Code-switching in the text-world of a multilingual play: the senile mind style in 'You and Me'


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World Building

Discourse in the Mind

Edited by Joanna Gavins and Ernestine Lahey
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Spanglish Dialogue in You and Me: An Absurd World and Senile Mind Style

Jane Lugea

13.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I use Text World Theory (Gavins 2007; Werth 1999) in conjunction with other stylistic models to analyse a play called You and Me (Simeon 2011; Shanahan 2013). The play revolves around two elderly sisters and is set in the confines of their home. The production company behind You and Me (Little Soldier Productions 2013: 3) and several theatre critics (Dillon 2013; Teo 2012; Yorston 2013) describe the play as ‘absurd(ist)’ and my aim in the discussion which follows is to show the cognitive-stylistic means through which this absurdity is achieved. I begin by outlining the few previous stylistic studies of absurd drama which have attempted to characterize an absurd dramatic aesthetic. I then suggest that Gavins’s (2013) comprehensive account of the stylistic characteristics of absurd prose fiction might be additionally useful for the analysis of absurd drama (Section 13.2). Section 13.3 uses Text World Theory to analyse several excerpts from the play, demonstrating the many ways You and Me conforms with the label ‘absurd’.

As I outline in Section 13.4, several of the dialogue features identified – including the use of code-switching and dysfunctional communication – also contribute to a realistic depiction of the characters’ senile ‘mind style’ (Fowler 1977; Semino 2002). According to clinical psychologists, senile dementia includes ‘chronic progressive deteriorization in intellect, personality and communicative functioning’ (Bayles and Kaszniak 1987: 1) and many of the features of the characters’ dialogue outlined in Section 13.3 are consistent with these symptoms. On the basis of this evidence, it may be suggested that You and Me presents a realistic depiction of the senile mind style, as well as features consistent with absurd drama. I argue, however, that these two phenomena need not be mutually exclusive, as linguistic absurdity is certainly not the
exclusive property of absurd drama and may also be found in natural speech (Simpson 2002). In Section 13.4, I use Text World Theory again to account for how absurdism and realism are dispersed across the worlds of the play.

13.1.1 About the play

Originally a monolingual Catalan play (Simeon 2011), You and Me is an adaptation and translation into English for a UK audience (Shanahan 2013). Although the setting is never confirmed, the characters express the desire to be flown back to Spain for their funerals, which suggests that the play is set in the United Kingdom. In the Shanahan (2013) production, the actress who plays Angeleta is Catalan while the actress who plays Etelbina is from Asturias and the actresses often code-switch from English into their native languages, with Catalan and Castilian Spanish interspersed throughout the English dialogue. It seems strange that one sister is Catalan and the other is from Asturias, but this logical anomaly is one of many which contributes towards an absurd reading of the play. In the ambiguity of its spatio-temporal context, You and Me conforms with canonical ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ texts, where settings are often ill-defined and timeless (Esslin 1980/1961; Sherzer 1978).

You and Me employs interesting strategies through which the fictional world of the play is built and that invite a text-world analysis. The play centres around the two ageing protagonists in their home and never leaves the confines of that space through any explicit spatial world-switch. As sisters, Etelbina and Angeleta argue frequently and these exchanges are the source of much of the play’s humour. However, Etelbina is also very caring toward Angeleta, who shows more acute behavioural and linguistic signs of dementia (summarized in Section 13.4). The two women discuss their daily existence, reminisce about the past and speculate about their future. These conversations result in flashbacks and hypothetical flash-forwards to imagined or remembered events. These departures from the matrix text-world provide rich data for analysis from a text-world perspective.

Although no published version of You and Me exists, Little Soldier Productions were kind enough to grant me access to their script, upon which my analysis is based. Although I make reference to some multimodal elements in support of the theatrical world-building, for reasons of limited space my focus here is on the written word. Although Werth (1995b, 1999) designed Text World Theory for the analysis of all kinds of discourse, there have been limited applications of the model to dramatic discourse (see Cruikshank and
Lahey 2010; and Lugea 2013 for exceptions) and this chapter goes some way to redressing that imbalance.

In the discourse situation of a written play script, the discourse-world consists of the discourse participants, which in this case include the playwright, the translator and the reader. Each of these participants brings their individual schematic and cultural knowledge, their bank of experience and their background to bear on the construction of the text-world. Although some world-building information is provided in the stage directions, the characters’ use of reference also helps us to furnish this text-world. It is further developed through function-advancing propositions, which are essentially the clauses in the stage directions or the dialogue that advance the action. Changes in the spatio-temporal coordinates of the text-world initiate world-switches, and the matrix text-world can be departed from through the use of modality or hypothetical expressions in the same way as in other discourse types. As this chapter demonstrates, a structured approach to informational accessibility and to spatio-temporal reference allows the text-world analyst to identify how meaning is made across ontological and referential levels.

### 13.2 Absurd text-worlds

Simpson (2002) and Gavins (2013) observe that previous scholarship on absurd fiction has suffered from a lack of precision with regard to the stylistic features that constitute the genre. Absurd drama in particular remains largely ignored by stylisticians, with the exception of a few isolated studies (Cruikshank and Lahey 2010; Sherzer 1978; Simpson 2002; Vassilopoulou 2008). Sherzer (1978) and Simpson (2002) focus on the dialogic features of absurd drama and their insights prove useful in identifying whether the dialogue of You and Me conforms with the absurd tradition (Section 13.3). Given that they take a worlds-based perspective on absurd dramas, Cruikshank and Lahey (2010) and Vassilopoulou (2008) are closer to the text-world approach that this chapter applies to You and Me. To analyse several canonical absurd plays, Vassilopoulou (2008) applies Ryan’s model of fictional worlds (1991a, 1991b), a useful framework for understanding how literary worlds relate to the ‘real world’. In their text-world analysis of Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (1967), Cruikshank and Lahey (2010) demonstrate how Text World Theory, previously applied mainly to narrative texts, can indeed be useful in the analysis of drama. Although the play they analyse is in the absurd tradition, they are
less focused on its conformity with this genre and more interested in developing the text-world model for application to dramatic discourse. Thus, this chapter constitutes the first exposition of the features of drama that contribute to an absurd reading, from a text-world perspective.

Gavins has provided a detailed account of the stylistic features of absurd prose (2000, 2001, 2013), analysing a wide variety of canonical and less-prototypical absurd texts. She demonstrates that numerous features pertinent to absurd narratives can also be found in poetry (Gavins 2013), suggesting that they transcend absurd narrative to other kinds of fictional texts. As well as classic concepts from stylistics, Gavins uses Text World Theory to account for the stylistic features she encounters. Given the breadth and depth of her study into absurd prose fiction, as well as her use of a text-world approach, Gavins’s account of absurd prose fiction is evaluated here for its possible application to absurd drama.

Gavins identifies an ‘unreliable narrator’ as ‘a key trait in absurdist narratives’ (2013: 137) and describes several narrative techniques by which such unreliability is achieved. Using terminology borrowed from Simpson’s (1993) modal grammar, she identifies ‘negatively shaded modality’ as a common strategy in constructing narratorial unreliability. This describes a narrator whose frequent use of epistemic modality (e.g. ‘I think’, ‘maybe’, ‘I see’) foregrounds a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the narrative. Gavins notes that a narrator’s use of logical fallacies or incongruities can also point to unreliability in the construction of a text-world, reflecting Simpson’s (2002) and Sherzer’s (1978) observations with regard to Theatre of the Absurd’s character dialogue. While world-building is achieved through different means in narrative prose and in plays, the usual lack of a narrator in drama does not mean that there are no means of expressing viewpoint (McIntyre 2006). Instead, we rely on stage directions and character dialogue, where unreliability and incongruities may also be found.

Gavins goes on to observe that absurd narratives often manipulate spatio-temporal deixis for surreal effect (2013: 132), referring to the ways in which references to space and time can be at odds with our discourse-world understanding of how these dimensions work, contributing towards a difficulty in ‘knowing’ or in cognitively processing absurd texts. Throughout, Gavins stresses that the stylistic features she identifies are not definitive but can be traced as ‘linguistic family resemblances’ (2013: 160) within the genre. Among some of the texts she analyses, Gavins finds that multimodal elements such as font, layout and images can be employed in innovative ways (2013: 133), disrupting the reading process and foregrounding of the physicality and fictionality of the text. Fictionality may also be foregrounded through other means, such as
the use of a narrator who inhibits immersion in the text-world through their unreliability, reminding the reader of the creative process behind the text. The breakdown of the boundary between the real world and the text, what Gavins (2013: 133) (drawing on McHale 1987: 34) calls a ‘semi-permeable membrane’, can disrupt the distinction between fact and fiction in absurd discourse, as the analysis in Section 13.3 of this chapter demonstrates. The features summarized here may appear to be a taxonomy of postmodern fiction in general, but Gavins points out that they are accompanied with an existential message or philosophy that contributes towards an absurd reading (2013: 133).

13.3 The text-worlds of You and Me

The discourse-world of this play involves the spatio-temporal coordinates of the discourse context, the discourse participants and all their schematic knowledge activated in processing the discourse. The play opens with the following stage directions (Excerpt 13.1), which initiate the building of the matrix text-world, illustrated in Figure 13.1:

Excerpt 13.1

Two old women, sisters, sit silently next to each other, staring out. They have been here for hours. Neither says a word and both appear to be in their own, separate, worlds. They sit for a while. Out of nowhere ANGELETA lets out an enormous fart. Both are frozen. A very tense moment. ANGELETA then begins to laugh hysterically. ETELBINA is not impressed.

Figure 13.1 Excerpt 13.1: The discourse-world and initial text-world
The opening stage direction refers to ‘two old women, sisters’ and later gives their names, Angeleta and Etelbina; these characters are ‘enactors’ in text-world terms. As Cruikshank and Lahey (2010) maintain, the stage directions originate from the playwright, who is both a discourse participant and an enactor in the text-world. This occurs as, although a ‘playwright/narrator’ is not overtly mentioned in the stage directions, there are textual clues that such a perceiving enactor exists at the text-world level, through the use of evidential verbs such as ‘appear to be’. While the reader might make some guesses, there is no information given about the location, ‘here’, where the women sit. However, the stage directions are given in the present tense (e.g. ‘They sit’), denoting a shared time between the narrated event and its narration.

The excerpt also includes function-advancing propositions (not shown in Figure 13.1), such as ‘Angeleta lets out an enormous fart’, an action which is incongruous with discourse-world expectations of behaviour either on-stage or from elderly ladies and is thus a source of humour. Simpson identifies ‘incongruity’ as a key feature of absurd drama, arising as ‘the consequence of speakers not observing the familiar or expected routines that are cued by a particular context’ (2002: 40). However on its own, this incongruity does not necessarily result in absurdity. Rather it is the accumulation of features revealed in the analysis below that contributes to the emergence of an absurd style.

Following the opening stage directions, the character dialogue begins, as follows:

Excerpt 13.2

ETELBINA Disgusting.

More laughter.

ETELBINA Disgusting. Disgusting, you are an old fart!... Disgusting … Disgusting!

With some effort, and with her sister still laughing, ETELBINA gets herself off the sofa and goes to the tower of boxes, beginning to label them.

ANGELETA Hey, I’m sorry.

Werth recognizes that directly represented discourse is embedded in basic-level discourse, stating that for characters in a text-world:

The world they inhabit is equivalent to the participants’ discourse world: it is, as it were, simply around them. Now suppose a character in a story himself tells a story: then the world of that story is for the characters a text world; but for the participants, it is one step further removed. (Werth 1995a: 60–1)
Werth goes on to describe character dialogue as generating a sub-world, but as Gavins (2005, 2007) points out, this label houses too many kinds of world to be effective. As such, I propose that character dialogue – and indeed any kind of directly represented discourse – be regarded as generating an ‘enactor text-world’ at a remove from the originating text-world (see also Lugea 2013). This descriptive term better reflects Werth’s contention that all levels within Text World Theory are subject to the same rules (1999: 353). Thus, as discourse participants create text-worlds, text-world enactors create enactor text-worlds, for which they are responsible and which operate according to the ontological rules of that level of the discourse. Figure 13.2 illustrates the enactor text-world created in the initial few lines of dialogue quoted above:

As shown in Figure 13.2, Etelbina describes her sister as ‘disgusting’ and ‘an old fart’. This world-building information feeds back into our conceptualization of the overall discourse, the matrix text-world. As readers, we process Etelbina’s accusation as indicative of her own character (perhaps irritable or prudish?), of the character of her sister (is she truly disgusting?) and of the relationship that holds between them (disgust, intolerance?). Furthermore, the unnecessary
repetition of the word ‘disgusting’ infringes Grice’s (1975) maxim of quantity. In her analysis of canonical Theatre of the Absurd plays, Sherzer (1978) demonstrates that Gricean maxims are often broken by characters therein. There is a brief switch back to the matrix text-world with the use of stage directions, beginning with ‘with some effort’, which reveals the laboured physicality of the elderly characters. The playwright develops the matrix text-world with function-advancing propositions which tell us the movements of the characters (Etelbina gets off the sofa, goes, labels etc.). Angeleta’s verbal apology, ‘I’m sorry’, brings us back into the enactor text-world, where her use of the relational copula verb provides further world-building information about the enactors.

13.3.1 Verbal play in the enactor text-world

While the opening of You and Me serves to show the initial text-world structure, we can find clear examples of absurd dramatic dialogue in the excerpt below, which occurs after an unanswered knock at the door:

Excerpt 13.3

ANGELETA Straightening up a bit on the sofa and looking discreetly towards the door. Are they gone?
ETELBINA Yes... who?
ANGELETA Whoever was knocking at the door.
ETELBINA I don’t know. But I am guessing so.
ANGELETA And who was it?
ETELBINA Who?
ANGELETA Whoever was knocking at the door.
ETELBINA No one... someone who got lost.
ANGELETA And how do you know that they were lost?
ETELBINA Who?
ANGELETA Whoever was knocking at the door.
ETELBINA Because we were not waiting for anybody.
ANGELETA Maybe I was.
ETELBINA Then he’ll be back.
ANGELETA Who?
ETELBINA Whoever was knocking at the door.
ANGELETA But was it not you?

ETELBINA. Who?

ANGELETA. In Catalan. Qui trucava la porta, collons! [Whoever was knocking at the door, dammit!]

Sherzer observes the tendency of characters in absurd drama to participate in ‘verbal ping-pong’, whereby they seem to momentarily lose interest in the propositional content of their utterances and instead ‘are carried away by the rhythm of speech’ (1978: 276) in a back-and-forth exchange. This absurd aesthetic is clearly represented here in the repetition and rhythm across turns. Extending from the discourse level to the phonic level, Sherzer likewise finds that there is often a repetition of similar sounds, to the extent that ‘phonic properties of language are foregrounded’ (1978: 278), evident in the repetition of ‘who/whoever’. Playing with discourse and phonic structure happens at the expense of plot-driving information and Sherzer identifies the ‘dramatization of banality achieved by overly performative elements that are of low informational content’ (1978: 282). Angeleta’s use of code-switching into Catalan to end the pointless exchange contributes to an emphasis on phonic properties over propositional content, given that the audience are likely to be unfamiliar with Catalan.

In this excerpt, the characters also break Gricean maxims of manner and quantity, by being unclear and repetitive. We can use our discourse-world schematic knowledge to surmise that given their cognitive decline, the elderly characters may not break these maxims purposefully, infringing them without meaning to do so. However, the presence of additional, absurdist features of style in the play may lead to a separate implicature being drawn – that the playwright is violating the maxims in order to make the implicature that life is meaningless. Thus, what might be an unconscious infringement of Gricean maxims at the enactor text-world level, is a deliberate flout by the playwright at the text-world level. It could also be argued that Angeleta’s suggestion that she was waiting for someone (in ‘Maybe I was’) is a similarly purposeful violation of the maxim of quality, for there is no evidence to support her claim elsewhere in the play. This, combined with her use of epistemic marker ‘maybe’, lends negative modal shading to the dialogue and calls into question the enactors’ reliability and our emergent understanding of the text-world, one of many examples in the play. As such, Gavins’s (2013) identification of ‘unreliable narrators’ as key in absurd prose may also be relevant to drama, where unreliable characters can contribute to a difficulty in ‘knowing’ the text-world.
13.3.2 Modal-worlds

Although the two characters in *You and Me* never physically depart from the matrix text-world in terms of space or time, they do imagine, desire and wish for alternate states-of-affairs. This is usually performed through dialogue, which generates various kinds of modal-worlds, extraneous to the matrix text-world. Paralinguistic and non-verbal elements of performance also combine with linguistic features to transport us to these modal-worlds. The following excerpt is taken from early in the play and demonstrates a theme that recurs throughout, death. The scene also exemplifies a recurrent logic in the play that ‘one can choose whether to live or die’:

Excerpt 13.4

ETELBINA Climbing up to stand on her chair. I’ve made up my mind. I don’t want to be a problem to anyone and I am aware that it is a huge sacrifice that no one else is prepared to do . . .

ANGELETA Cuidado [Careful]

ETELBINA . . . but I’ve decided that I will never die.

ANGELETA What?

ETELBINA That I’ll live forever. Oye [Listen] Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I enjoy being here, but I’m kind of used to it and I move around easily, and now, to think about all the hassle of dying.

Mozart’s requiem begins to play, as this sequence is physically played out with ANGELETA playing various characters from the coffin bearer to mourners, while ETELBINA enacts her own death.

The last bit of breath leaving my lungs . . . so much effort. And then the ambulance arriving and them spending an hour trying to resuscitate me when all I want to do is sleep. And then finally when they have given up they zip me into a body bag and dump me in a freezing mortuary just for some doctor to drag me back out. He pokes and prods me, cutting me open pulling out my intestines, squishing my lungs before he eventually decides that I died of old age. Then they measure me for my coffin, dress me in my Sunday best and put awful make up on my face and drag my lips into a hideous smile. And then the plane journey! Aargh! I’m put in the cargo storage and sent to Barcelona because my stupid sister wants me to be buried there, even though I tell her I want to go to Asturias! And then the funeral! No! I have to endure my service. The church is full of people I don’t even know all wearing horrible black. Then men of all different heights march me in, making me feel sick in my coffin, all to depressing,
morbid music. Then set me down and open the lid for everyone to see and I am freezing. And then the priest begins to pray and tells everyone how wonderful I am ... which I already know!

ANGELETA whispers the prayers of the priest in Catalan.

ETELBINA And all the never-ending tears and the people bothering me opening the lid to kiss me and fill my cheeks with saliva and makeup Quita, quita! [Get off, get off!] and then throwing flowers on my face. Nah! Such a pain! So many unnecessary complications. I accept my condition of martyrdom and I remain here and that's that.

ANGELETA Oh! I didn't know that you could choose. I haven't thought what I want to do.

Before examining the hypothetical events around Etelbina's undesired death, I want to consider the proposition underscoring this scene, namely that death is a choice. In her fictional-worlds analysis of several canonical absurd plays, Vassilopoulou (2008) reveals that absurd dramas often have a logical incompatibility with the real world, noting that absurdist plays present the reader with 'a world that is similar to theirs but all their expectations for a realistic plot are then disrupted due to the impossibilities that take place' (2008: 174). Furthermore, Vassilopoulou also finds that 'authentication' (Doležel 1989) is blocked in absurd plays, as the characters – like narrators in absurd prose – make it difficult for readers to form an understanding of the fictional world through their unreliability. Like Sherzer (1978) and Simpson (2002), Vassilopoulou finds that, 'absurdity does not result only from the logical contradictions that render the world partially impossible but mainly from the characters' reaction to these impossibilities' (2008: 163). Thus, when Angeleta replies 'Oh! I didn't know that you could choose', her unquestioning acceptance of and contribution to Etelbina's use of flawed logic contributes to the drama's overall absurdity.

Applying a text-world approach to this excerpt, Etelbina's use of 'will' in the first line 'I will never die' activates a future world in which her dying does not happen. It is unclear whether the subsequent propositional content (Etelbina's not dying) produces a temporal world-switch to the future, or a modal-world. This is because the modal auxiliary 'will' can be used in English to mark the future tense, as well as three kinds of modality: boulomai modality (expressing desire), epistemic modality (expressing belief) or deontic modality (expressing obligation) (Coates 1983; Simpson 1993). Indeed, we could read Etelbina's intention not to die as either a future prediction, a desire, a firm belief or perhaps even a personal obligation. The ambiguity in the meaning of this auxiliary
demonstrates how a replicable text-world analysis can prove difficult (see Lugea forthcoming). Nevertheless, as a discourse-world participant who knows that death is inevitable, I read Etelbina’s use of ‘will’ as expressing desire, which is stored in a boulomaic modal-world (see Figure 13.3 for this and subsequent modal-worlds). This same boulomaic modal-world is revisited throughout the course of the play as the characters discuss and advance the desire to not die. Like most of the other modal-worlds in the play, it is generated from character dialogue and so stems from the ‘enactor text-world’ as depicted in Figure 13.3.

Advancing the enactor text-world, Etelbina’s monologue develops with her stating the reasons why she does not want to die and she begins ‘to think about all the hassle of dying’. The use of the epistemic lexical verb ‘to think’ triggers the generation of an epistemic modal-world where the imagined events around dying occur (Figure 13.3). The stage directions cue the start of Mozart’s requiem at this point, using music to further indicate a switch from the matrix text-world to an imagined world. The epistemic modal-world is not just realized verbally and musically, but also physically enacted by both characters. Etelbina enacts her dead self, pulling her face into a hideous smile, shivering in her coffin and code-switching into Spanish to tell mourners to ‘get off!’.

Angeleta takes on various roles from the airplane, to the coffin bearers and to...
the priest, code-switching into Catalan to perform the priest’s funeral blessing. Just as Gavins has found absurd narrative fiction to use a mixture of modes and genres, it seems that absurd drama can also employ the aural and physical modes available in performance for a similar effect. I would also argue that these re-enactments constitute a manipulation of spatio-temporal deixis, in the sense that the epistemic modal-world we are presented with in this scene constitutes a complete shift from the spatio-temporal coordinates of the matrix text-world of the play (from a timeless scene in the sisters’ home to an imagined living death), crossing many spatio-temporal boundaries (including a three-second plane journey to Barcelona), as well as ontological ones.

Many of the features described so far contribute towards foregrounding the fictionality of the play, drawing attention to the semi-permeable membrane between the text-world and the discourse-world. Throughout the epistemic modal-world in the excerpt above, Etelbina uses the present tense to make the imagined scene as immediate to the time frame of the text-world and thus the discourse-world of the performance as possible. This trick of tense is mirrored in the characters’ performances, as they enact the imagined events live. What were fragile, slow-moving elderly ladies in the matrix text-world become agile, animated actors in the epistemic modal-world that their enactor text-world creates, leaping on chairs and channelling various other characters, objects and events. The young actresses’ discourse-world agility is brought into the performance, dropping the old-lady act from the matrix text-world and reminding us of the fictionality of the play. This permeation of discourse-world features into the enactor text-world is not just physical but also linguistic, as the actresses’ native Spanish and Catalan permeate the English text-world of You and Me. The significance of these code-switches is explored in the next section, which examines whether the features observed in the play contribute towards the absurdity of the text, or whether they can be read as contributing towards a realistic representation of a senile mind style.

13.4 Realism and Absurdism in You and Me

The version of You and Me discussed here is aimed at an Anglophone audience, so the code-switching exemplified in the excerpts above does not contribute to the ideational meaning (Halliday 1973) and so does not serve an informative function. The fact that isolated, non-clausal elements are in Spanish and Catalan means that the code-switching does not inhibit Anglophone
understanding. However, the question as to why include it at all still remains. If we recall Sherzer’s assertion that, in Theatre of the Absurd, ‘phonic properties of language are foregrounded’ and ‘language makes itself conspicuous in its materiality’ (1978: 282), the code-switching in the play could simply be interpreted as adding to its meaninglessness and hence its absurdism.

Nevertheless, the code-switching strategies used reflect real code-switching practices. Research has shown that discourse markers, fillers and interjections tend to be code-switched (Gumperz 1982; Poplack 1980), as in Etelbina’s use of oye (‘listen’) in Excerpt 13.3. Furthermore, natural code-switches are often repetitions to emphasize or clarify the message (Gumperz 1982), as in Etelbina’s use of quita, quita, meaning ‘get off, get off’ in Excerpt 13.3. The play abounds with realistic examples of code-switching and all conform to the ‘equivalence constraint’ (Poplack 1980), whereby syntactic rules of both languages are upheld when bilinguals switch between languages. Not only is the code-switching a realistic portrayal of bilingual performance, but also of bilingual practices in the elderly, as senile dementia sufferers ‘often revert to their first language in second language contexts and tend to use the same code-switching strategies as healthy speakers’ (Hyltenstam 1995: 334). Given the realism in the use of code-switching, it could be argued that You and Me does not necessarily use alternate codes to foreground the phonic properties of language in line with an absurd aesthetic, but rather realistically portrays ageing bilingual characters.

It may also be argued that You and Me quite accurately represents a senile mind style. Semino defines mind style as follows:

… world views that are primarily personal and cognitive in origin, and which are peculiar to a particular individual, or common to people who have the same cognitive characteristics (for example, as a result of a similar mental illness or of a shared stage of cognitive development […]). (Semino 2002: 97)

Previous research has focused on literary creations of ‘deviant’ mind styles (Halliday 1971; Leech and Short 1981; Semino 2002), especially in characters on the autism spectrum (Semino 2011, 2014a, 2014b). Although the mind style of characters in narrative fiction has been explored widely, mind style in drama has received relatively little attention. One notable exception is McIntyre (2005, 2006), who explored the mind style of the elderly character Miss Shepherd in Alan Bennett’s play The Lady in the Van. He shows that the character’s flawed use of inductive logic, where she jumps to conclusions ‘on the basis of little evidence and wrong assumptions’ (2005: 28), cumulatively contributes to her mind style. In Section 13.3, we saw a similar use of inductive logic in Etelbina’s
claim, ‘I have decided that I will never die!’, where the logic is, ‘I don’t want to
die, therefore I will not’. As with Miss Shepherd, it is the repetition of such pat-
tterns that leads to the emergence of a particular mind style.

However, no study has specifically examined a senile mind style, which may
derive from features that tally with our schematic and clinical knowledge about
cognitive ageing. I have chosen to use the term ‘senile’ mind style, as senility
refers to general cognitive deterioration due to age. Dementia is an umbrella
term for a broad-spectrum syndrome which entails a progressive deficit in
cognitive functions, affecting the communicative, cognitive and memory fac-
tulties. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia, although
not restricted to the elderly, and displays more specific symptoms, including
confusion and impaired thought and speech (Román 2006). While both sisters
display symptoms of senile dementia, Angeleta certainly seems to display more
symptoms related to Alzheimer’s, culminating in an incoherent, violent and
confused breakdown towards the end of the play. De Bot and Makoni (2005)
emphasize the effect of non-linguistic factors, such as memory and perception,
on language processing in the elderly. According to inhibition deficit theory
(e.g. Hasher and Zacks 1988; Hasher, Lustig and Zacks 2007), the inhibitory
processes that regulate information entering and leaving working memory are
weakened with age. De Bot and Makoni relate this phenomenon to several key
communicative dysfunctions:

A reduction of the inhibition capacity may lead to both verbosity in production
and a slowing down of language production and decline in language compre-
hension because of the inability to suppress irrelevant candidates in selection
processes. (De Bot and Makoni 2005: 43)

Inhibition deficiency may lead to violations of the Gricean maxims of relevance,
quantity and manner, as displayed in the repetitive and irrelevant contribu-
tions advanced by both characters in the play. As Semino notes, medical accu-
cracy is not necessary for a successful fictional depiction of character, yet ‘stories
involving characters with illnesses or disorders tend to be valued, among other
things, for their degree of realism’ (2014b: 143).

The evidence from clinical accounts of senile dementia suggests that some of
the features found in the character dialogue of You and Me could actually be inter-
preted as symptoms of cognitive ageing. This would mean that these features do
not foreground fictionality, but instead realistically represent a senile mind style.
However, I should stress again that a realistic depiction of a senile mind style
and an absurd dramatic aesthetic need not be mutually exclusive. As observed
by Simpson (2002), linguistic absurdity may not be the sole property of absurd drama, but may also pertain to other unsuccessful communicative events where communicative norms are broken. Nevertheless, *You and Me* poses a problem as to how these two seemingly incompatible fictional strategies can work together.

### 13.4.1 A text-world resolution

The answer to this question can be found by examining the structure of the play using Text World Theory. In Figure 13.4, a familiar Text World Theory diagram is presented; this time without the micro-level details from the text, and instead representing the overall macro-structure of the worlds of *You and Me*.

I suggest that events depicted at the text-world level, which include the characters’ lonely reality, their isolation and their boredom, set the scene for the discourse participants’ empathetic engagement with the elderly characters. Once the characters begin to converse, some of the features at the enactor text-world level tally with our discourse-world perceptions of cognitive ageing. These features include the code-switching and the communicative dysfunction created by logical incongruities, repetitions and infringements of Gricean maxims. At this level, the dialogue can be understood as contributing either towards realistic depictions of cognitive ageing and/or conforming to classic stylistic features of absurd drama. What happens at either side of the enactor text-world
enriches this double reading, as our discourse-world schematic knowledge of ageing and the text-world representation of the elderly characters’ lonely existence can support the realist reading. Esslin observes that:

The Theatre of the Absurd can actually coincide with the highest degree of realism. For if the real conversation of human beings is in fact absurd and nonsensical, then it is the well-made play with its polished logical dialogue that is unrealistic, while the absurdist play may well be a tape-recorded reproduction of reality. Or, in a world that has become absurd, the Theatre of the Absurd is the most realistic comment on, the most accurate reproduction of, reality. (Esslin 1965: 17)

You and Me’s strategy of realistically portraying the absurdity of these elderly characters’ lonely and isolated existence at the text-world and enactor text-world levels coincides with a high degree of realism. This strategy does not preclude an absurd reading, but actually contributes to a reading of You and Me as a genuine piece of Theatre of the Absurd. Going beyond the text-world and enactor text-world levels, the use of multiple modal-worlds to portray fantastical events supports an absurd reading, as it coincides with Gavins’s (2013) findings with absurd prose. At the modal-world level, the characters depart from the confines of their banal reality and operate at the level of imagination, memory and hypothetically, bringing the play to its absurd heights. As Esslin observes, ‘the reality with which the Theatre of the Absurd is concerned is a psychological reality expressed in images that are the outward projection of states of mind, features, dreams nightmares and conflicts . . .’ (1980 [1961]: 415). While many critics have commented on the sense of alienation and meaninglessness that absurd fiction can convey, I believe that this play’s integration of truly absurd stylistic features with a realistic portrayal of the elderly characters’ existence and dialogue contributes towards a very human and heartfelt work.

13.5 Concluding remarks

By analysing several excerpts from You and Me with reference to previous research on absurd fiction, I have found that the play indeed conforms with the absurdist tradition. I demonstrated how Gavins’s account of absurd prose fiction can provide some insight into the analysis of absurd drama, but I recognize that much more work is needed in order to characterize the stylistic features of absurd drama in its own right. A text-world approach, supported by other stylistic frameworks,
has proven useful for considering both the micro-level word-building in this play as well as the macro-level structures in operation. Ultimately, Text World Theory has enabled me to tease out the layers at which realistic and absurd features operate, in order to account for the co-existence of an absurd aesthetic and a realistic representation of a bilingual senile mind style. Further research into fictional constructions of the senile mind style is necessary to expand on the brief and unique examples provided by the characters in You and Me.

Given the bias of text-world research towards fictional narrative, Text World Theory can only benefit from further application to drama and integration with stylistic models for the analysis of dramatic dialogue. Furthermore, the text-world framework was developed in and for the analysis of English discourse and although Werth (1999: 85) made claims to the applicability of the model to any text type, there has been no attempt to test the framework’s broader suitability to a wider range of languages other than English (see Lugea forthcoming). Given that languages other than English have different means to express deixis, modality and other key world-building information, Text World Theory would need to be adapted for non-Anglophone discourse analysis. With regards to You and Me specifically, future research might explore the unified use of the three languages in one text further and the potential implications of the play’s multilingualism for the readerly experience.

References


Stoppard, T. (1967), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, London: Faber and Faber.


