



# **Dramatic Dialogue as Revelation:**

## **An analysis of the characters in Alan Ayckbourn's** ***Mother Figure***

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The aim of this essay is to see how Alan Ayckbourn uses language in order to depict his characters in his play *Mother Figure* from 1974. By using a pragmatic approach, including Gricean maxims, speech acts and politeness theories, I will examine how the three main characters communicate and what conclusions can be drawn from this. First, I take a look at the language strategies given to each of the characters as they enter the stage. After that I look at the interaction and the struggle for power. The conclusion I made is that Lucy has many bald-on records, which makes her role very powerful. Rosemary, on the other hand, maintains her weak status by using many politeness strategies and vague utterances. Terry, the third character, is forced to surrender to the adult-child power struggle that Lucy has been caught up in.

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Sökord: Alan Ayckbourn, dialogue, pragmatic, Mother Figure, relationship, power struggle

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## Introduction

Dialogue, put simply, is characters conveying information verbally – about themselves, about each other, about events. (Ayckbourn 48)

When a playwright wants to create his characters, he usually draws his examples from real life. This is called realistic or naturalistic drama, which has been explained as “drama which is a representation of characters in everyday situations and using apparently real language” (Sanger 19). The language is specifically chosen by the author “as a means of expressing thoughts that characters employ as they participate in an action” (Smiley 183). These choices can be deliberately deceptive and manipulative in order to suit the author’s intentions (Herman 6). The author can choose to construct utterances that either follow or break the rules of pragmatics such as politeness strategies, speech acts and maxims. Thomas defines pragmatics as “meaning in interaction”, where the context of the words, the speakers and listeners all have to be taken into account (22). According to Culpeper, the behaviour of the characters can be the results both of the “fictional personality” and of the writer’s “motivated choice” (87). This means that in order to understand a character we can analyse the language of the play and draw conclusions on the basis of our findings. This paper will focus on the playwright Alan Ayckbourn and his one-act play *Mother-Figure*.

Alan Ayckbourn was born April 12, 1939. His father was a violinist and his mother was a novelist. His parents divorced in 1945 and he grew up in a household influenced by difficulties in relationships. He left school at the age of 17 and started a life-long career in the theatre. He joined the Library Theatre in 1957 and its founder, Stephen Joseph, would become his most important mentor. This would be the start of his career as an actor, writer and director. He eventually became the Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough in 1972 and remained as such until 2009 when he chose to step down due to a stroke that he suffered earlier in 2006 (alanayckbourn.net).

He wrote his first play, *The Square Cat*, in 1959 and has since written 74 full length plays, among these *Relatively Speaking* (1967), *The Norman Conquests* (1973), *A Chorus of Disapproval* (1985), *Things We Do for Love* (1998) and *Life of Riley*

(2010). He has also written a number of other works such as revues, children's plays and one-act plays (alanayckbourn.net).

In his plays, he is mostly occupied with people and their relationships and, as Billington notices, he is concerned with "exploring human behaviour in ever greater detail" (168). Billington also notices that there are recurring themes of loneliness, non-communication and self-absorption in his plays. Using characters that might exist in real life, Ayckbourn pushes the limits of the situation and makes us laugh at them without becoming a moralist writer (25). There seems to be a lack of connection and "unfulfilled expectations" between the couples (Dukore 89). Billington states that, at least in his earlier plays, Ayckbourn seems to have a "preoccupation with gruesomely uncomprehending husbands and neglected wives (19). One of the results of the combination of loneliness, unsatisfactory relationships and failed parental definition is the play *Mother Figure* (Dukore 52).

*Mother Figure* is the first part of a collection of five interlinked one-act plays which premiered in Scarborough in September 1974 (Billington 89). This first part was written the year before for an event called Mixed Blessings, but Ayckbourn took the piece back and wrote four new pieces called *Drinking Companion*, *Between Mouthfuls*, *Gosforth's Fête* and *A Talk in the Park* (Alan Ayckbourn).

This essay will focus on this first one-act play. I will look at how Ayckbourn uses language to depict the characters in *Mother Figure* and their relationships and power struggle. I have chosen to concentrate on two different aspects:

- The language strategies given to each character
- The relationship and struggle for power between the characters

I will first give a short background to some pragmatic methods that I have used. After that comes a brief description of the plot. I will then analyse each character as they enter the stage and look at their interactions and see what we can learn about their relationships and the power struggle that takes place. Finally, I will discuss the analysis and try to make some conclusions based on my interpretations.

## Method

Dialogue at its best reveals the soul of your character. Through what it says. Or doesn't say. And because of *how* it says it (Ayckbourn 68).

Since most dramatic dialogue is an imitation of real conversation, it has to follow the same language rules (Burton 5). If these rules are broken we look for reasons why (Sanger 28). In order to understand what happens in the dialogue of this play, I have chosen a pragmatic approach. I have used a variety of language tools, depending on what the dialogue needs. I mainly looked at Gricean maxims, politeness strategies and speech acts as a way of explaining the verbal interaction and its consequences.

H P Grice made the assumption that people who are communicating usually try to “design their contributions to be informative (the maxim of quantity), relevant (the maxim of relation), truthful (the maxim of quality and clear (the maxim of manner)” (Mandala 83). Whenever these maxims are flouted or violated, the contribution becomes foregrounded and the reader or hearer looks for underlying reasons. This means that the author can help us see certain aspects in the discrepancies between the expected and the actual utterance. Since language is contextual, what might be appropriate in one context might not be so in another. When looking at specific characters and how they express themselves, we can look at what they say and at what they intend with their utterances (Bülow-Møller 26-27). This has to do with speech acts, for example requests. Since requests inherently want the hearer to do something, the actual utterances can either be said bald-on or with redressive action (Culpeper 168). Redressive action means that the inconvenience for the hearer of the suggested request is taken into account by the speaker (Brown and Levinson 69-70). Again the context has to be taken into consideration but the way the request is said deals with politeness strategies. Politeness has to do with “strategic manipulation of language” (Culpeper 83) which takes the listener into consideration. Here we also have to take into account the social distance, the possible power difference and the level of imposition involved between the characters (Brown and Levinson 15). If what we expect does not coincide with what is actually said, we may wonder what the author is trying to convey.

Even though, as noted above, most dramatic dialogue imitates real language, it usually doesn't contain "normal non-fluency" features (Short 176). Short explains these features as verbal mistakes. They can include "voiced fillers" and "silent pauses". When they are part of the written text, they seem to have some "meaningful function" (Short 177). This has also been taken into consideration when looking at the dialogue. Let us now take a closer look at the plot.

## The play

The play starts with a presentation of Lucy, a mother of three children, who is totally absorbed in the role of motherhood (Allen 152). She ignores everything else, including the ringing sound of telephones and doorbells. After having received a phone call from Lucy's husband Harry, Rosemary, the next door neighbour, enters and tries to deliver the telephone message. The problem is that Lucy, who is all consumed with child raising starts to treat Rosemary as a child by offering her milk and comforting her with a doll among other things. The whole story escalates when Rosemary's husband Terry arrives and does not want to be reduced to a child, but starts to react as an obstinate child anyway. In the end, the neighbours leave, holding hands and the absentee husband Harry is heard over the telephone that just keeps ringing. Let us take a look at each of the characters as they enter the stage.

## The characters

Characters in plays are there, when it boils down to it, to perform certain tasks: to further the plot whilst informing us – directly or indirectly, through word or deed – of their individual thoughts and emotions (Ayckbourn 36).

The first character that we meet in the play is Lucy. In the stage directions she is described as "untidy, unmade-up, in dressing gown and slippers" (1). Ayckbourn lets us meet her chaotic situation of caring for three children without ever presenting them on stage – only through her words and her actions:

**Lucy** (*calling behind her*) Nicholas! Stay in your own bed and leave Sarah alone.

*The telephone rings*

*Lucy goes out to the kitchen, returning at once with a glass of water*

All right, Jamie, darling. Mummy's coming with a dinkie... (*As she passes the telephone, she lifts the receiver off the rest and almost immediately replaces it*) Mummy's coming, Jamie, Mummy's coming.

*Lucy goes off to the bedroom with the glass*

*The front door chimes sound. A pause, then they sound again*

*Lucy returns from the bedrooms*

Sarah! You're a naughty, naughty girl. I told you not to play with Jamie's syrup. That's for Jamie's toothi-pegs...

*The door chimes sound again*

*Lucy ignores these and goes off to the kitchen. She returns almost at once with a toilet roll, hauling handfuls of it as she goes to perform a giant mopping-up operation*

Nicholas, if you're not in your bed by the time I come up, I shall smack your botty. (1)

In this short passage, the only one speaking is Lucy. By talking to her “off-stage” or “unseen” children we learn that she has three children. These children, though never physically present on stage, become important for the plot since they give Lucy a reason for behaving as a mother (Kalsou 71). We assume that they are quite young since she uses baby-talk such as “dinkie”, “toothi-pegs” and “botty” instead of “drink”, “teeth” and “bottom” (61). There are reasons for her choices of utterances. We would expect the same kind of “bald-on-record strategy” (Brown and Levinson 94) in a real conversation. The directness of speech and the reprimands are suitable for a situation where a mother is raising her children. However, as the plot unfolds, we see that she is so caught up in her maternal role that this “parent-to-child mode of verbal behaviour” (Elsam 28) is transferred onto the neighbours. This means that her utterances are inappropriate in this new context and we get more proof of her preoccupation of motherhood (Herman 7). She uses baby talk when she offers some biscuits: “Now here's some very special choccy bics but you mustn't eat them all. I'm going to trust you” (5). She uses phrases which usually are used at children as a threat when they don't want to eat or drink something: “If you want to be a little weakling, that's up to you. Just don't come whining to me when all your nails and teeth fall out” (8). She also uses both comforting phrases that everything will be all right: “Blow your nose and have a drink, that's a good girl” (8), as well as clear

demands: “When you’ve drunk your milk. Sit down and drink your milk....And don’t do that, Rosemary. If the wind changes, you’ll get stuck like it. And sit up straight and don’t slouch” (10-11).

The next character who enters the stage is Rosemary. In the stage direction she is described as “a rather frail, mousey-looking woman” (2). She initially seems very uncertain and uneasy which shows in her initial dialogue:

**Rosemary** Hallo. I thought you must be in.

**Lucy** (*puzzled*) Hallo?

**Rosemary** I thought you were in.

**Lucy** Yes.

**Rosemary** You are.

**Lucy** Yes.

**Rosemary** Hallo.

**Lucy** Hallo. (*A slight pause*) Who are you?

**Rosemary** Next door.

**Lucy** What?

**Rosemary** From next door. Mrs Oates. Rosemary. Do you remember?

**Lucy** (*vaguely*) Oh, yes. Hallo.

**Rosemary** Hallo. (2)

The discomfort of the situation and the possible fear of being impolite cause Rosemary to be repetitive in order to make herself clearer. According to Grice’s maxims, Rosemary is flouting the quantity maxim by giving the wrong amount of information (Grice 45-49). Instead of adding information in the first part of the dialogue, she reduces her utterances from “I thought you must be in” to “you are”. In the second part she keeps adding information in “From next door. Mrs Oates. Rosemary”. The repetitive nature of the dialogue suggests that the frailty described in the stage directions carries through into her language. She does not want to seem obtrusive or too familiar and therefore chooses to be vague. In the next example, she instead gives too much information. We learn from her conversation that Lucy’s

husband Harry has given up calling the house and has called next door instead in order to have someone visit his family and make sure that they are all right.

**Rosemary** And then ten minutes ago, we got this phone call.

**Lucy** Phone call?

**Rosemary** Yes. Terry answered it – that’s my husband – and they say will you accept a transfer charge call from a public phone box in Middlesbrough and Terry says, hallo, that’s funny, he says, who do we know in Middlesbrough and I said, not a soul and he says, well, that’s funny, Terry says, well who is it? How do we know we know him? If we don’t know him, we don’t want to waste money talking to him but if we do, it might be an emergency and we won’t sleep a wink. And the operator says, well suit yourself, take it or leave it, it’s all the same to me. So we took it and it was your husband.

**Lucy** Harry?

**Rosemary** Harry, yes. Mr Compton.

**Lucy** What did he want?

**Rosemary** Well – you. He was worried. He’s been ringing you for days. He’s had the line checked but there’s been no reply.

**Lucy** Oh.

**Rosemary** Has it not been ringing?

**Lucy** Possibly. I don’t take much notice of bells. (*She goes to listen for the children*)

From this dialogue we can draw some more conclusions about Rosemary. She not only explains why she is there, but reproduces the whole scene that has taken place earlier in her home. She does not seem to have an opinion of her own, but relies on her husband. We learn that it is he who finally decides to accept the call after a long almost one-sided discussion. It is also probably he who has told her to go and leave the message. Even though she violates the maxim of relation and quantity, she still wants to be polite. When Lucy asks if it is Harry, Rosemary gets confused and repeats his first name but then adds the more socially appropriate last name “Mr Compton” in order to maintain the social distance (Culpeper 83). This correlates both with her appearance and her uncertainty. She does not want to offend anyone, but still has to ask some questions. In order to minimize the imposition she continues to agree with Lucy and to avoid directness. As the play progresses she surrenders herself to the care and control of Lucy instead of her husband. This will be further explored when we look at their relationships.

This leads us to Terry, Rosemary's husband. He enters the stage reluctantly:

*Rosemary returns from the hall with Terry, a rather pudgy man in shirt sleeves.*

**Rosemary** (*sotto voce*) Come in a minute.

**Terry** I'm watching the telly.

**Rosemary** Just for a minute.

**Terry** I wondered where you'd got to. I mean, all you had to do was give her the number...  
(5)

The description of Terry, along with the initial dialogue, leaves us with an impression of a man who is more interested in staying at home than anything else. It is not the look of a refined man, but a short and chubby man. Instead of answering his wife's plea, he violates the maxim of relation by talking about what he has been doing and questioning her prolonged absence. We already know from Rosemary that Lucy is not one of their closest neighbours, but when Terry meets Lucy, he tries to be very familiar and uses her first name. He is immediately told to change to her family name in order to show the formal social distance and convention between them (Fowler 123). His whole appearance is plump and he continues by trying to assert himself as knowing the truth about life and the superiority of man:

**Terry** I mean, when you think about it, it's more natural. For a man. His natural way of life. Right back to the primitive. Woman stays in the cave, man the hunter goes off roving at will. Mind you, I think the idea originally was he went off hunting for food. Different sort of game these days, eh? [...] Be after something quite different these days, eh? [...] No, I didn't want to give you the wrong impression there. But seriously, I was saying to Rosie here, that you can't put a man in a cage. You try to do that, you've lost him. See my point? (6)

This text can be interpreted as an implication. There is a difference between what is implied and what is actually stated (Fowler 135). The "game" which he refers to can be understood as going after another woman to please himself, regardless of his marital status. Thinking that he may have chosen a topic that is not appropriate, he starts to defend mankind or even himself. The "cage" cannot be interpreted literally either, but refers to taking away somebody's freedom of coming and going at his own will. Both Lucy and Rosemary confront him and Rosemary disagrees with the idea

that he is bound to the house. He apparently is not used to anybody questioning him, especially not Rosemary, and is quick to retaliate when they are alone:

**Terry** And we'll have less of that, too, if you don't mind.

**Rosemary** What?

**Terry** All this business of me never going out of the house.

**Rosemary** It's true.

**Terry** It's not true and it makes me out to be some bloody idle loafer.

**Rosemary** All I said...

**Terry** And even if it is true, you have no business saying it in front of other people. (7)

Terry starts with a very unclear sentence, including the deictic "that" and Rosemary is forced to ask him to elaborate. He does and Rosemary tries to defend herself. When she says that it is true, he denies it and when she tries to explain herself he interrupts her and tells her that she is not allowed to talk about it despite its possible truth value. Again we see that Terry is telling Rosemary what to say. As the play progresses he moves from being the verbal bully to a small boy "just showing off" (10). He storms out after having been told by Lucy to apologise to his wife for drinking her orange juice. He tries to regain control of the situation when he comes back to retrieve the key but is forced to surrender to Lucy. Instead of letting his frustration fall upon his wife in words, he instead gets childishly angry and moves to hit her when she sticks out her tongue. This reduction to a child will be further discussed when looking at the struggle for power.

The last character who actually never enters the stage is Harry. We overhear a conversation with the phone operator which reveals the conversation he has been having and his desperation of still not reaching his wife after the conclusion of the play. Once again, we have a character that never enters the stage, but has influenced the plot, since he is the cause of the interaction between Lucy and her neighbours.

## Relationships

Plan carefully each character's attitude to each other – loving, hateful, indifferent. Remember your manner and behaviour on occasion tends to alter considerably depending on who we're with (Ayckbourn 40).

As we have seen in the examples above, the interaction between the characters gives us further clues about them. Ayckbourn often gives us marital couples that seem trapped in their relation (Watson 119). Harry flees his marriage by being away as much as possible, and Lucy preoccupies herself with her children and only sees her husband as “a mere appendage to a more important life function” (Dukore 89). In the other marriage, as mentioned earlier, Terry does not let Rosemary have an opinion of her own, and when she tries he verbally threatens her:

**Rosemary** Oh, honestly, Terry, you're so touchy. I can't say a thing right these days, can I?

**Terry** Very little. Now you come to mention it.

**Rosemary** Niggle, niggle, niggle. You keep on at me the whole time. I'm frightened to open my mouth these days. I don't know what's got into you lately. You're in a filthy mood from the moment you get up till you go to bed...

**Terry** What are you talking about?

**Rosemary** Grumbling and moaning...

**Terry** Oh, shut up.

**Rosemary** You're a misery to live with these days, you really are.

**Terry** I said, shut up. (7)

In this section, Rosemary is trying to explain why she is upset to Terry. She asks a possible rhetorical question that Terry answers and uses as a statement of truth. Again we see that Rosemary flouts the maxim of quantity and continues to complain about his behaviour at home. He repeatedly tells her to be quiet, which means that his insensitivity is foregrounded (Short 10-16). He also interrupts her since he is not interested in her feelings.

When Terry has drunk Rosemary's orange juice and storms out after refusing to apologize to her, Rosemary confides in Lucy:

**Rosemary** He'll sulk now. For days.

**Lucy** Well, let him. It doesn't worry us, does it?

**Rosemary** No. It's just sometimes – things get on top of you – and then he comes back at night – and he starts on at me and I ... (*She cries*) Oh dear – I'm sorry – I didn't mean to... (9)

Again, we learn about the situation at home in the other household from Rosemary. Since we know that these two women are not close friends, Rosemary violates the maxim of manner when she confides in Lucy. Lucy does not respond as we would expect. In order to stop Rosemary crying, Lucy picks up a doll and wiggles it about to make her laugh. This behaviour would be appropriate when consoling a child, but not an adult.

In the relationship between adults who are neighbours, but not close friends, the idea of politeness becomes very important. If we look back at the initial dialogue between Lucy and Rosemary, we have already discussed the politeness strategies that Rosemary tries to follow. After this, it seems as if Lucy has realised that she has been impolite and tries to act as a perfect hostess.

**Lucy** Would you care for a drink or something?

**Rosemary** A drink? Oh – well – what's the time? Well – I don't know if I should. Half past – oh yes, well – why not? Yes, please. Why not? A little one.

**Lucy** Orange or lemon?

**Rosemary** I beg your pardon?

**Lucy** Orange juice or lemon juice? Or you can have milk.

**Rosemary** Oh, I see. I thought you meant...

**Lucy** Come on. Orange or lemon? I'm waiting.

**Rosemary** Is there a possibility for some coffee?

**Lucy** No.

**Rosemary** Oh.

**Lucy** It'll keep you awake. I'll get you an orange, it's better for you.

**Rosemary** Oh... (4)

The initial utterance of an offer is a socially accepted speech-act. Since Lucy's offer is not relevant to the conversation which has just been taking place, Rosemary is left to "intuitively look for contextual sense" (Thomas 5). Rosemary immediately draws the conclusion that the beverage might include alcohol. She does not want to seem impolite and gives her answer in a hesitant way with "voiced fillers" such as the repetitive "well" and "silent pauses" as well as the "unnecessary repetitions" of "why not" (Short 176). The offer however does not follow a normal adult-adult context. Lucy has to repeat her offer of orange and lemon several times in order to get an answer which means that this offer is foregrounded. Rosemary, who still wants to be offered a suitable drink for the occasion, uses an indirect request of coffee. This is blatantly disregarded with a blunt "no", and Lucy decides that she should have orange juice and leaves the room to get it without giving Rosemary the choice to answer.

When a similar situation arises between Lucy and Terry, the outcome is the same, but the dialogue leading up to it differs.

**Lucy** Would you like an orange drink as well, Terry? Is that what it is?

**Terry** Er... Oh no – I don't go in for that sort of drink much, if you know what I mean. (*He winks, then reaches for a biscuit*) I'll have another one of these though, if you don't mind?

**Lucy** Just a minute, how many have you had?

**Terry** This is my second. It's only my second.

**Lucy** Well, that's all. No more after that. I'll get you some milk. You better have something that's good for you.

**Terry** (*half rising*) Oh no – thank you, not milk, no. (6-7)

Terry is offered orange juice in order to stop the quarrelling, but instead of just refusing it, he again makes an implication. He hints that his choice of drink would probably contain alcohol in some way. The wish of taking another cookie is more rhetorical in his mind, which means that he is surprised when asked to tell how many he has eaten. He is left off guard and answers repeatedly no when trying to stop Lucy from getting him milk, trying to remain in power. This changes as the play progresses as the power transfers to Lucy as we will see in the next section.

## **The struggle for power**

In text, power is a *position* that the speaker may take up, i. e. *choosing* phrases that *reflect authority* (Bülow-Møller 107).

There is no need for us to question Lucy's bald-on-strategy towards her own children and to expect her to be more polite since there is a great power difference (Thomas 170). However, as we have seen in the examples above, there is a power shift from Terry to Lucy. Rosemary, who already was powerless from the beginning, just shifts her personal control from Terry to Lucy. Terry, who at the beginning dominates Rosemary, tries to do the same with Lucy, but fails. After giving his long speech of the superiority of man, Lucy simply dismisses him with: "Now don't get silly, Terry" (6). When he tries to redeem himself by explaining the need for a man to be free, she simply answers: "That can apply to women, too, surely." (6) The struggle escalates when Lucy orders Terry to apologize to Rosemary since he has drunk her orange juice. He chooses to leave, but has to return since he has locked himself out and needs Rosemary's key. Here the power struggle reaches its climax.

**Lucy** (*very fiercely*) Rosemary, will you give me that key at once.

*Rosemary gives Lucy the key. Terry regards Lucy*

**Terry** Would you mind most awfully giving me the key to my own front door?

**Lucy** Certainly.

**Terry** Thank you so much.

**Lucy** Just as soon as you've apologized to Rosemary.

**Terry** I've said, I'm not apologizing to anyone.

**Lucy** Then you're not having the key.

**Terry** Now listen, I've got a day's work to do tomorrow. I'm damned if I'm going to start playing games with some frustrated nutter...

**Rosemary** Terry ...

**Lucy** Take no notice of him, Rosemary. He's just showing off.

**Terry** Are you going to give me that key or not?

**Lucy** Not until you apologize.

**Terry** All right. I'll have to come and take it off you, won't I?

**Lucy** You try. You just dare try, my boy.

**Terry** All right. (*He moves towards Lucy*)

**Rosemary** Terry ...

**Lucy** Just you try and see what happens.

**Terry** (*halted by her tone; uncertainly*) I'm not joking.

**Lucy** Neither am I.

**Terry** Look, I don't want to... Just give me the key, there's a good...

**Lucy** Not until you apologize to Rosemary.

**Terry** Oh, for the love of ... All right (*To Rosemary*) Sorry.

**Lucy** Say it nicely.

**Terry** I'm very sorry, Rosie. Now give us the key, for God's sake.

**Lucy** When you have drunk your milk. Sit down and drink your milk.

**Terry** Oh blimey ... (*He sits*)

**Lucy** That's better.

**Terry** I hate milk.

**Lucy** Drink it up. (10)

Here Terry turns to all the possible verbal ways of getting the key. He starts by using an exaggerated negative polite phrase: "would you mind most awfully" and then continues with an ironic "thank you so much". When he realizes that this isn't working, he loses his temper and says what the playwright may want to convey: that the whole play is a game where Lucy is the crazy puppet master. Feeling that he has exhausted all polite possibilities of getting the key, he even physically threatens her by moving closer. Lucy does not change her standpoint at all. The only visible change in her voice is seen in the stage direction where Terry is "halted by her tone". Terry gives in to the "game" and half heatedly apologizes to Rosemary in order to get the key. Lucy then changes the rules and makes Terry drink his milk before returning the key to him. By now, Terry has given up and even though he complains, he complies with her command. He has been reduced to a child, supervised by a "patient but non-complying adult" (Burton 75). Rosemary, who in some way is still part of this power struggle since she had the key and gave it to Lucy instead of Terry, tries to stop Terry from saying or doing something that he might regret. In both cases

she is interrupted by Lucy. The first time by a response directed towards her but the second time she is ignored and the response is directed at Terry as a possible threat.

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to show how Ayckbourn manipulates the dialogue in order to present his characters in a certain way. By giving Lucy many bald-on-record utterances such as clear commands, she is perceived as the person with power. This power must be seen in an adult-child relationship. She does not follow the expected rules of conversation since she violates the social distance and treats everybody as children. On the other hand, Rosemary's many politeness strategies and vague statements suggest that she surrenders to the situation both verbally and physically. She gives the control that Terry has had over her to Lucy, never taking a stand in any of the relationships. Terry, who initially has verbal control over Rosemary, tries to assert himself and to remain in control over Lucy too. He eventually has to capitulate to Lucy and does this both physically and verbally by, for example, complaining about the milk, but still drinking it.

By taking an accepted situation of parent-child dialogue and transferring into another context, the effect is both comical and worrying. The question is whether Ayckbourn wants us to see the humour in the absurd relationship or whether he wants us to pity Lucy who is so absorbed by the role of being a mother figure that she becomes trapped within the walls of "motherhood". Do we become like children, if treated as one, either accepting it and giving away our power or struggling against it? Does society treat us as children, telling us what to do and how to react? Having read this play several times, I am still not fully convinced of either idea. On the one hand, I welcome the irony of the comical situations that the characters find themselves in. On the other hand, I cannot feel compassion for the characters and only see misery and sadness in their lack of connection. Perhaps this indecision comes from our daily struggles with working relationships and a healthy power balance in our own lives.

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