

**Dialogic Problems and Miscommunication:
A Study of David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992)**

prepared by ☞

**Dr. Ahmed S. M. Mohamed,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts,
Assiut University**

Abstract

Since it was first produced in 1992, David Mamet's *Oleanna* has been regarded as a controversial play and won a great interest from critics who attempted mainly to clarify or give justifications for the diverse social, political and academic issues the play reflects. A great number of those critics related Mamet's play to the famous Hill-Thomas¹ hearings which had taken place one year before the play appeared. Therefore, most of the criticism considered issues such as harassment, political correctness, gender, and education. However, this article tends to study the play away from its social and political occurrences in an attempt to emphasize the dialogic problems which lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between the two characters of the play. For the critical background, this essay will refer to Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory. Of the devices which partly cause the dialogic problems, the study focuses on the nine phone calls which interrupt the dialogue and impair communication. Likewise, the manipulation and practice of power lead both characters to use coercive language styles that develop vexation and anger and consequently prevent proper understanding and mutual toleration. Furthermore, the study focuses on some other linguistic aspects of the dialogue design such as the unnecessary sophistication and linguistic mysticism used by John in his discussions with Carol who reveals a notable difficulty in understanding her professor's normal discourse either in his office or in class.

Since its debut in May 1992, David Mamet's *Oleanna* has become one of the most famous and controversial plays. It "has been the object of more widespread public rage, debate, celebration, and reproof than even the most extreme of the performance piece" (Tomc 164). In its entirety, *Oleanna* has been widely acclaimed for its treatment of current issues and problems of sounding echo in the American society of the 1990s. Such issues include: gender problems and relationships, sexual harassment, political correctness, and the manipulation of power (Macleod 199, 202). In their reference and emphasis on the sexual harassment, Mamet's critics have mostly relied on the Hill-Thomas hearings. For example, Walker could not avoid or dismiss the impact of the hearings, as he notes: "there could hardly have been a more incendiary issue than sexual harassment for the time, and the play seemed to weigh right into the national debate" (149). A somewhat different vision is that of Kane who regards the play as "a tragedy on the dystopia of academe" (1999, 122). Showalter asserts the influence of the hearings indicating that the action of Mamet's *Oleanna* projects "the audience's reservoir of emotion from the Hill-Thomas hearings" (17). To Kendrick, *Oleanna* "is about a number of things – sexual harassment, higher education, the battle of the sexes, the role of the middle class – but more than anything, it is about power" (par 1). Likewise, Bourne notes that *Oleanna* is "a furious probing of power politics, sexual harassment hysteria, ideological agendas, academia, the excesses of what is fatuously called 'political correctness'" (par 1).

However, Mamet did not admit the claims relating his play with the Hill-Thomas hearings, and indicated that he did not follow the hearings, and that he had started working on his play before the hearings, but the play appeared after the hearings only because he had problems with the third act. Furthermore, Mamet assured that he did not regard *Oleanna* as a play about sexual harassment and he only meant to structure it as "a tragedy about power," and adds that the two people in the play have "a lot to say to each other . . . at the end of the play, they tear each other's throat out" (Walker 150).

Controversial as it has been, the problem of *Oleanna* remains impelling and irresolvable. While most of Mamet's critics have mainly asserted the play's treatment of sexual harassment, Curry sees that "the problem with *Oleanna* is that it is not really, or not primarily, about sexual harassment, but rather about false allegations . . . or distorted claims of harassment" (par 11). Since these problems have been frequently discussed and won considerable scrutiny, this paper tends to study the play away from its social and cultural occurrences. It will concentrate on the dialogic problems which seem to have led to miscommunication and hindered the possibility of proper understanding between the characters particularly because "the life in Mamet's theatre is in its language, in the funny pathetic dialogues that capture the American idiom" (Harriott 61). Since this study is mainly concerned with

dialogic problems, it has become essential to make use of the critical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory in which he assumes:

The single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life. (*Problems*, 293)

Obviously, the primary assumption of Bakhtin's theory indicates that any language or discourse, whether spoken or written, embodies a dialogue. Besides, he indicates that dialogue consists of three elements: a speaker, a listener, and a relation between the two.

In his dialogic theory, Bakhtin gives particular emphasis to the concepts of dialogue, heteroglossia, utterance and appropriation. By dialogue, he means the dialectical relationship between speaker and listener, "between self and other where self occupies a relative centre and requires the other for existence" (*Dialogic Imagination* 270). Dialogue is thus viewed as a subsidiary part of human discourse that differs from monologue. He distinguishes between monologue and dialogue considering them as single-voiced and double-voiced discourse respectively. Monologic, single-voiced

discourse is a discourse that recognizes only itself and its object. Dialogic, double-voiced discourse, on the other hand, is a discourse that contains a deliberate reference to someone else's words. Such discourse inserts a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own (Zappen 14).

The term heteroglossia refers to all the forms of ordinary social speech or rhetorical expressions that people use in their daily life. Bakhtin uses the term heteroglossia to describe the multiple voices engaging in a dialogue. Therefore, heteroglossia focuses on the production of meaning through different dialogues of any discourse. A good example of heteroglossia can be found in the different ways a person uses the language with his friends, with his professors, with his parents, or with any other person at various situations. The primary element of any dialogic or heteroglossic situation Bakhtin classifies as utterance. In *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin notes that "the authentic environment of an utterance. . . is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance" (272). Utterance, according to Holquist, "is always an answer to another utterance that precedes it, and is therefore always conditioned by, and in turn qualifies, the prior utterance" (60).

Mamet's dramatic language and style are so distinctive in their realistic spoken quality that Roudane addresses Mamet: "I think

one of your major contributions to the stage is your 'language.' Clearly you have an ear for the sound, sense, and rhythms of street language" (180). This quality is further emphasized by Cohn as he writes:

The critic Ross Wetzsteon quotes Mamet: 'I'm fascinated by the way, the way the language we use, its rhythms, actually determines the way we behave rather than the other way round.' I would argue however that the way Mamet's characters behave determines their language Skillful as Mamet is with the controlling rhythms sonically, he is even more adroit with grammar and vocabulary to reveal the insecurity of his characters. (111)

Mamet's dialogic language may be problematic in the sense that spoken street language may lack grammatical correctness and formality. For example, the characters, in their rapid ripostes, "can shift tenses- usually from past to present. Their subjects and verbs can disagree in number, and pronouns can run riot" (Cohn 113). Other words may be dropped or interrupted by angry tones and intolerant behavior.

In regard to the entire dramatic design of his plays, Mamet indicates that "the strictness of the dramatic form should conduce to a greater level of communication between the audience and the playwright" (Harriott 92). The dramatist is right and he has truly achieved the sort of dramatic strictness he protests, but his dramatic strictness in *Oleanna* seems to be consciously and intentionally

devised to capture specific dialogic exchanges which lead to a state of miscommunication between the characters and eventually become a motive and justification for the problematic end; a matter that can be evidently noticed in the conflicting critical views and the varied responses to the play.

In terms of its academic and linguistic features, Mamet's *Oleanna* can be easily distinguished from the other plays. It is characterized by a distinct and careful choice of words (i.e. *Oleanna*'s diction is mostly respectable, formal, and devoid of derogatory, offensive, or profane expressions except for the final scene when John loses control and bursts out in anger racking and offending Carol by two or three profane words), linguistic sophistication and scholarly notions and concepts (i.e. notions and concepts are exclusively introduced by John on his capacity as university professor). In *Oleanna*, the use of language differs from the language used by the real estate dealers of *Glengarry, Glen Ross*, or the junk retailers of *American Buffalo*, as noted by Roudane:

Not only the texture of his characters' language, but, too, the quality of human relationships defined and confined by that language. Within his junk shop or trashed office settings Mamet places his characters, whose predicaments and responses to their lives define a post modernist world in which loss, betrayal and ethical perversity dominate. (178)

In the business plays, the characters are loquacious for they are inclined to "talk about 'talk,' so that [the] verb can mean speak, ask, boast, chat, describe, explain, comfort, confide, bargain, deal, reveal, deceive, teach intend, and even act" (Cohn 115). Nevertheless, Mamet's plays have one dialogic aspect in common which appears in the characters' lack of power to express all that they want; an evidence of their inability to communicate. In *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), for example, Lingk confesses to Roma: "I can't negotiate," and when he is asked to say the words, he simply replies, "I don't have the *power*."² This sort of inability to express one's own ideas and feelings is comparable to the early scene in *Oleanna* where Carol looks so inarticulate that John begins his course of power and domination.

In its final effect, though different in word choice and grammar commitment, the dialogue in *Oleanna* reflects similar linguistic aspects and qualities to those used in business and power plays such as: *American Buffalo* (1976), *Glengarry Glen Ross*. These aspects are reflected in Mamet's use of dialogic language that intrigues his readers and audience through a number of devices by which he tends to quicken the speech on the stage. Likewise, even though these plays undoubtedly bear clear and significant messages, their dialogues tend to show that communication between the characters is often impaired by "business pressures . . . and we are left in

American Buffalo . . . with a pessimistic sense of the possibilities of human relationships” (Esche 165). The business pressures definitely cause problems of misunderstanding occasionally expressed by Teach who instructs Don in *American Buffalo*: “You have to talk it out. Bad feelings, misunderstandings happen on a job. You can’t get away from ’em, you have to deal with ’em.”³ Nevertheless, Teach’s verbal experience does not help much when he is put under business pressure. He characterizes the business language and distinguishes it as business language: “Wrong, wrong. . . . We’re talking business, let’s talk business” (52). Whether by business or other life affairs the characters may be placed under pressure, and consequently they are compelled, as Cohn notes, “to omit prepositions, conjunctions, or relative pronouns. As though the conjunction ‘if’ were absent from the English language” (112). Blurring and angry as he wishes his language to be, Mamet “bases his grammatical chaos on the solecisms, digressions, and tautologies of everyday speech, but on stage they become symptomatic of the chaos in the seemingly different worlds of petty crime, real estate speculation, and the film production” (Cohn 113). However, Cohn suggests a distinction between the language used in the dialogue of *Oleanna* and that in *Buffalo* or *Glengarry* in that the “grammatical chaos” of the business plays “reinforces lexical poverty to convey a general impression of illiteracy” (113).

Like most of his other plays, Mamet's *Oleanna* is characterized by its tiny dramatic structure, typical Mamet technique in the portrayal of limited cast and clipped dialogue which Ryan describes as: "staccato, often elliptical dialogue; small casts" (393). These specific dialogue features are designed to quicken the rhythm and reflect the state of anxiety of his characters. For this purpose, Mamet uses short words and phrases, occasional disregard to syntax and grammar, and a series of repetitions, interrogations, and long pauses:

CAROL: I . . . I . . . (*Pause*)⁴

JOHN: What"

CAROL: I . . .

JOHN: What?

CAROL: I want to know about my grade. (*Long pause*)

JOHN: Of course you do.

CAROL: Is that bad?

JOHN: No.

CAROL: Is it bad that I asked you that?

JOHN: No.

CAROL: Did I upset you? ⁵

As it appears from this excerpt, there is a problem in framing context of the utterance as standardized by Bakhtin. The utterance should include the author of the utterance and the person to whom the author responds and from whom the author expects a response. The author of the utterance does not take an active position "in one referentially semantic sphere or another," as suggested by Bakhtin

(*Speech Genres* 84). On the contrary, Carol is confused as John's utterances make her doubt that her questions may be unpleasing. Her words 'bad' and 'upset' seem to reflect the state of misunderstanding.

In the rapid flow of the dialogic exchange, Mamet drops or adds prepositions, conjunctions, and question marks; and he sometimes uses italics or block capitals for certain words. Since Mamet's design of speech cannot be done at random, it must be intentionally inscribed as such either to emphasize some particular feeling, or to expose the mood and state of anger of his characters which definitely participates in the development of the sense of misunderstanding:

JOHN: OH COME ON. Come on Sufficient to deprive a family of . . .

CAROL: Sufficient? Sufficient? Sufficient? Yes. It is a *fact* . . . and that story, which I quote, is *vile* and *classist*, and *manipulative* and *pornographic*. It . . .

JOHN: . . . it's *pornographic* . . . ?

CAROL: What gives you the *right*. Yes. To speak to a *woman* in your private . . . Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You feel yourself empowered . . . you Say so yourself. To *strut*. To *posture*. To "perform." (51)

The interrogative mainstream in the play reflects a kind of difficulty for both characters to understand one another. Likewise, on several occasions, Carol expresses her desire to have a meaning of a certain phrase or concept "explained" (4). Therefore, Mamet's use of

frequent interrogatives appears as a logical expression of the numerous doubtful queries in the play:

CAROL: No.

JOHN: What?

CAROL: I can't understand them.

JOHN: . . . you . . . ?

CAROL: . . . the "charts." The *Concepts*, the . . . (35)

Mamet's interrogations pervade the play so that Carol and John, feeling unable to reply or communicate properly, repeat phrases such as: "I don't understand," (i.e. the phrase is repeated for fourteen times), "I can't understand," (16), (35), and "I don't know," (i.e. repeated for fourteen times throughout the play). Both characters question one another and their questions indicate their misunderstanding and lack of mutual tolerance. Remarkably, Mamet's dialogic design does not meet the standard requirements of dialogic process as a communicative interaction. Bakhtin's work elucidates the dialogic principle and its correlates in a whole range of discourse. According to Bakhtin, what links the chain of speech communication is "a variety of relationships to the author, but typically the person or persons to whom the author responds are authors of other utterances on the author's subject or theme" (*Speech Genre* 91). In this regard, Carol does not understand anything of John's utterances, and therefore the link is missing. Likewise, Carol's utterances which are responses to John's

utterances seem strange enough to disconnect them from one another. His succeeding utterances come as a series of interrogatives.

In *Oleanna*, the dramatic language seems to have been structured in a way to reflect a number of problems and difficulties which impair communication between the two characters of the play and anticipate greater problems of controversy among the readers and critics of the play. The first structural difficulty which causes controversy among the readers is based not on the level of language but on contextual impropriety. It arises from the play's title and the two subsequent epigraphs. The first epigraph appears immediately after the dedication page as follows:

The want of fresh air does not seem much to affect the happiness of children in a London alley: the greater part of them sing and play as though they were on a moor in Scotland. So the absence of a genial mental atmosphere is not commonly recognized by children who have never known it. Young people have a marvelous faculty of either dying or adapting themselves to circumstances. Even if they are unhappy – very unhappy – it is astonishing how easily they can be prevented from finding it out, or at any rate from attributing it to any other cause than their own sinfulness.

The Way of All Flesh
Samuel Butler

The epigraph involves an image of youngsters who enjoy life regardless of the social circumstances and conditions. As far as

Mamet's structure is concerned, there appears a female university student with countless intellectual and psychological problems which she precisely attributes to something wrong in her own personality. Carol repeatedly asserts her personal inability to cope with the study level: "I'm stupid. And I'll never learn," and emphasizes her inability compared to peers, "And everybody's talking about 'this' all the time. And 'concepts,' and 'precepts' and, and, and, and, and, WHAT IN THE WORLD YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT? . . . I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT ALL MEANS AND I'M FAILING" (14). Remarkably, the dramatic development of Mamet's play suggests antithetical implications to those maintained in the Butler epigraph. In spite of the difficulty arising from the contextual impropriety, Walker does a great favor by indicating that the epigraphs "provide support for the play's argument. . . . In the context of the quotation from Butler, the implication must be that the fault lies not with Carol but with the circumstances in which she finds herself" (157,8).

The Butler epigraph is in itself simple and direct, but it provides unnecessary obscurity and sophistication by the irrelevant mentioning of or reference to children. In this case, Walker's attempt to find a possible justification must rely on a hypothesis diminishing Carol, the teen-ager university student, to a little child. Besides, Walker refers to a certain fault, not with Carol, but 'with the circumstances,' while the problem is truly with Carol more than

it is with the circumstances. Carol is old enough to decide and identify the reason why she fails to understand the course. Confused and discouraged as she is, Carol admits the problem and frequently stresses: "There are *people* out there. People who came *here*. . . . But I don't *understand*. I don't *understand*. I don't understand what anything means" (12). By italicizing the verb '*understand*' twice here, Mamet wishes to emphasize the problem of understanding.

The second epigraph follows immediately on the next page. It seems to be likely irrelevant and vague. If there is any significance, it could be only that it guides the readers by the reference to the origin where Mamet has got the play's title:

"Oh, to be in Oleanna,⁶
That's where I would rather be.
Than be bound in Norway
And Drag the chains of slavery."
— folk song

Again, it seems difficult to force a kind of relationship between the development of the play and the ancient folk tale. This epigraph refers to notions and implications other than those provided by the play's texture. It is taken from Ole Bull's 'Oleanna.' By comparison with the ancient prototype, Mamet's *Oleanna* aims at providing a precise image of the failure to achieve success in a desired Utopian academia. "The obscure title, Oleanna," Schwartz notes, "is taken from a folk tale of a husband (Ole) and wife (Anna) selling worthless swampland to farmers investing their lives' savings and

then disappearing with all the farmer's money" (par 3). Despite the obscurity of the title and the irrelevance of the context, Walker endeavors again to provide an acceptable relevance for the title, as he notes: "Mamet has identified the world of the play as a utopia gone bad. And putting this notion together with the reading of the first epigraph, it would seem that what has gone wrong is the pedagogy" (158). Obviously, both epigraphs provide a remarkable difficulty not in their interpretation, but in their reference to irrelevant paradigms.

However, Walker's notion that the world of Mamet's play has been 'identified with a utopia gone bad' is significantly expressive of Mamet's dramatic work and critical views in general, for Mamet holds a shocking vision of the American condition of the time. In addition to the various expressions of critical and awkward problems in his plays, the dramatist indignantly declares:

the national culture is founded very much on the idea of strive and succeed. Instead of rising with the masses, one should rise from the masses That American myth: the idea of something out of nothing. And this also affects the individual. It's very divisive. One feels one can only succeed at the cost of someone else . . . at the cost of the failure of another which is what a lot of my plays . . . are about." (Roudane 178)

In such a case, Walker's interpretation of the two epigraphs provide a significant meaning since it could be also true that the problem Mamet presents in *Oleanna* is not precisely a problem of American

academia but rather a problem of the whole nation. And, by this ingenuous touch of the American academia and the emphasis on the characters' failure to understand one another, Mamet is heightening the tragic effect. Not only in *Oleanna* but also in other Mamet's plays, a great part of the problems between American people lies in their failure to communicate properly. As Harriott explains:

The characters in Mamet's plays express their muddled ideas in uncompleted sentences and sputtered obscenities, decorate their language with ornate malapropisms, pronounce their platitudes with the triumph of fresh discovery. The desperation of their lives is echoed and intensified in their desperation to be understood. Part of their suffering comes from the state of their language, and Mamet is writing about the state of that language in that language. It is an interesting paradox: to compose a spoken art form about the failure of speech. (75,6)

Mamet's emphasis on the people's failure to communicate threatens of a greater danger that makes America "an urban inferno inhabited by victims who victimize one another" (Harriott xiv).

Mamet's second epigraph would better suit another Pulitzer Prize and New York Drama Critics Circle Award winning play, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984). In this play, Mamet deals with the idea of business and property through a group of unethical real estate salesmen who attempt to sell out worthless tracts of swampland to unsuspecting buyers. Plot developments, character types, and the



language used would be all more related to the idea of land and deceit and loss expressed in the second epigraph.

Mamet's *Oleanna* reflects a number of dialogic devices which form varying levels of disruption through which the problem of impaired communication can be easily traced and diagnosed. Of these devices are the multiple phone calls which stand significant in the sense that they frequently interrupt the conversation flow and indulge both audience and characters in diverted matters which inevitably distort and hinder clear perception and mutual understanding. Throughout the play, there are nine oncoming phone calls. Five of these phone calls occur in Act One alone where John and Carol seem to need enough time and leisure for concentration, only one in Act Two, and the remaining three calls take place in Act Three. The structural distribution of these calls throughout the play reflects the actual size and texture of the three acts. Because Act One is the longest, five calls take place to disrupt the meaning and denote misunderstanding between John and Carol.

Regarding the use of the frequent phone calls in *Oleanna*, it is probably noteworthy to refer to *La Voix Humaine* (*The Human Voice*) (1930), a play which Jean Cocteau structured upon the device of a telephone call unfolding one-sided dialogue between a woman and her lover just before they end up their passionate relationship. Just as people do in real life, the voice of the woman, in Cocteau's

play, engages the audience as she tries to hold the line on until the very end. By structuring his entire play on a telephone call, Cocteau must have really initiated a distinct dialogic technique for the theatre to illustrate how a human being may hold a conversation activity and be understood by a third party other than the speaker and listener. Nevertheless, telephone calls may still be regarded as serious signifiers that can be interpreted in different ways. Primarily, they are means of communication, but they are definitely lacking one important dimension if compared to direct face-to-face communication. Besides, the phone calls may be a source of noise and disturbance to the ear. Also, conversations on phone calls cause imperfect dialogue since the utterances of the 'other' are only left to be guessed by the listeners and this inevitably causes communication impairment.

The first act begins with a phone call which is relatively the longest (i.e. it almost takes the first two pages of the play) and most significant. This call serves as a device to start a kind of dialogue rather than real action, yet it adds a further dimension to the tension between the two characters since John appears presumably preoccupied with personal and familial affairs. Carol, who comes to John's office without a prescheduled appointment, is seated on the opposite chair and keeps listening. She must be anxiously waiting for John finish his phone call to present her problem. On the phone,



John utters a number of distracted, incomplete, clipped and hazy phrases empowered by his stylistic preeminence as a university professor:

JOHN: (*On the phone*) . . . Look, I'm not minimizing it. The "easement." Did she say "easement"? (*Pause*) What did she say; is it a "term of art," are we *bound* by it . . . I'm sorry . . . (*Pause*) are: we: yes. *Bound* by . . . Look: (*He checks his watch.*) before the other side goes home, all right? "a term of art." Because: that's right (*Pause*) The yard for the boy. Well that's the whole . . . Look: I'm going to meet you there . . . (*He checks his watch.*) is the realtor there? All right, tell her to show the basement again. Look at *this* because . . . Bec . . . I'm leaving in ten or fifteen . . . Yes. No, no, I'll meet you at the new . . . That's a good. If he thinks it's necc . . . you tell Jerry to meet . . . All right? (2)

As it appears from Mamet's stage directions, John makes three pauses and looks twice at his watch within a very short time; an indication of his irritation and unwillingness to indulge in a prolonged discussion. Since John appears worried and busy, Carol should have been a little more considerate. Of course it would have been better for her to arrange for another meeting. Instead, Carol chooses to delay the unwilling John. Further than that, she does not state her problem plainly and directly so as to see how John is going to help her. Shortly, John realizes the problem of misunderstanding and Carol's failure to cope with his class. He admits the greater part of the responsibility as he explains: "Well, then, that's my fault.

That's not your fault. And that's not verbiage. That's what I firmly hold to be the truth. And I am sorry, and I owe you an apology" (17). Instead of his apologies, John should have travailed to explain to Carol the unclear parts which she does not understand, or to suggest any amendments that would make her able to follow him in class, or to suggest any other solution for her to end the present discussion since he knows: "And I suppose that I have had some *things* on my mind We're buying a *house*, and . . ." (17).

In spite of his apparent distraction, John's language here seems to be controlled by two factors: his male tone, and his sense of and desire for dominance. As for his male voice, Mamet's major plays, "either totally exclude or marginalize women" (Radavich 46). In spite of his uneasy feelings and distraction, the language John uses in this phone call shows his masculine drive as well as his priggish attitude. Although Mamet's *Oleanna*, unlike the other business plays: *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, introduces an angry female voice through the character of Carol, the plays shares other masculine aspects and overtones. Mamet's intent to design most of his plays as virtually lacking the presence of female figures is justified by Zeifman:

In the brutally macho and materialistic dog-eat-dog world of American business, values like compassion and spirituality—implicitly inscribed as "feminine" and therefore, in the figures of Ruth and Grace, devalued and

excluded – are totally lacking. The world of American Buffalo – the world of American business – is thus literally ruthless and graceless. (128, 9)

In *Oleanna*, however, Mamet introduces a young female who is given an equal chance to express herself as well as her gamut; a group that is most probably made of female students. When Carol realizes that she has become more powerful than John, she shakes off her hesitation and, in an articulate voice, diagnoses the problem of understanding: “You don’t understand? You’re angry? What has led you to this place? Not your sex. Not your race. Not your class. YOUR OWN ACTIONS” (64). Apparently, John’s anger confuses his utterances.

From the start, the two characters of *Oleanna* experience an intrinsic difficulty understanding one another, partly due to the remarkable difference in language competency between the professor and the student. Normally, the discourse of university people, more particularly at campus, is distinguished by a set of constraints and values imposed by the academic environment and traditions. Therefore, this language is characterized by such linguistic features as: formal quality, scholarly terminology, and grammatical structures. Consequently, “the discourse of academe,” as Lakoff notes, “seems especially designed for incomprehensibility . . . we know, you cannot understand, you may not enter. But for insiders they are a secret handshake” (143). Of course any

educational institution, according to Lakoff is made up of “a community of unequals, as manifested through its communicative structures” (155). Mamet must have been aware to illustrate these communicative structures through the verbal inequality between John’s sophisticated style and Carol’s inability to perceive. The first sentence that Carol ever utters in the play: “What is a ‘term of art?’”(2) indicates the first problematic quality which Bakhtin describes as the ‘dynamics of speech indexicality.’ Carol’s question here is not related the context of the dialogue she really needs to develop with John. Furthermore, it reveals that she is spontaneously stuck into a semantic dilemma leading her to forget that she is there only to discuss a personal problem. Thus, carol gives the first indication of her failure to communicate positively and constructively. As in colloquial speech, she reveals how collapsed her nerves are: “No, you’re right. ‘Oh, hell,’ I failed. Flunk me out of it. It’s garbage. . . . I know I’m stupid. I know what I am” (14).

Although John makes a rational move by his readiness to discuss her problem: “I want to talk to you,” (15) his cynical answer and the subsequent repartee illustrate how their conversation fails to achieve verbal or non-verbal communication. It is not only because of the difference in their linguistic competence, but also because of their manner and mood during the discourse. Because they are hazy, irritated, and uncertain, they intolerantly and rapidly exchange

ripostes so as to reflect their confusion and mutual mistrust: "Is that what you want to talk about?"(3) John replies Carol's question reluctantly, while yet trying to simplify the diction and clarify the meaning: "Let's take the mysticism out of it, shall we? Carol? (*Pause*) Don't you think? I'll tell you: When you have some "thing." Which must be broached. (*Pause*) Don't you think . . ." (3). Ironically, John's reply adds more mysticism instead of removing it. Moreover, by doing this he leads Carol to develop an implicit aggressive tone and suppressed inner bitterness:

CAROL: . . . don't I think . . . ?

JOHN: Mmm?

CAROL: . . . did I . . . ?

JOHN: . . . what?

CAROL: Did . . . did I . . . did I say something wr . . .
(3).

Likewise, John's attempt to communicate with Carol fails because his explanation of the "term of art" seems so dubious and uncertain that Carol's instant reaction reflects implicit indignant feelings of disrespect and mistrust. The professor's logic and knowledge seem to be far less than expected to push on a convincing dialogue:

JOHN: It seems to mean a term, which has come,
through its use, to mean something more specific
than words would, to someone not acquainted with
them . . . indicate. That I believe is what 'a term of
art,' would mean. (*Pause*)

CAROL: You don't know what it means . . . ?

JOHN: I'm not sure that I know what it means. It's one

of those things, perhaps you've had them, that you look them up, or have someone explain them to you, and you say "aha," and, you immediately forget what . . . (3, 4)

With such uncanny tone, hesitant manner, and impractical knowledge, John fails either to satisfy the academic standards demanded by the institution he works for, or to convince Carol on the personal level. The professor's extensive doctoral studies must have made him a true observer and a better instructor. It is shocking indeed that John falls in trouble early in the play when he fails to give a clear definition of the phrase he himself used. In addition to John's failure to understand and decode the signals Carol uses to communicate with him, he also fails as an instructor, for the education process must by necessity embody the teacher's capacity to understand and follow the academic progress and achievement of his students, or else why are evaluation systems set and considered essential in any academic program? John's failure would only lead to awkward dialogue exchange that will inevitably lead to misunderstanding.

This early scene marks the difficulty both characters create, as Leibler notes: "In his plays, Mamet invariably deals with his characters' difficulties with communication, and the obstacles they meet and create when trying to establish intimate contact with each other" (75). As a student, Carol must be seeking to learn language

proficiency and skill. On his part as a professor, John must have the privilege and experience to send and receive clear messages via educated but not bombastic and sophisticated language style.

Ironically, John interrupts and clips all that his student wants to say:

CAROL: . . . but how can you . . .

JOHN: . . . let us examine. Good.

CAROL: How . . .

JOHN: Good. Good When . . .

CAROL: I'M SPEAKING . . . (*Pause*)

JOHN: I'm sorry. (30)

In her three speech attempts, she fails to complete a sentence. When she is fed up with his interruption for the first two times, she bursts out in the third attempt for which Mamet uses all block capitals: "I'M SPEAKING." By doing this, Carol tries to let John wait or listen to her for a while or have a sense of proper discourse manners. Nevertheless, he unhesitatingly repeats three successive and immediate apologies that give a powerful proof of his detachment from whatever she wants to say or communicate with him:

CAROL: How can you . . .

JOHN: . . . I beg your pardon.

CAROL: That's all right.

JOHN: I beg your pardon.

CAROL: That's all right.

JOHN: I'm sorry I interrupted you. (31)

Here, both persons' utterances provide a good example that shows how they are detached and seem to hear their own voices only. John

apologizes but never stops or listens as if he intentionally means to vex, enrage or satirize Carol rather than please or apologize to her.

In fact, John is devoid of the emotional and intellectual faculties that his status as an instructor requires. Instead, John is very proud of himself, his theories, his affairs, and his career which he rates above anything. Self-conceited as he is, John does not properly use only means that communicates him with the out-of-campus world thus losing several chances for complete and satisfactory communication process. His frequent assertion that he “can’t talk now” and that he will “call later” makes it clear that things are still hazy and undetermined. John is also disconnected from the inside by his isolation in the office space with only Carol whom he sees but fails to understand or let her understand him. However, the only chance for better communication between John and Carol appears immediately before the end of Act One when Carol starts to open a new channel and tell him about something that she has “never told anyone” (38). But, as usual, this is aborted by the fifth phone call after which John shifts abruptly to his tenure “surprise” (40). John fails here also because he is self-centered and emotionally dry.

At John’s campus office, dialogue is generated Carol, the student, begins to talk with John, the professor. This process must have surely embodied their involvement in a positive learning/teaching experience, but in fact they fail to do this due to

some dialogic problems. Bakhtin's work provides a method for better understanding and interpretation of the dialoging process. He explains that interpretation is a constant struggle between the "internally persuasive discourse" (i.e. one's word) and the "authoritative discourse" (i.e. transmitted word), and, Bakhtin adds: "the word in language is half someone else's, becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, and when he appropriates the word, adapting to his own semantic and expressive intention" (*Dialogic Imagination* 293). Therefore, when individuals get involved in a dialogue, they must assimilate words through "their own conceptual systems filled with specific objects and emotional expression" (282). Besides, Bakhtin is concerned with "dimensions and dynamics of speech indexicality – ways that the now-said reaches ahead to, anticipates, and somehow incorporates the to-be-said" (Bauman 145). However, John and Carol participate in the confusion of the roles of speaker and listener by overlapping one another's utterance by interrupting each other and this is simply because they both lack the 'conceptual systems' and the 'emotional expression.'

In addition to the numerous priggish pauses John makes in his unconvincing explanations, both characters clearly commit a problem of appropriation. For Bakhtin, appropriation is an integral component of dialogue. In order to engage in a dialogue, one must

be able to understand and react to the utterances of others. The dialogic failure between John and Carol can be partly attributed to the pretentious use of sophisticated and superfluous terminology: "broached" (3), "concepts", "precepts" (14), "index" (24), "charts" (36), "pedantic", "paradigm"(45), "The Stoics"(47), and many other unnecessary wordings which Carol does not understand. When he tells her that a "paradigm" is simply "a model" (45), she reluctantly wonders: "Then why can't you use that word?"(45). The responsibility for this whole course of misunderstanding does not lie only on John's choice of diction and vocabulary, but also on Carol's way of thinking, talking, and feeling. As Bigsby notes, Carol's "language is confused and confusing She seems to fail to understand what he is telling her, or respond to his attempts to put her at her ease" (232, 3). In *Speech Genres*, Bakhtin gives emphasis to the importance of the word and significance in the dialogue. He explains:

A word . . . is interindividual. Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the soul of the speaker and does not belong only to him. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one). (121,2)

John's choice of the words and Carol's reaction suggest that there is something wrong in their dialogical situation which eventually causes miscommunication and misunderstanding.

When the phone rings for the second time, John has already been out of mood and temperament. The ringing of the phone goes on for a while to interrupt the dialogue which has already been impaired by vexation and disrespect. Significant as they are, these frequent phone calls represent the channel that communicates John with his out-of-campus world. Henceforth, they disrupt the ongoing teacher-student line of thought. John's high-pitched conversation with Carol makes him so outrageous that he briefly ends the second call with Jerry; a sign that he disconnects himself again from his personal affairs. Jerry is calling for important details concerning the purchase of the new house, but John's tone and method indicate how irritable and confused he is:

JOHN: . . . in class I . . . (*he picks the phone.*) (*Into phone*) Hello. I can't talk now. Jerry? Yes? I underst . . . I can't talk now. I know . . . I know . . . Jerry. I can't talk now. Yes, I. Call me back in . . . Thank you. . . (10)

Obviously, John is unable to discuss Carol's problem or talk about his important affairs properly. The repetition of the phrase: "I can't talk now" emphasizes his disruption and lack of concentration; a state of mind described earlier in the play: "I'm sorry that I was distracted" (5).

John's distraction is further emphasized by the third telephone call through which he appears utterly divided between two channels of impaired communication. The first is supposed to exist "within the teacher-student paradigm . . . the motivation and the finalities underlying the exercise of power," where Mamet, as Leibler notes, "unveils the desires and the deficiencies which his uncultivated quasi-aphasic characters are unable to express openly or even acknowledge to themselves" (75). The second channel is with the out-of-campus world through the phone. John fails to communicate through either of these channels:

JOHN: (*The phone rings*) Through . . . (*To phone:*
Hello . . . ? (*To Carol:*) Through the screen we create.
(*To phone:*) Hello. (*To Carol:*) Excuse me a moment.
(*To phone:*) Hello? No, I can't talk nnn . . . I know I
Did. In a few . . . I'm . . . is he coming to the . . . yes.
I talked to him. We'll meet you at the No, because
I'm with a *student*. It's going to be off . . . This
is important, too. I'm with a *student*, Jerry's going to
. . . Listen: the sooner I get off, the sooner I'll be
down, all right. . . . (*He hangs up.*) (*To Carol:*)
I'm sorry. (19,20)

The next phone call bears a remarkable structural significance as it weighs paradoxically with the synchronizing plot development. Because it is the only phone call which John does not answer, and the characters are only shortly interrupted by the ringing of the phone, positive communication between John and Carol must show

any advancement. Probably John's intentional leaving of the phone unanswered can be interpreted as an attempt from John to avoid communication disruption and keep on through one channel with Carol, but unfortunately, he makes an odd offer that leads Carol to entire misunderstanding:

JOHN: . . . (*The telephone starts to ring.*) Wait a minute.

CAROL: I should go.

JOHN: I'll make you a deal.

CAROL: No, you have to . . .

JOHN: Let it ring. I'll make you a deal. You stay here.

We'll start the whole course over. I'm going to say it was not you, it was I who was not paying attention.

We'll start the whole course over. Your grade is an

"A." Your final grade is an "A." (*The phone stops ringing.*) (25)

John's offer to give Carol an "A" as a final grade is ridiculous since it is neither based on logic nor on academic achievement, and Carol must be truly confused. Even if he is innocent about trying to help Carol, she must be excused when she misinterprets John's deal for two reasons: first, the semester is almost "only half over," (25); and, second, she must suspect that John will definitely demand a price for this, especially as he insists: "Your grade's an "A." Forget about the paper. You didn't like it, you didn't like writing it. It's not important" (25). In their discourse, John and Carol show varying degrees of intellectuality and rhetoric which impose a barrier hindering proper understanding between them. Leibler assures that:

“besides these regulations of oral communication, there also exists a gestural code of obedience by which the teacher expects the student to abide” (72). But, since Carol cannot easily accept the offer without being convinced, the situation becomes a turning point at which misunderstanding and confusion become supplemented by overt incredibility and suspicion:

CAROL: But we can't start over.

JOHN I say we can (*Pause*) I say we can.

CAROL: But I don't believe it.

JOHN: Yes, I know that. But it's true. What is The
Class but you and me? (*Pause*)

CAROL: There are rules.

JOHN: Well. We'll break them. (26)

Is John so naïve that he shows readiness to break the rules to grant Carol an “A”. Is it because he feels that they are “similar” (21), or because he “likes” (27) her? Unnecessarily, too, he punctuates his offer with a sarcastic view of higher education: “It's a sick game. Why do we do it? Does it educate? In no sense. Well, then, what is higher education? It is something-other-than-useful” (28). Moving from misunderstanding to wickedness and evil intentions, Carol continues but with a sly purpose now: “What is something-other-than-useful” (28). Carol's intention now goes beyond what she needs to know and by this question she causes a problem of speech indexicality because she intentionally carries out the dialogical process for purposes other than communication.

Carol does neither believe nor understand John simply because what he offers is beyond the legal methods or means of belief or understanding. But, according to Leibler: "when the teacher chooses to operate within the question-answer structure, the student is granted the right to speak, but only the form of the duty to answer" (72). Obviously, Leibler refers to the implicit power and domination assumed and practiced by the teacher over the student. Therefore, John never imagines that Carol will refuse the offer since she must react within the circle he has drawn for her. In fact, this sense of domination provides a good justification for communication failure. Proper communication and emotional understanding occur naturally and normally between parties who are power equal.

In its dramatic effect and cast design, Mamet's *Oleanna* can be compared to Eugene Ionesco's *La Leçon* (*The Lesson*) (1951)⁷ In both plays, the dialogue between the professor and his student ends in a catastrophe. In spite of the four-decade-lapse of time between the two plays, and the fact that they arose from different generations and different backgrounds, it seems that both plays present a relative crisis in the cultural and social heritage. Both plays of course rely on the teacher-student relationship to exemplify the model of speech variety at a given educational situation. In Ionesco's play, the Maid advises the Professor: " no! ... You mustn't do that! . . . especially not philology, philology leads to calamity. . . (60). On his part, the

Professor continues to ignore the Maid's advice until the Pupil gets tired of the Professor's voice and explanation. The young Pupil begins to complain: "I've got a toothache, but the Professor continues: "I said: Let's continue. Take now the word "front". . . . Have you taken it? The word "front" is the root of "frontispiece." It is also to be found in "affronted" (75).

Before the play ends, the professor kills the Young Pupil with an illusory knife, and with the assistance of his Maid, he gets rid of the corpse. Obviously, Ionesco uses a number of imaginary tools such as: the imaginary knife, imaginary piece of chalk, and the imaginary blackboard. The imaginary knife appears as the professor explains the meaning of 'knife' in different languages. The imaginary piece of chalk and the blackboard are seen when the professor explains subtractions. These illusory things become illogical, meaningless, and absurd as it is difficult to believe that a pupil may be killed by an imaginary knife. Instantly, the Professor regrets that he did not adhere to the Maid's warning, but Marie, the maid blames him for his ignorance: "An intellectual like you is not going to make a mistake in the meaning of words" (77). The play ends with the arrival of another young pupil who comes to the professor's doorstep for another lesson.

Absurd as it is, Ionesco's *The Lesson* "is concerned with the meaningless of meaning, the way we embalm ourselves in

knowledge. How much of what you know do you really understand and how much have you merely absorbed? The pupil gains nothing from her lesson; it is the audience who are supposed to learn” (Wood n.p.). In the same way Samuel Beckett ends the scenes of *Waiting for Godot* Ionesco ends up his play where it began with a new student coming at the professor’s place for another lesson. In a sense, the ending marks a difference between Ionesco’s *The Lesson* and Mamet’s *Oleanna* because John will most likely be dismissed from college, not only lose the chance of becoming tenure. John will have no chance of destroying another student as the Professor of *The Lesson* does. Other differences between the two plays can be also traced in the character design, development, and personal traits. Unlike Mamet’s characters who are given specific names, Ionesco’s Professor and Pupil are typified, and it is only the Maid who is given the name Marie. Moreover, Carol’s language, appearance, and behavior at the beginning of *Oleanna* assert her weakness and confusion which turn out gradually to unveil her power, aggression, and decisiveness. On the contrary, Ionesco’s Pupil grows weaker and weaker as the play advances towards the end. However, in both plays, there are two students who fail to understand their tutors and the catastrophic end in both plays is a direct consequence of the misunderstanding. Likewise, the dialogue in both plays is characterized by similar pauses, abrupt phrases, repetitions, and

interrogations which all indicate the problematic feature leading to miscommunication which in turn renders a sense of the absurdity and meaninglessness.

As the phone calls stand for distraction and disruption due to their obstruction of the communication flow, they render the situation more symbolically significant as the first act begins and ends with relatively long calls. Further, the fifth call provides another structural significance in that it intermediates the nine calls of the play. Given this structurally significant location, the fifth call marks the climax of the dialogic problem, for Carol, who is now filled with bitterness, gathers her power to launch her attack and exchange power roles with John in the subsequent two acts. Immediately after John hangs up, she begins to recollect herself and gather the necessary information she needs to use against John, "the tenure announcement," "the new house" (40). From this time on, Carol assumes power to press hard on John and this develops their mutual misunderstanding even further. Carol becomes so articulate that she gives John a moral lesson:

CAROL: You love the power. To *deviate*. To *invent*, to transgress . . . to transgress whatever norms have been established for us. . . . But to the aspirations of your students. Of *hardworking students*, who come here, who *slave* to come here — you have no idea what it cost me to come to this school — you *mock* us. You call education "hazing," and from your so-



protected, so-elitist seat you hold our confusion a
joke, and our hopes and efforts with it. Then you sit
there and say “what have I done?” And ask me to
understand that you have aspirations too. But I tell
you. That you are vile. And that you are exploitative.
(52)

Carol’s power gives her tongue to express all the suppressed feelings she could not previously reveal to John. Not only has she become able to defend her fellow students, but also a whole gender: “Don’t call your wife baby. You heard what I said” (79). However, it remains true that the major problem is a problem of understanding and communication. It may be mistaken that when Carol grows powerful she may be looking for revenge which is not true as she declares to John while rebuking him:

CAROL: YOU FOOL. Who do you think I am? To come
Here and be taken in by a smile. You little yapping
fool. You think I want “revenge.” I don’t want
revenge. I WANT UNDERSTANDING. (71)

Obviously, Mamet is keen to reflect the problem of understanding here as it appears from the emphasis he gives to the phrase written in all block capitals.

The only phone call in the second act occurs near the end when John has already heard of Carol’s complaint to the tenure committee. He knows that Carol has raised a number of charges against him. Realizing how colossal the blunder is, John chooses to avoid any distraction: “. . . I can’t talk about it now. Call Jerry, and I

can't talk now. Ff . . . fine Gg . . . good-bye. (*Hangs up.*) (*Pause*)
I'm sorry we were interrupted" (55). John becomes fully aware of
the development and therefore apologizes for the interruption
caused by his frequent phone calls. Likewise, John has become
aware of the emotional dimension and its importance for human
communication:

JOHN: You said "Good day." I think it is a nice
day today.

CAROL: *Is it?*

JOHN: Yes, I think it is.

CAROL: And why is that important?

JOHN: Because it is the essence of all human
communication. I say something conventional, you
respond, and the information we exchange is not
about "weather," but that we both agree to converse.
In effect, we agree that we are both human. (53)

It is ironical that John tries to talk rationally with Carol only when it
is too late for she has now changed. When she says "Good day," she
does not wish to get herself involved in a rational discussion with
him, but she only intended to be cynical as it appears both from her
following comments and Mamet's use of the italics: "*Is it?*" Carol
soon prepares to leave his office.

In Act Three, three successive calls take place to continue the
course of interruption, and impair communication. Like the other
calls, the three calls of the third act graphically depict the gradual
collapse of the nerves and the entire destruction. The first call (i.e.
seventh in the play), interrupts the dialogue at a very critical point:

JOHN: ALL RIGHT. ALL RIGHT. ALL RIGHT. (*He picks Up the phone.*) Hello. Yes. No. I'm here. Tell Mister . . . No. I can't talk to him now . . . I'm sure he has, but I'm fff . . . I know . . . No. I have no time t . . . tell Mister . . . tell Mist . . . tell Jerry . . . (62)

Growing more irritable, John fails to utter a single meaningful sentence to indicate that he is capable of communication. When he hangs up and goes back to converse with Carol, the whole matter is muddled into a more complex situation leaving the issue of Carol's accusations unsettled.

The last two calls are equally significant as they take place when the tragedy approaches its end. When the phone rings John does not wish to reply, but Carol advises: ". . . you'd better get that phone. (*Pause*) I think that you should pick up the phone (*Pause*)" (77). Disruption and misunderstanding reach a summit everywhere around John so that he becomes unable to understand anything. Every thing is now vague and incomprehensible: "What does this mean?" (77) John shouts at Carol in sheer panic. Apparently, the angry mood impairs the communication process and the dramatist's use of language "reflects both the inner pressures of his characters and the confusion of the urban environment" (Kane 1992, 284). Realizing that his failure to communicate, and that he must move to rescue his career and future dreams, John is obliged to look for another valid channel: "I have to talk to my lawyer" (78).

Before he finishes the last phone call, John's blinding outrage and failure to communicate or compromise with Carol lead him to order Carol to get out of his office. Before she does so, he grabs and knocks her down to the floor, picks a chair and approaches towards her. Carol's reaction, on the other hand, is dense with communicative expressions: "Yes. That's right. (*She looks away from him, and lowers her head. To herself:*) . . . yes. That's right" (80).

Mamet's design of the finale drawing the dialogue abruptly with short repartee bears dense metaphoric meaning. It could imply that both characters feel defeated because they become certain that they have already reached a cul-de-sac. In *Oleanna*, as in other plays, Mamet is keen on using dramatic language suggesting that "communication frequently has less to do with actual language than with the silent empathy that exists between the speakers" (Dean 25). To this effect, it will remain unclear if Carol's final declaration at the end of the play is a sign of her acceptance or rejection of John's ravenous behavior so that proper reaction can be taken with or against either side. In its dramatic action as well as dialogue structure, *Oleanna* presents a problem, but Mamet "seldom tells us directly that he is doing so, and even more rarely offers any kind of clear solution to the problems" (Skeele 513). The experience of this last scene asserts Mamet's dramatic vision that "the theatre is not a

place where one should go to forget, but rather a place where one should go to remember” and that “the participant who reflects is then led on to questions of further exploration” (Esche 168).

In addition to the interruption and communication impairment caused by the phone calls, Mamet's dialogue is designed, on purpose, as a supplementary structure that gives a dramatic rendering of the problem. In a way, Mamet uses distinctive dialogic language which he himself describes, in an interview with Roudane, as “poetic language. It's not an attempt to capture language as much as it is an attempt to create language. The language in my plays is not realistic but poetic. . . . It's language that is tailor-made for the stage” (Roudane 180). Obviously, Mamet's previous dramatic experience shows that he does not travail in creating such a dialogic exchange of clipped disruptive statements, phrases, or words to give an adequate expression of the characters' inability to concentrate or understand; an evidence and proper reflection of the problem:

CAROL: You don't do that.

JOHN: . . . I . . . ?

CAROL: You don't do . . .

JOHN: I don't, what . . . ?

CAROL: . . . for . . .

JOHN: . . . I don't for . . .

CAROL: . . . no . . .

JOHN: They don't . . .

CAROL: No.

..... [my ellipses]

JOHN: I think so, though. (*Pause*) I'm sorry
that I was distracted. (4, 5)

As verbally noted by John, an obvious sense of distraction overwhelms the dialogue. They are both distracted and John does not even give a chance for Carol to finish her sentence by clipping the word 'forget' and reduce it to 'for', so the meaning becomes hazy. In a short while, they become aware of their difficulty to communicate and understand one another. John attempts to diagnose the problem attributing it to "some basic missed communi . . ." (6), but Carol considers the problem of misunderstanding as a problem of language, namely John's:

CAROL: I'm doing what I'm told. I bought your book,
I read your . . .

JOHN: No, I'm sure you . . .

CAROL: No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's difficult
for me. It's difficult . . .

JOHN: . . . but . . .

CAROL: I don't . . . lots of the language . . .

JOHN: . . . please . . .

CAROL: The language, the "things" that you say . . . (6)

Carol complains of the language John uses in his book, in his lectures, and in his discussions of the "things." They talk over and over, but their talk drives them farther away from one another even though they are seated together and are supposed to be communicating within a respectable closed medium. The office space here, being insulated from the noise outside must have served

positively in transmitting the messages from sender to receiver, but since they are both catalyzed against one another, they fail to exchange clear and honest sound messages. Disruptive noise comes from their inside rather than from their outside surroundings.

The context in which Bakhtin introduces his concepts of rhetoric suggests that all human dialogical activity and human discourse are based on a multiplicity of voices: "this dialogized or dialogical rhetoric is not only a multiplicity and diversity of voices, a "heteroglossia," but an act (and an active) listening to each voice" (Zappen 8). In *Oleanna*, as well as in other plays, Mamet presents people "who play language games by manipulating others with monologic language" (Geis 90). Therefore, dialogic problems occur and impair communication between John and Carol whose clipped angry utterances fail in transmitting information and clear messages. Instead, each of them shows a tendency to ignore the other speaker. Herman notes that, "nearly all of Mamet's plays hinge on the opposition of two individuals, the nature of the rift, and the energy available for reconciliation" (126). In *Oleanna*, the dialogue between John and Carol seems problematic because it fails to bridge or narrow the gap. Of course there are reasons of which Geis mentions the "unbalanced relationship between speaker and listener suggests that even though characters' meetings are cast as dialogic exchanges, the operative force . . . is primarily a monologic one"

(91). They fail to communicate because each of them listens to his own voice. Even at times when they appear as self controlled and less ravenous at one another, John and Carol seem to be communicating through completely disconnected channels:

CAROL: I feel bad.

JOHN: I know. It's all right.

CAROL: I . . . (*Pause*)

JOHN: What?

CAROL: I . . .

JOHN: What? Tell me.

CAROL: I don't understand you.

JOHN: I know. It's all right.

CAROL: I . . .

JOHN: What? (*Pause*) What? *Tell* me. (37)

One more dialogic problem that leads both characters to undergo this mutual miscommunication lies in their inability to control their nerves. The most astonishing or rather frightening aspect in this context is that the action takes place at an academic environment where John and Carol, are supposed to talk and behave within a respectable code of ethics. Natural and typical communication between them must be based on the status imposing a kind of mutual understanding not only of the language levels, but also an understanding of their roles and limits. Instead they keep on pressing and exercising subversive powers and prejudices. In this consideration, John's sense of superiority and pretentious arrogance

control his attitude as if he is the only one who possesses the absolute knowledge and truth:

JOHN: Sshhhh.

CAROL: No, I don't under . . .

JOHN: Sshhhhhh.

CAROL: I don't know what you're saying . . .

JOHN: Sshhhhhh. It's all right.

CAROL: . . . I have no . . .

JOHN: Sshhhhhh. Sshhhhhh. Let it go a moment. (*Pause*)

Sshhhhhh . . . let it go (*Pause*) Just let it go. (*Pause*)

Just let it go. It's all right (*Pause*) Sshhhhhh. (*Pause*)

I understand . . . (*Pause*) What do you feel? (36, 37)

Here, John places himself in a position where he has the right to approve or deny Carol's attempts to understand him. He frequently interrupts and cuts off her speech and reroutes the conversation according to his own desire. As MacLeod notes, "the power of the lecturer and the weakness of the students derive from their respective and relative status, not from their sex" (204). Consequently, they both fail to perceive the complex levels of language. They disregard the limits of respect and mutual understanding partially because Mamet "appropriates the stage with a singular vision. This unity of vision most often finds its expression in terms of an implicit critique of a contingent and decidedly ambiguous universe" (Roudane 177). While Roudane attributes this sort of perception to an 'ambiguous universe' Skeele narrows the scope for he notes that Mamet "uses the groping inarticulations and

dizzying verbal constructions of his characters to form a chorus of complaint against spiritual emptiness at the chore of America” (512). Like most writers, in addition to his own artistic vision, Mamet must have had early influences on his art. His father was a labor lawyer whose sense of the language was very particular and his mother was a teacher of retarded children. His parents were divorced when he was ten; an event which Herman regards as very important and influential on the dramatist’s use of language: “The toughness of language, irony, and comedy that play around this basic division may be related to this fundamental event in the playwright’s life” (126,7). In his plays, Mamet proves that the characters of *Oleanna* are not normally inarticulate but due to some pressures they become unable to transmit clear and communicative messages through their flagrant biases and prejudiced views.

From singular dramatic visions, John and Carol adamantly depend on a self-biased right of expression and interrupt each other while tacitly claiming the right and power over one another. Eventually, this “leads them down the slippery slope to a point where, at the end of the play, they tear each other’s throat out” (Walker 160). Mamet’s *Oleanna* seems to expose the moral disaster in such an academic atmosphere where hierarchical differences among its members must be recognized and established. In fact, the play deals with teaching and failure, not only for Carol to pass the

course, but generally for people to read and understand one another. The problem is truly impelling for John's failure must be emphasized since he fails as an educated professor. It becomes clear then that when free thinking and reasonable dialogue lack toleration and forgiveness, understanding becomes impossible and both sides lose.

John and Carol fail to compromise because they are continually at pressure as they manipulate their power and desire to suppress one another. Bigsby notices that, "there is little sign of sentimentality," and adds that the play "is, first and foremost, a study of power" (232). Regarding their relationship, it is noticed that John's language is very much influenced by his known and recognized power. At the beginning, he looks boastful and proud of his faculties as he criticizes "the Artificial Stricture, of 'Teacher,' and 'Student' " (21). In his priggish attitude, John begins to practice this overriding power in his conversation with Carol: "I know how . . . believe me. I know how . . . potentially *humiliating* these . . . I have no desire to . . . I have no desire other than to help you" (5). Unfortunately, this method usually fails simply because healthy human relationships can never develop between unequal parties. When he recognizes this failure to communicate with her, he turns out in an egoist manner to reprimand Carol: "Look. Look. I'm not your father"(9). Eventually, John comes to a point proving that he is

almost disconnected from Carol: "though I sympathize with your concerns, and though I wish I had the time, this was not a previously scheduled meeting" (13), even though Carol manages to drag his feet and delay him for about half an hour.

In regard to the manipulation of power, MacLeod believes that "the power of the lecturer and the weakness of the student derive from their respective and relative status" (204). Therefore, John derives his power, his pride, and self esteem from his status as faculty member when he exceeds the limits of Carol's understanding as a student. Eventually, John's self conceit leads him to deprecate the entire education system: "I came *late* to teaching. And I found it Artificial. The notion of 'I know and you do not'; and I saw an *exploitation* in the education process" (22). John's negative vision shows that he dismisses and elevates himself above every thing else in the system. His sense of power and worthiness leads John to add more confusion and perplexity to Carol's:

JOHN: The tests, you see, which you encounter, in school, in college, in life, were designed, in the most part, for idiots. *By* idiots. There is no need to fail at them. They are not a test of your worth. They are a test of your ability to retain and spout back misinformation. Of *course* you fail them. They are *nonsense*. And I . . .

CAROL: . . . no . . .

JOHN: Yes. They're garbage. They're a joke. Look at me. Look at me. The Tenure Committee

Come to judge me. The Bad Tenure Committee
... they had people voting on me I wouldn't
employ to wax my car. (23)

John's angry language shows his readiness to monopolize the conversation to reveal much of his own worth and power. Even when his position is at risk near the end of the play, he insists: "It's my *name* on the door, and *I* teach the class" (76). In fact, Mamet uses italicized John's "*name*," and the pronoun "*I*" to stress the fact that John is more interested in his person and name than in other tasks and duties he is entitled to. Doing this, Mamet tends to provide possible justification for John's inner desire to separate himself from his environment.

Towards the end of the play, when Carol changes the power roles with John after she has filed the report to the Tenure committee accusing John of harassment, she still reveals a difficulty to understand his diction even though John has become much weaker in front of her outspoken impertinence:

JOHN: Even if you were inclined to "forgive" me.

CAROL: It would be wrong.

JOHN: And what would transpire.

CAROL: Transpire?

JOHN: Yes.

CAROL: "Happen?"

JOHN: Yes.

CAROL: then *say* it. For Christ's sake. Who the *Hell*

Do you think that you are? You want a post. You
want unlimited power. To do and to say what you

want. As it pleases you — (66)

From her singular vision, Carol deliberately asserts that the whole problem lies in her professor's strong desire for power and domination. Whether Carol's assertion is right or wrong, she expresses it in an angry verbal tone:

CAROL: [my ellipses] Do you know what you've *worked* for? *Power*. For *power*. Do you understand? And you sit there, and you tell me *stories*. About your *house*, about all the private *schools*, and about *privilege*, and how you are entitled. To *buy*, to *spend*, to *mock*, to *summon*. All your stories. (64,5)

Cynical as it appears, Carol's dialogic structure shows a remarkable change in her power of articulation. She is now able to speak and give alternative verbs which Mamet tended to italicize, but as it seems she is still unable to communicate properly.

By and large, Mamet's dramatic dialogue is skillfully designed to reflect the major thematic problems. For this purpose, the dialogic problems lead to communication impairment and misunderstanding. These dialogic problems take various forms and methods. Primarily, Mamet's use of the phone device through which nine frequent calls interrupt the action and distort the context of the conversation. In addition to the phone calls, Mamet uses wrong and improper utterances represented by short and abrupt linguistic stops caused either by the interruption of the characters or by their own failure to

find the proper method and choice of communication. Along with these come the unnecessary sophistication and linguistic mysticism which lead to the problems of improper speech indexicality and misappropriation mostly employed by John. Carol, on the other hand, reflects a similar problem by her utterances which indicate her essential dialogical difficulty and inability to understand her professor. Communication between them fails also because of their manipulation of power. In this way, the disruptive voices of Mamet's plays "reflect the 'American dream of communication,'" Geis notes, "Mamet's characters pretend to speak, to communicate, and to relate with other people, in a world where everyone is isolated. The wires have been cut" (103,4).

Notes

1. The Hill-Thomas Hearings were conducted by the United States Senate Judiciary Committee and were eventually televised to the whole nation on 11-13 October 1991. The hearings were conducted to investigate Prof. Anita Hill's allegations of previous sexual harassment by Clarence Thomas, a Supreme Court nominee. The hearings did not indicate any legal significance, but to the public they symbolized a referendum on sexual harassment and other gender issues in America during the last decade of the twentieth-century. More news update can be retrieved at:
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,976770-3,00.html>
2. David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross*. (London: Methuen, 1984), 54. All subsequent references are to this edition and indicated in textual parentheses.
3. David Mamet, *American Buffalo*. (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 47. All subsequent references are to this edition and indicated in textual parentheses.
4. All ellipses, italics, and block capitals or capital initials in the quotations from *Oleanna* are placed as they are used by the dramatist in the text (i.e. to show the disruption and confusion, or emphasis), unless otherwise indicated in square brackets by the researcher.
5. David Mamet, *Oleanna* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993). 24,5. All subsequent references are to this edition and indicated in textual parentheses.
6. The folk tale of Ole Bull (1810-1880), is about a talented Norwegian musician who toured around the world, kept on playing his violin until he arrived in Pennsylvania. He liked the place and

therefore bought a wide area of land hoping to establish an idealistic community. He called it 'Oleana', and hoped that his fellow Norwegians would live peacefully away from the tyrannies and suffering at their homeland. Unfortunately his enterprise failed because the land he bought was barren and impossible to farm. Losing a great deal of money and effort, Bull and his fellow Norwegians were obliged to go back to their native land. The site of his venture is now the Ole Bull National Park (Walker 1997, 158).

7. One slight difference is that the cast of Ionesco's play includes three characters: Professor, Young Pupil, and a Maid, but the dialogue is most entirely limited to the Professor and the Pupil because the Maid leaves the stage most of the time. She only appears shortly at the opening scene to meet the Young Pupil and let her in, then again to warn the Professor to "remain calm" and to avoid his prolonged discussion on philology:

Eugene Ionesco, *Four Plays*, Trans. Donald Allen (New York: grove Press, 1958). All subsequent references are to this edition and indicated in textual parentheses.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas, 1981.

———. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

———. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern McGee. Austin: University of Texas, 1986.

Bauman, Richard. "Commentary: Indirect Indexicality, Identity, Performance: Dialogic Observation." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15.1 (2005): 145-150.

Bigsby, Christopher W. E. *Modern American Drama: 1945 – 2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Bourne, Mark. *The DVD Journal*. 2003:
<<http://www.dvdjournal.com/reviews/o/oleanna.html>>

Curry, J. K. "David Mamet's *Oleanna* as Commentary on Sexual Harassment in the Academy." A paper presented at the Third Annual Conference on Intellectual Freedom, Montana State University-Northern, April, 1997:
<[http://mtprof.msun.edu/fall 1997/ JKCURRY. html](http://mtprof.msun.edu/fall%201997/JKCURRY.html)>

Dean, Anne. *Language as Dramatic Action*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990.

Esche, Edward J. "David Mamet," *American Drama*. Ed. Clive Bloom. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Geis, Deborah R. *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama*. Michigan: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996.

Harriott, Esther. *American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and interviews*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company Inc., 1988.

Herman, William. *Understanding Contemporary American Drama*. South Carolina: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1987.

Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Ionesco, Eugene. *Four Plays*, Trans. Donald M. Allen. New York: grove Press, 1958.

Kane, Leslie "David Mamet," *Contemporary Jewish – American Dramatists and Poets*. Eds. Shatzky, Joel and Michael Taub. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

———. Ed. *David Mamet: A Casebook*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992.

Kendrick, James. 1998-2006

<<http://www.qnetwork.com/?page=review&id=597>>

Lakoff, Robin. *Talking power: The politics of language*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

Leibler, Pascale Hurbert. "Dominance and Anguish: The Teacher-Student Relationship in the Plays of David Mamet," *David Mamet : A Casebook*. Ed. Kane Leslie. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992.

Macleod, Christine. "The Politics of Gender. Language and Hierarchy in Mamet's *Oleanna*." *Journal of American Studies* 29.2 (1995): 199- 213.

Mamet, David. *American Buffalo*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.

———. *Glengarry Glen Ross*. London: Methuen, 1984.

———. *Oleanna*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Radavich, David. "Men among Men: David Mamet's Homosocial Order." *American Drama* 1.1 (1991): 46-60.

Roudane, Matthew C. "David Mamet," *Speaking on the Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman. Alabama: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1996.

Ryan, Steven. "*Oleanna*: David Mamet's power play." *Modern Drama*. 39.1(1996): 392-403.

Schwartz, Dennis. May, 2006:

<<http://www.rovers.net/~ozus/oleanna.html>>

مشاكل الحوار وسوء التواصل: دراسة لمسرحية ديفيد ماميت أوليانا (١٩٩٢)

ملخص

منذ أن ظهرت مسرحية ديفيد ماميت أوليانا على خشبة المسرح سنة ١٩٩٢، وهي تشغل مساحة واسعة من الجدل بين الرأي العام، وقد نالت هذه المسرحية كثيرا من الاهتمام و الدراسة من قبل النقاد الذين ركزت دراساتهم على توضيح أو تقديم التبريرات للقضايا الاجتماعية والسياسية والأكاديمية المتنوعة التي تتعرض لها أو تشير إليها المسرحية بشكل مباشر أو غير مباشر. ومن الواضح أن عددا كبيرا من هؤلاء النقاد قد ربطوا بين مسرحية ماميت وجلسات التحقيق المشهورة في قضية أنيتا هيل وكليرنس توماس التي وقعت قبل ظهور المسرحية بعام واحد.

ونظرا لأن العديد من الدراسات النقدية للمسرحية ركزت في مجملها على القضايا السابق ذكرها، فقد تبلورت فكرة هذا البحث لدراسة المسرحية بعيدا عن الخلفية والأحداث الاجتماعية و السياسية و التركيز على التصميم الدرامي للحوار في محاولة لتأكيد و توضيح المشاكل الحوارية التي أنت بدورها إلى سوء التواصل و التفاهم بين شخصيتي المسرحية وبالتالي يمكن إيضاح جانب آخر من المشكلة، ونظرا لاهتمام ميخائيل باختين بقضية البلاغة و الحوار، كان من الضرورة الإشارة إلى بعض النقاط النقدية التي تناولها باختين في نظرياته ومنها نظرية الحوار، على وجه الخصوص، وذلك بغرض توضيح القصور الذي أدى إلى المشكلات الحوارية والتي تسببت بدورها في سوء التواصل وعدم التفاهم بين البروفيسور جون و تلميذته كارول، بالرغم من سير الأحداث بينهما فقط في مكتب الأول طوال العرض المسرحي لا يقاطعهما سوى رنين التليفون.

ومن الأساليب اللغوية المستخدمة في الحوار، تركز الدراسة على المكالمات الهاتفية التسع التي يستقبلها البروفيسور جون، لتحديث تقطعا في الحوار وتشوش على التواصل. و من ناحية أخرى، توضح الدراسة أن أسلوب الهيمنة وممارسة السيطرة والنفوذ من جانب جون وتلميذته كارول (كل على حدة و حين الشعور بالقوة والسيطرة على الآخر)، هذا الأسلوب كان له بالغ الأثر على استخدام أساليب اللغة الجبرية التي دفعت كلا الشخصين إلى الانزعاج والغضب وبالتالي أعاققت التفاهم والتسامح المتبادل بينهما .

بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فقد ركزت الدراسة على السمات اللغوية الأخرى المستخدمة في بناء الحوار مثل: السفسة والغموض اللغوي غير الضروري الذي يستخدمه جون بشكل واضح (ربما لكونه أستاذا جامعيا ينتقى من الألفاظ و المفردات ما يتناسب مع مستواه الأكاديمي)، في مناقشاته مع كارول طالبة الجامعة التي تعاني من صعوبات مبدئية في فهم الحديث العادي لأستاذها إلى جانب مشاكلها الأساسية في فهم المقرر الجامعي الذي يقوم جون بتدريسه لفرقتها.