

Although the relationship between language and waiting is complex and difficult to characterize, it is possible to approach one understanding of the connection between these concepts by examining similarities between the various aspects of language and waiting manifested in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In particular, during the key moments of the play that mark the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky and the surrounding conversation between Vladimir and Estragon, both language and waiting seem to exhibit a fundamental and seemingly paradoxical tendency towards binding and unbinding. As a close reading of these passages in *Waiting for Godot* reveals, these opposing tendencies speak to a deeper, perhaps even structural, connection between the nature of language and the nature of waiting.

During the first encounter between *Waiting for Godot*'s two central players, Vladimir and Estragon, and other characters, the tension inherent to language is exemplified most clearly through names and naming. Just before their conversation is punctuated by the sudden appearance of Pozzo and Lucky, Estragon and Vladimir turn to discussing the object of their waiting: Godot. Although they have mentioned him previously, and agreed that it is him for whom they are waiting,¹ a curious confusion arises on page 38 when Estragon asks Vladimir, "His name is Godot?" and Vladimir replies with apparent uncertainty, "I think so." In the French Vladimir's response is even more telling: lacking even the confidence of a thought, it is merely a statement of belief, "Je crois." This sudden doubt about the name of Godot would seem to imply that the connection between a person and their name is no strong tie, but rather a nebulous connection the existence of which can be questioned, disbelieved, and even denied.

This notion has barely been introduced, however, when Pozzo arrives with Lucky to deliver just the opposite message. Even as Vladimir and Estragon's difficulty with the name

¹ *Waiting for Godot*, page 20

Godot persists, alternately forgetting and mishearing it, on page 42 Pozzo announces himself with certainty: “Je suis Pozzo!” – “I am Pozzo!” This statement, placing particular emphasis on the connection by using the phrase *je suis* instead of the textbook *je m’appelle*, indicates that here the tie between oneself and one’s name is beyond doubt. Pozzo equates himself to his name, his confidence standing in sharp contrast to the continued confusion of Vladimir and Estragon, while the reader is left trying to decipher these opposing perceptions of naming. Although the reasons for this apparent contradiction may be manifold, other portions of this same scene suggest that the paradox is in fact inherent to language itself.

It is seemingly in the nature of language to bind: thinking is deeply tied to language, to such an extent that one can trace the etymology of the French verb *penser*, “to think”, back to *pendre*, “to hang”, a verb strongly associated with binding. It is through language that thoughts are formed, and it is through language that they must then be expressed. In this way, language not only binds thinking and words, but also creates social ties between those who speak. This binding aspect of language is exhibited on page 38 when Estragon, questioning the specifics their association with Godot, asks Vladimir, “We’re not tied?” Although Vladimir denies this forcefully, the very asking of the question is evidence of the tie that links them to Godot: never appearing in the flesh, Godot is entirely a product of the language surrounding him and anticipating his arrival in the play. Estragon and Vladimir are tied to Godot by their own questions and exchanges of words about the otherwise nonexistent figure.

However, even as language appears to tie together thoughts and words, people and names, it is internally unbound and acts as a means of opening into thinking: the breaks and pauses that define the structure of speech work together with the words that form its contents in order to free meaning. For example, when Vladimir is insisting to Estragon that they are by no

means tied to Godot, he emphasizes his point by stating, “Pas encore.” – “Not yet.” – “*Il ne fait pas la liaison.*” By failing to include the liaison between the words, Vladimir draws attention to the space between them, as if attempting to break apart the language that binds him and Estragon to Godot at a literal, vocal level. More generally, words are distinguished by the spaces that separate them from each other, becoming comprehensible and significant only when they are divided. Conversation, as an abstraction and application of language, tends towards a similar format of coherent speech broken up by periods of silence: without pauses for listening and understanding, it would be impossible to derive meaning from speaking.

The apparently self-contradictory binding and unbinding tendencies that characterize language seem to equally underlie the act of waiting in this section of *Waiting for Godot*. In order to understand waiting in the context of this portion of the play, it is useful to initially consider waiting in terms of elapsing time: from the beginning, the characters themselves relate time and waiting in this way, discussing how they will “pass the time” until Godot arrives.² Although the overall arch of time in the play seems to take on a circular, moebius-like quality, time can also be perceived as a series of discrete moments that are divided from one another rather than bound together.

These opposing views of time encounter each other directly towards the end of the first scene with Pozzo and Lucky. When Pozzo, checking his watch in a manner reminiscent of Lewis Carroll’s White Rabbit, claims on page 78 that his schedule requires him to “really be getting along”, Vladimir responds succinctly, if obscurely: “Time has stopped”. Since the scene goes on and dusk becomes night despite this utterance, it seems that Vladimir is referring to the cyclic, ouroboric nature of time in the play. This perception of time seems to bind the passing moments

² *Waiting for Godot*, page 16, Vladimir

together so tightly that the future loops back upon the past. In contrast, Pozzo is obsessed with marking each passing second, dividing time into sections that are isolated and quantifiable. He is even seen “cuddling his watch to his ear”³ to hear it ticking after Vladimir claims that time has stopped, the sound seemingly his only proof of the passing time. Echoes of these conflicting notions even appear in the etymology of the word time itself: the Proto-Italic *tempos*, from which the Latin *tempus* and the English *temporal* derive, means both “to stretch” and “to measure”.⁴ Although one may refer to time stretching out in a seemingly continuous flow, one may equally define it as a sequence of separate and measurable units of time. In a similar way, the structure of waiting itself shows a simultaneous tendency towards binding and unbinding.

Although the bond that ties Vladimir and Estragon to Godot, as previously argued, is formed in and by language, the connection between these characters can also be understood as a bond of waiting: a new modality of waiting that obliges those who wait to do something, anything, in the meantime. Vladimir and Estragon are not merely bound to the linguistic concept of “Godot”, but also to this type of waiting, “en attendant”, that gives the play the first portion of its French title. Particularly in the moments following the departure of Lucky and Pozzo on page 106, the two men, left with no other means of the distraction, keenly feel the strain of this bond between themselves and Godot: although they realize that they now have nothing to do, Vladimir explains to the despair of Estragon that they cannot leave simply because “We’re waiting for Godot.” They try to make conversation, and later in the play will resort to various games in attempts to pass the time, but Estragon and Vladimir never become capable of breaking the tie that waiting creates between themselves and Godot.

³ *Waiting for Godot*, page 79

⁴ Etymonline.com – temporal (adj)

At the same time, as with language, waiting also contains elements of unbinding: while waiting can clearly act as a contract that ties the one who waits to the anticipated person or thing, the very concept of waiting is also defined by the lack of this object. As soon the thing that one is waiting for happens or the person for whom one is waiting arrives, the time of waiting is over. Just as words are defined by the spaces and pauses separating them, waiting is an act defined by non-arrival and non-happening. For Vladimir and Estragon, whose characters are so entrenched in waiting, the loss of this peculiar stasis is catastrophic: when Lucky and Pozzo arrive on the scene, the pair, thinking that Godot has appeared at last, scatter in fear, “cringing away from the menace”⁵, tripping over each other and their words in a panic. Clearly, they are not prepared for an end to waiting; their entire mode of existence, the very act of waiting that binds them to Godot, is based on the lack of Godot, and would fall apart at once were he to arrive.

This necessary separation of reality from expectation in the realm of waiting mirrors the breaks and pauses inherent to the structure of language. Despite this mutual tendency towards unbinding, however, language and waiting alike also tend to tie together people, thoughts, and words. As the first key encounters between characters in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* reveal, both language and waiting hold at their core this apparent contradiction between a nature that binds and a nature that unbinds.

⁵ *Waiting for Godot*, page 40