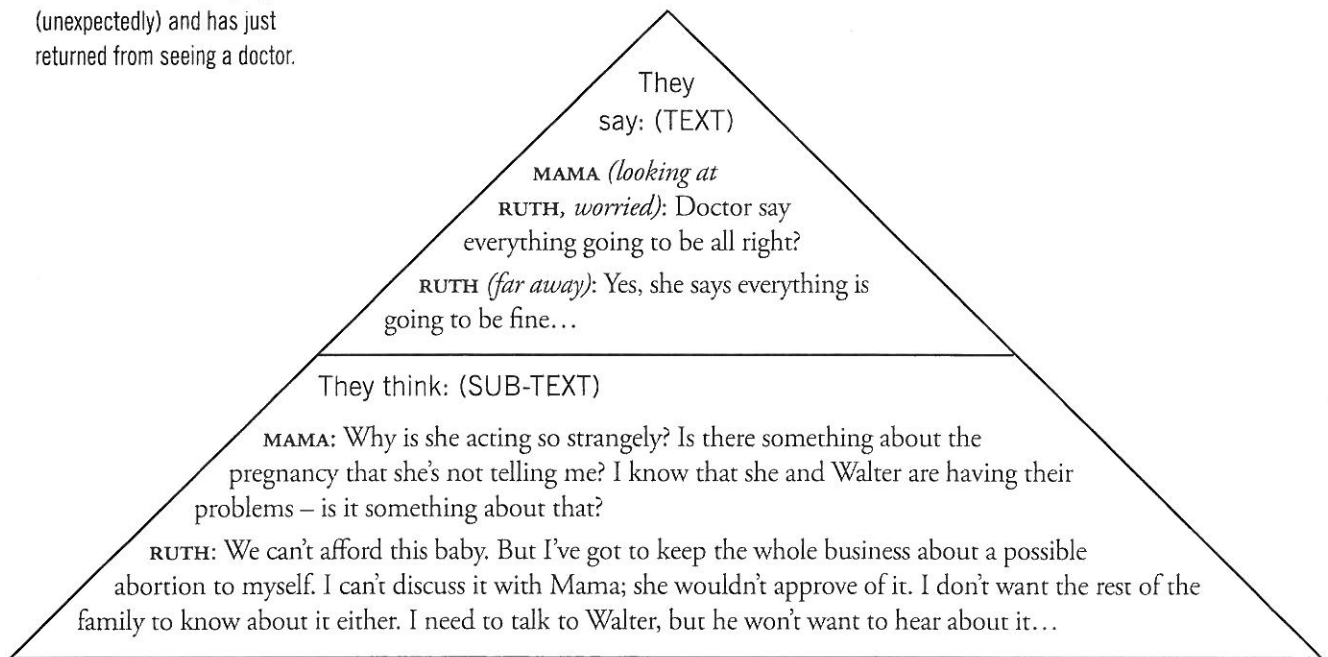
Activity 8

Think about a play you know well. What pictures does it create in your mind? What feel does it have? (For this exercise, it's better if you haven't seen a film of it.) Are there parts of the language you remember? How do these contribute to the pictures in your mind?

The lines in the diagram below are from Act 1 Scene 2 of *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (1959). The Walters are a poor black family, living in Chicago. Ruth is married to Mama's son Walter, who has unrealistic dreams of setting up in business (he's a chauffeur at the moment). Ruth has discovered that she is pregnant (unexpectedly) and has just returned from seeing a doctor.

Text and sub-text

Especially in modern naturalistic plays, there is a great deal going on under the surface of the words which are being said out loud. Like the iceberg with its bulk under the water line, most of the meaning may be implied by the tone in which something is said (or the fact that something isn't said) rather than by the words on the page. As a student and as an actor, you need to be very aware of the sub-text (see page 34 about using language for a purpose). Look at the following example from *A Raisin in the Sun*.



Key term

sub-text

Activity 9

Read through a section of one of your texts. Find an example of the use of sub-text (a character thinking something different from the words he or she is saying).

Make up the words that he or she is actually thinking. Why is the character saying not these words (the sub-text), but the words of the text?