

FUNCTIONS OF NON-VERBAL MESSAGES IN MIHAIL SEBASTIAN'S AND MARGUERITE DURAS'S WORKS

RALUCA-MIHAELA LEVONIAN

The importance of body language as a carrier of meaning during communicative exchanges has been proved by the development of the science of interpersonal communication. Non-verbal messages play a major role for the interpretation of the verbal discourse, which they can emphasize, complete or contradict. Our study is based on the assumption that non-verbal messages occurring in literary texts are even more important than the ones which occur during real-life conversations. Non-verbal communication in literature – and especially in dramatic writings – is never accidental or redundant (as may happen in real life), but always provides information for the spectator or reader¹.

I have chosen for the purpose of this study two theatre plays by the Romanian author Mihail Sebastian and the script of the film *Hiroshima, mon amour* by Marguerite Duras. Although the works may seem extremely different, we shall see that a short analysis of main non-verbal messages can highlight both similarities and discrepancies between the literary texts.

Jocul de-a vacanța [Holiday Play] brings forward a group of characters, two women and four men, who are spending their summer holiday at a challet in the mountains. One of the men, Ștefan Valeriu, persuades them, little by little, to break all connections to the outer world and to forget their social statuses and their common life. Valeriu falls in love with a young lady, Corina, who abruptly decides to put an end to the affair, by leaving the challet. The play *Steaua fără nume* also focuses on a love affair. The plot of the play takes place in a country town. Marin Miroiu, a teacher of astronomy at the local highschool, leads a dull life and finds his only contentment in his scientific work. The teacher has discovered a new star in the sky, for whom he has yet been unable to find a proper name. His life is going to change as Mona, a mysterious young lady, comes to the town. She has fled from her rich boyfriend, a passionate gambler. The love story between the teacher and the lady lasts only for a night, because Mona decides to leave the town and go on with her previous, carefree existence, provided by her rich fiancé.

¹ Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, second edition, London, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 38–39.

The plot of Marguerite Duras's work also consists in a love affair. A difference lies in the fact that this relationship is previous to the beginning of the dramatic text. In *Hiroshima, mon amour*, the relationship between a French woman and a Japanese man is seen on a double background: at a general level, connected to the disaster in Hiroshima, and at an individual one, in connection to the woman's personal drama. She was punished earlier for her love to a German soldier.

The theme of all these dramatic texts is the impossibility of a love couple to last for long. Self-fulfillment through love is never complete and durable. Each time, the woman is the one who leaves, the only partner who is aware of the necessity of the break-up. The man loves passionately and finds difficult to bear the pain of the final parting. In all three plays, love develops in spite of certain social and/ or cultural rules and taboos. Ștefan and Corina live their relationship almost literally out of time and space: they know nothing about each other's lives, but it is exactly this indeterminateness that increases the attraction. The poor Professor and the rich lady make a strange couple, as their social statuses are too different for their love to last. The couple in Duras's script also transgresses a cultural difference, because the partners belong to totally different cultures. However, the transgression seems perfectly possible and motivated in Duras's view.

Although the structure of the texts is different, body language is a constitutive part of all the texts analysed. The selection of nonverbal markers poses some risks for the dramatic writers, who have to avoid both lack of originality and too much innovation: the message should be comprehensible for the spectators and not too predictable at the same time. Mihail Sebastian tries deliberately to explain his heroes' gestures, either by means of stage directions or by heroes' utterances. Marguerite Duras also feels the need for glossing the characters' attitude, but she chooses a different manner: she reveals her vision in a „synopsis”, which functions as an introduction for the text.

Sebastian presents the characters' body language accompanying their lines or in the form of global stage directions; his plays are organised according to the typical structure of modern theatre plays. This is, to a certain extent, also the structure preferred by Duras for the script of *Hiroshima*. Many stage directions are formulated between the lines of the heroes, interrupting the verbal exchange. Both similarities and contrasts are noticeable in regard to the meaning conveyed by body language. A classification of non-verbal messages can be established, according to the semantic dimension of nonverbal communication and to the functions which such messages may have.

1. For Sebastian, kinesics functions as a **means of characterization**, as in the play *Jocul de-a vacanța*. One participant in the communicative event can characterize another's behaviour: for example, Corina's presence cannot go unobserved, as she likes to be in the spotlight of her companions. Her flamboyant verbal and kinesic discourse unnerves her lover: „Ștefan: [...] I wonder what you are doing here. Can't

you feel, can't you see that you're too smart for this sleepy place? Hold it! Put your hand down! (*He comes again near her, takes her hand, somehow severely.*) This one too! Don't move. Try to make no gestures for five minutes"².

On the contrary, the male protagonist, Ștefan Valeriu is portrayed by his fear of being laughed at, which causes his endless arguments with the other tourists. His isolation is revealed not only by his harsh and unpolite words, but also by his clumsy and shy movements. The writer himself feels the need of glossing his protagonist's gestures, because, for Mihail Sebastian, a gesture expresses a character's inner world. Any alteration in the heroes' kinesic style is equal to an alteration of their state of mind; in other words, gestures can shape reality. The simple act of holding a bunch of flowers becomes a metaphorical gesture in a key scene of the play, where proper gesticulation is achieved after an initiation process:

„Corina [...] (*She goes to the lounge, takes out the flowers Ștefan has put in a vase, comes back, draws near to him and gives him the flowers.*)

Ștefan (*surprised by this gesture, hesitates, does not know how to react.*)

Corina: Take them. For a second. Hold them in your hand. (*She puts the flowers in his hand, closes his fist, in order not to let him drop the flowers.*)

Ștefan (*still taken aback, stands there, flowers in his hand, in a stiff, theatrical, extremely unnatural gesture*)"³.

Both protagonists of the play undergo an evolution process which will improve their inner self. Their first verbal exchange occurs when they are left alone and consists, for the beginning, merely of directive acts, because both characters are equally stubborn and try to influence each other. Comments on each other's kinesic styles help establishing a closer relationship; nevertheless, they also have a deeper meaning. Sebastian tries to present his protagonists' life on the whole, to represent on stage plausible characters, not general ideas.

Hiroshima, mon amour stands in contrast to Sebastian's plays, regarding this particular function of the nonverbal messages. Marguerite Duras creates two protagonists who are extremely generic, to the extent that they are not even named, but defined according to their gender and culture; ideally, they can be every man

² *Jocul de-a vacanța*, act I, scene XV: „Ștefan: [...] Mă întreb ce cauți aici. Nu simți, nu vezi că ești prea deșteaptă pentru locurile astea somnoroase? Stai! Lasă mâna asta în jos. (*S-a apropiat iar de ea, o apucă de mână, cu oarecare severitate.*) Și pe asta! Rămâi așa. Încearcă să nu gesticulezi cinci minute.”

³ *Ibidem*: „Corina [...] (*Se duce în hol, ia florile pe care Ștefan le-a pus într-un vas, se întoarce, se apropie de el și i le întinde.*)

Ștefan (*surprins de gest, ezită, nu știe ce să facă.*)

Corina: Ține. Un moment. Ia-le în mână. (*I le pune în mână și-i închide pumnul, ca să strângă bine buchetul.*)

Ștefan (*încă nedumerit, rămâne cu florile în mână, cu un gest țeapăn, teatral, foarte «poză»*).”

and every woman who have outlived the catastrophe. The male protagonist's presence is less marked than the female one's, which means that information about him are scarce, not enough to distinguish any personality traits. The main characteristic for Duras's protagonists seems to be their love for each other; everything else connected to their lives falls in the background, to the extent that the author proposes the names „Nevers” and „Hiroshima” for them („Ils ne sont en effet encore personne à leurs yeux respectifs”).

2. Nonverbal messages have an **expressive function** as they are able to convey the sender's thoughts and feelings even in the absence of the verbal discourse. In theatre plays as well as in movies, the actor's body is seen as a vehicle for conveying information to the spectator.

The carrying out of certain gestures and the manner of execution reveals the inner states of the protagonists in the play *Steaua fără nume*. The use of stage vehicles can be considered a common trait of all Sebastian's plays, since his heroes' gesticulation often implies the use of different objects. The expressive ability of the *dramatis personae*' (and hence the actors') bodies must be enhanced by use of objects which thus are turned into signifying units. In the first part of the play, the readers lack almost any information about the Professor, as he seems not to be very talkative and constantly refuses his turns. He is contented to do mostly phatic conversation. His kinesic and eye behaviour provide a glimpse into his feelings, as the passionate gestures reveal his passion for scientific research: „[...] *he unwraps the package quickly and takes out a big tome which he febrile browses, as if he were looking for a certain page, for a certain information [...]*”⁴. The reiteration of this expressive gesture will cause a conflict, because the other characters surrounding the Professor cannot grasp the correct interpretation of his behaviour and therefore suspect him of being up to some mischief. His shyness is a definitory personality trait which brings him closer to the mysterious lady who arrives into town. She is reluctant, at the beginning, to engage herself in a conversation with the Stationmaster and to disclose any kind of personal information. Therefore, she tries to inhibit all her messages in order to stop communication, but the gestures and eye behaviour supply the lack of information:

„The Stationmaster (*concerned with the problem*): Your name, Madam?...

The Stranger (*looks up at him puzzled, absent-minded*).

[...] The Professor (*draws near her, touched*): Why don't you answer, Madam? What is your name? [...] Maybe you've got a document. An identity card.

[...] The Stranger (*handing her bag to him, with a gesture of extreme fatigue*): I don't know. Search. See what you can find”⁵.

⁴ *Steaua fără nume*, act I, scene IX: “ [...] *desface repede pachetul și scoate de acolo un volum mare, pe care-l răsfoiește cu înfrigurare, ca și cum ar căuta o anumită pagină, un anumit lucru. [...]*”

⁵ *Ibidem*: „Șeful (*instruind afacerea*): Numele dumneavoastră, doamnă?...

The heroine's attitude shows her wish to withdraw from her world and to lose her old identity. This attitude is typical for her in the first part of the play. As she falls in love, she turns out to be loquacious and her behaviour becomes vivid. Sebastian's heroines, Mona and Corina, incarnate the ideal woman of his dramatic texts: extrovert, lively, rather a good comrade than a „femme fatale”.

Duras's characters are both introverts. The woman succeeds in externalizing her deepest trauma (which may as well be the trauma of a nation or a generation) in a scene which appears as the climax of their intimacy and during which she seems to undergo a process of catharsis. The disclosure of her memories and emotions is done by means of verbal utterances mixed with flash-back images. Body language acquires metaphoric connotations (the woman's bleeding hands, her mouth biting the walls of the cellar).

Since the protagonists imagined by Duras are generic, their non-verbal messages should be rare and have mostly metaphoric connotations. Nevertheless, in order to indicate temporary inner states of the speakers, the author uses self-adaptors, *i.e.* gestures which are learned as part of an individual's adaptive efforts and are meant to satisfy specific self or bodily needs⁶. The focus of attention must be the actor's body itself; the use of objects merely serves to emphasize the role of the body as a carrier of meaning:

„[...] *Puis on la voit refermer doucement la porte de cette chambre.*

Monter l'escalier, le descendre, le remonter, etc.

Revenir sur ses pas. Aller et venir dans une couloir. Se tordre les mains, cherchant une issue, ne la trouvant pas, revenir dans la chambre, tout à coup. Et cette fois, supporte le spectacle de cette chambre.

Elle va vers le lavabo, se trempe le visage dans l'eau. Et on entend la première phrase de son dialogue intérieur:

On croit savoir. Et puis, non. Jamais.”

This continuum of movements prepares the spectator for the woman's monologue and increases dramatic tension. The scene includes proxemic behaviour (walking up and down a room) and kinesic movements (twisting of the hands) which are almost stereotypical expressions of nervousness. The innovation consists here in the verbal utterances, whose meaning is built gradually, in connection to the non-verbal discourse.

Necunoscuta (*ridică spre el o privire nedumerită, absentă*).

[...] Profesorul (*se apropie de ea mișcat*): De ce nu răspundeți, doamnă? Cum vă cheamă?

[...] Necunoscuta (*intinzându-i poșeta cu un gest de nesfârșită oboseală*): Nu știu. Caută. Vezi și dumneata ce găsești.”

⁶ Paul Ekman, Wallace V. Friesen, *The Repertoire of Nonverbal Behavior: Categories, Origins, Usage and Coding*, in: Adam Kendon (ed.), *Nonverbal Communication, Interaction and Gesture. Selections from “Semiotica”*, The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981, p. 92–93.

The gradual isolation of Duras's heroine is highlighted by the decline of physical contact to her partner. Deprived of this form of contact, the woman feels the impulse of replacing the lover's touch with self-touch, a movement which indicates frailness and reminds of the childhood, as Duras glosses: „Elle: Je vais rester là. Là. *Elle quitte le café des yeux, regarde autour d'elle. Et tout d'un coup se recroqueville sur elle-même le plus qu'il est possible qu'elle le fasse, dans un mouvement très enfantin. Figure cachée dans les bras. Pieds repliés.*” The helplessness indicated by such gestures contradicts the apparent decision and self-confidence which the woman's utterance might suggest. The non-verbal messages emphasize the correct interpretation of the woman's words: they express only a wish, not a fact.

3. Another function of non-verbal messages is the **signalling of interpersonal relationships**. Research conducted on interpersonal communication has shown that non-verbal messages can function as complex signifiers, involving both sender and receiver, the most obvious case being that of the touch. Such messages occur in interactive contexts, during verbal exchanges. It is not unusual for the expressive function and the interactive one to overlap, especially when extreme positive or negative feelings are concerned⁷.

The display of emotions for the heroes of the play *Steaua fără nume* is filtered by the various social norms and rules of etiquette, in contrast to Duras's lovers and the couple from *Jocul de-a vacanța*, who enjoy the possibility of displaying their relationship. Emotional displays depend upon the background of the love story presented in the texts. The couples in *Hiroshima, mon amour* and in *Jocul de-a vacanța* live their relationship secluded from other people and the seclusion happens either at the temporal or at the spatial level.

Mona and the French woman resemble by their readiness to initiate contact to the partner: „*Elle lui embrasse l'épaule et se cale la tête dans le creux de cette épaule. Elle a la tête tournée vers la fenêtre ouverte, vers Hiroshima, la nuit. [...]*”; „The Stranger: I am a star that deviates from its route (*She is very close to him. She embraces him. A long, long kiss. Afterwards, they break away and look at each other silently*)”⁸. In both plays, it is the female protagonist the one who leads the erotic relationship, while the man submits to her desires. Though, a discrepancy can be noticed: Mona and the Professor are fully taken aback with their love, while the French woman and the Japanese man can never completely overcome the

⁷ Barbara Korte, *Body Language and Literature*, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, p. 178.

⁸ *Steaua fără nume*, act II, scene V: „Necunoscuta: Eu sunt o stea care se oprește. (*E foarte aproape de el. Îl îmbrățișează. Lung-lung sărut. Pe urmă se desprind unul de altul și se privesc în tăcere.*)”

disaster of Hiroshima and of the Second World War. The touch described in the quotation thus has a complex significance, not just an erotic meaning, since the woman's posture indicates her not losing sight of the general drama.

4. Body language also plays an important role at a conversational level. Virtually, any gesture, facial expression or eye movement may acquire the function of **regulating the flow of communication** during verbal exchanges. Mihail Sebastian's plays provide a larger range of regulating movements than Duras's script, because his texts consist of plausible conversational events. There is one specific gesture which occurs both in the Romanian and the French play, with similar functions: the look in the mirror. It is carried out by female characters and this feature might suggest an interpretation from the point of view of gender differences. The communicative force of this gesture goes yet beyond the simple depiction of female typical behaviour. It acquires a double function: the look in the mirror traces the development of the speech and also the speaker's evolution.

The French heroine carries out the gesture while she is alone and thus her behaviour is deprived of any erotic goals. Her gesture accompanies an apparently paradoxical utterance:

„Elle a eu à Nevers un amour de jeunesse allemand...

Nous irons en Bavière, mon amour, et nous nous marierons.

Elle n'est jamais allé en Bavière. (*Elle se regarde dans la glace.*)

Que ceux qui ne sont jamais allés en Bavière osent lui parler de l'amour.

[...] Regarde comme je t'oublie...

– Regarde comme je t'ai oublié.

Regarde-moi.

[Par la fenêtre ouverte on voit Hiroshima reconstruit et paisiblement endormi.] Elle relève la tête brusquement, se voit dans la glace le visage trempé (comme des larmes), vieillie, abîmée. Et, cette fois, ferme les yeux, dégoûtée."

The referent of the discourse does not seem to be a stable entity. The speaker uses different pronouns (elle/she, nous/we, je/I) as though her utterances might have two different referents. The discourse lacks semantic coherence, but only on the surface, because the real and unique referent of her utterances is the woman's tragic love for a German soldier. The female protagonist is wavering between two different moments in time and two identity levels and seeing her face in the mirror helps to bridge the gap. The movement separates two parts of her discourse: the first one includes a delusive commissive act („Nous irons en Bavière, mon amour, et nous nous marierons"), the second one includes the rejection of the proposal and of the former relationship. A similar discursive shift is indicated by Mona's gesture:

„Mona (*absorbed in thoughts*): He’s so nice. (*Silence.*) He was so nice!

Miss Cucu: Was. You said «was». (*She exits unobserved, through the door which Grig has left opened.*)

*Mona has been left staring. A few seconds pass. Then, automatically, without noticing her gesture, she takes her bag, opens it, takes out a mirror and looks at it, adjusting her hair a little. [...]*⁹

The young woman has been advised to give up her true love for the Professor and leave the small and dull country town. Although she rejects the advice at first, she slowly brings herself to do it and the change of mind is betrayed only by the use of the past tense in regard to her lover. Mona’s gesture functions as an acknowledgement of her decision because, for her, the gesture is a necessary part of the flirtation ritual. The execution of the gesture indicates that she resumes her previous existence.

The examples above show some functions of non-verbal messages which are important for the interpretation of the literary texts. Mihail Sebastian’s and Marguerite Duras’s works present similarities regarding the literary themes and the employment of specific gestures. The discrepancy comes from the degree of realism involved and, ultimately, from the seriousness of the discourse. Mihail Sebastian’s plays never lack a ludic dimension; the conflicts and the pain depicted are never to be taken too earnest. Love and happiness are a game whose rules are gradually learned by the partners. Duras portrays a love relationship deprived of any trace of ludic and the dramatism of the historical background hallmarks both the verbal and the non-verbal discourse of the play. The two writers’ views resemble also because they place female characters – and, as a result, the female body – as the central focus of attention, a feature which can be analysed by means of further research.

SOURCES

1. Duras, Marguerite: *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1960.
2. Sebastian, Mihail: *Opere alese*, volume I, Bucharest, Editura pentru Literatură, 1962.

SECONDARY LITERATURE

1. Borgomano, Madeleine: *Le corps et le texte*, in Bajomée, Danielle, Heyndels, Ralph (eds.), *Écrire: dit elle. Imaginaires de Marguerite Duras*, Bruxelles: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1985, p. 49–62.

⁹ *Steaua fără nume*, act III, scenes, IX–X: „Mona (*pe gânduri*): E așa de drăguț. (*Tăcere.*) Era așa de drăguț!

Domnișoara Cucu: Era. Ai spus «era». (*Iese ușor, discret, pe ușa lăsată deschisă de Grig.*)

Mona a rămas cu privirea în vag. Trec câteva secunde. Pe urmă, mașinal, fără să dea atenție gestului, își ia poșeta, o deschide, scoate o oglindă și se uită în ea, aranjându-și puțin părul.”

2. Ekman, Paul, Friesen, Wallace V.: *The Repertoire of Nonverbal Behavior: Categories, Origins, Usage and Coding*, in Kendon, Adam (ed.): *Nonverbal Communication, Interaction and Gesture. Selections from Semiotica*, The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981, p. 57–105.
3. Elam, Keir: *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, second edition, London, New York: Routledge, 2005.
4. Golopenția, Sanda, Monique Martinez Thomas: *Voir les didascalies*, Paris: Éditions Ophrys, 1994.
5. Hill, Leslie: *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*, London: Routledge, 1993.
6. Korte, Barbara: *Body Language in Literature*, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
7. Maingueneau, Dominique: *Pragmatique pour le discours littéraire*, Paris: Borda, 1990.
8. Mey, Jacob L.: *Pragmatics. An Introduction*, second edition, Malden, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001.