

Xuejiao Lin*

Construing time as blank signs in *Waiting for Godot*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/lass-2022-0007>

Received September 11, 2022; accepted September 28, 2022

Abstract: Story time and narrative time are two interrelated issues in the research of drama. In *Waiting for Godot*, mere explorations in the perplexing systems of story time cannot pin down the signifieds of time, while incontiguity and quiescency of narrative time highlight the theme “Existence of time is meaningless”. The contradictory and paradoxical co-existence of story time and narrative time contributes to the construing “the void of ambiguous signifieds” and “the void of ambiguous signifiers” of time as blank signs.

Keywords: blank sign; meaning; narrative time; story time; *Waiting for Godot*

Waiting for Godot as an epitome of the absurd theatre construed a fragmented living reality of human beings with its “audacious and gruff counter-tradition aesthetics” (Wang 2005, p. 1). Time, one of the fundamental factors of drama is deprived of its linear feature universal in traditional dramas, which is alienated into resolvable fragments and even elevated from a structural factor to thematic level contributing to the construal of thematic meaning. This shift of time factor in *Waiting for Godot* was mainly due to hiatus of signifieds in story time and signifiers in narrative time, i.e., “the void of ambiguous signifieds” and “the void of ambiguous signifiers” of time as blank signs, which expanded the experiential meaning of time in this drama.

1 Time in drama and blank sign

Aristotle defines tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions” (Aristotle 1997, p. 19). The ‘magnitude’

*Corresponding author: Xuejiao Lin, Soochow University, Suzhou 215006, China; and Liaoning University, Shenyang 110136, China, E-mail: linxuejiao0512@126.com. <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7850-7344>

in this definition is referring to time in drama which was confined to only the time limitation in tragedy and epic. Aristotle's conception of magnitude in tragedy as "a cycle of the sun" (1982, p. 17) is referring to the duration of action being imitated in drama or the duration taken for imitating the action in a drama has been an incessant debate: those who hold the former view think "dramatists should be faithful to the three unities of action, place, and time" (Nicoll 1985, p. 41), and the overwhelming success of classic dramas following the guideline of the three unities was mainly dependent on the fast pace and evident contradiction through the unity of time and place; those who hold the latter view rely on Aristotle's (1982, p. 26) interpretation through competition among tragic performances, in which the time calculation of each performance through hourglass was similar to acting time.

Hence, researches on dramatic time are generally classified into duration of action in drama and duration for imitating the action, i.e., story time and narrative time. Story time, or "situational time" and "plot time" refers to "time factors in narrative text marked in various forms" (Hu 2018, p. 170); narrative time, or "time taken for narration", refers to "time which is taken for narrating an action" (Hu 2018, p. 170). The difference between the two concepts in drama texts resides in that the former refers to physical time taken from the start to the finish of an action with manifest signs and the latter refers to the time taken for narrating the action without manifest signs. Classification of time has been more delicate with the development of narratology, such as the categorization of Zhao (2013, p. 162), story time, time for narrating action, time difference within and beyond narrative text, and designated time for narration. Based on this, the exploration of drama time in *Waiting for Godot* is aiming at story time (plot time) and narrative time (time taken for narration).

Generally, time as an abstract concept can be symbolized through such concrete ways as chronical numbering, shifts of seasons, rising and falling of the sun, waxing and waning of the moon, and different numbering units, through which the symbols denoting time become physical representation of time and in semiotics are physical "symbol carriers" with exact sphere (Sebeok 2001, p. 40). Symbols which are not physical carriers can be categorized as "blank sign" (Wei 2012), which are also "significant carriers of meaning" (Zhao 2016, p. 26), or "blank sign" (Cantor 2016; Jakobson 1984; Sebeok 1985). The words blank and zero are related the philosophical thought that blank is the origin and the finale of the physical world. Some researchers (Cantor 2016; Sebeok 2001) view blank from in linguistic shade and hold that the signifiers of blank signs are inherent signifiers in that the designated hiatus "can be felt and carries significant meaning" (Zhao 2016, p. 25).

The dramatic time signs within this research are not looped in the physical sign systems as defined in general sense, which are specific signifiers and proceed in the linear way as the pacing of narrative drama texts. Since theatrical drama is the closest to authentic text featuring “ellipsis, hiatus, contradiction, and fragmentation” (Hu 2018, p. 194), dramatic time signs might be contradictory and/or fragmented appearing in dramatic texts as “hiatus” of signifieds. The narrative process of dramatic text projecting the reality “must proceed and present its radical features in the linear dimension of time” (Tang 2004, p. 43), and ellipsis, hiatus, and fragmentation in the narrative process “make curvature of time possible” (Metz 1996, p. 37), which can be realized through “absence” of signifiers for time signs. For a tentative interpretation of the contradictory and repetitive curvature of time signs in *Waiting for Godot*, the story time and narrative time of this drama can be interpreted as “blank sign”: on the one hand, through analysis of story time, time as blank sign with the presence of signifier and absence of signified can be explored; on the other, through observing hiatus of narrative time, time blank sign with the absence of signifier and presence of signified can be interpreted.

2 Absence of signified in story time

Story time, “the linear continuum of time inherent in the plot arranged in accordance to the beginning, development and possibilities of an event” (Chen 2003, p. 18), may cover several hours or several decades, which was even practiced by dramatists strongly following “the three unities”, since the “‘recount’ time of a story through the speech” (Tan 2014, p. 66) of one character may exceed one day. Appearing in drama texts mostly as exact time sign, or instantiations of symbolized time, story time contributes to the construal of implicatures. Through the curvature of absence of signified with manifest signifier, time becomes a conceptualized “blank sign”.

2.1 Ambiguity in reference of story time

Time, though an abstract concept, can be metered in that a set of signs are used to mark hour and second, or a duration of time. The time mechanism in a story signifies the decade, season, month, date, or a day in a week which can provide readers with the historical and social background of a story, which facilitates understanding of character relations in the story. In accordance to Saussure’s

duality of signifier and signified, sometime signs in *Waiting for Godot* present such features as a precise signifier which carries ambiguous reference.

In Act I, the two Tramps are discussing over the time when Godot will arrive, though no exact date of the event is shown.

ESTRAGON: That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR: He said Saturday. [Pause.] I think.

.....

ESTRAGON: [very insidious] But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? [Pause.] Or Monday? [Pause.] Or Friday?

VLADIMIR: [looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape] It's not possible!

ESTRAGON: Or Thursday?

(Beckett 1954, p. 7)

The Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Friday, and Thursday which are the signifiers of time have no matching points in the chronological time system because of the loss of rules and point of reference for time in the drama, so even Vladimir looks wildly about, he cannot detect anything. The signifieds are absent.

The characters in the drama, while roaming in the meaningless time, try to seek the signifieds of time through asking other characters for the reference of time, while others' explanations about the meaning of time further prove the loss of signifieds. When Pozzo says "[suddenly furious] Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, ..." (Beckett 1954, p. 80), every odd day makes no difference from every even day, proving that in Pozzo's conception of value, every change of time is utterly meaningless. The loss of signifieds of time signs leads to the futility of time as a dimension in human society.

In the same shade, the age of Estragon is with ambiguous signified, as shown in the following actors' lines,

POZZO: "... [To Vladimir.] What age are you, if it's not a rude question? [Silence.] Sixty? Seventy? [To Estragon.] What age would you say he was?

ESTRAGON: Eleven.

(Beckett 1954, pp. 19–20)

Age as one of the popular subsystems of time sign may be symbols marking chronological years or human being's duration of life. In the conversation between

Pozzo and Estragon, the signifiers for age, such as sixty, seventy, and eleven make no difference among them since the signifieds respectively carried by them are deprived of their meanings, conveying the meaninglessness of time, as Manfred Pfister says, “transforming the chronological flow of time into achrony” (Pfister 2003, p. 371).

Story time signs appear in *Waiting for Godot* as various subsystems with absence of signifieds, conveying that in the real world, the well-founded rules for time signs are ambiguous, resulting in the loss of signifieds of the respective time signs. Characters in the drama have perceived that signifiers without signifieds symbolize the collapse of time system, implying that contemporary human beings missing in time is exploring new sense of time. The blank sign with the absence of signified proves the meaninglessness of time through time itself.

2.2 Disordering flow of story time

Time is universally viewed as a unified entity featuring directional flow from the past to the present and then to the future as one of the most stable orders. One is born on some day in the past, lives on some day at present, and dies on some day in the future, along the track of time. Changes are always perceived through the flow of time. The time in *Waiting for Godot* breaks the bonds of the stable flow of time, in that birth and death representing past and future are respectively synchronized. In Act II, the two vagrants keep asking when such a great change of Pozzo and Lucky has taken place. Pozzo answers, “... One day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? [Calmer.] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more ...” (Beckett 1954, p. 80). The mingling of birth and death obliterates the difference between the past and future, since the arrival of a new life on a tomb signifies regeneration, and elapse of life happens with the blink of eyes, i.e., the future follows the past with obliteration of the present. This is further illustrated in Vladimir’s interior monologue, “... Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old ...” (Beckett 1954, p. 81). “Astride of a grave” implies the priority of death representing the future over birth representing the past which is hard to realize. The lengthy duration taken for the gravedigger to pull the dead from a grave symbolizes the equal duration of time taken for the arrival of a life, lengthy enough for the life to be born old, who immediately flashes into the cycle of death. In the drama, the linear flow of time is replaced by a shuttle traveling between the past and the future, which is a chaotic disordering of time. Furthermore, the present does not exist

between the past and the future, and this absence contribute to the clear comprehension of the disordered time and meaninglessness.

The faltered linear order of time can also be detected in the time signs of the drama. The time is “dusk” at the beginning of Act I, which is the only expression marking time. Other vague signs of time can only be detected in the most evident place categories.

ESTRAGON: What is it?

VLADIMIR: I don't know. A willow.

ESTRAGON: Where are the leaves?

VLADIMIR: It must be dead.

ESTRAGON: No more weeping.

VLADIMIR: Or perhaps it's not the season.

(Beckett 1954, p. 6)

The episode leads to two possibilities: the willow “must be dead”, since a dead tree cannot grow leaves in whichever season; the willow is in deep autumn or winter when all the leaves fall. At the beginning of Act II, time is mentioned again as “Next day. Same time. Same place. ... The tree has four or five leaves” (Beckett 1954, p. 47). The “four or five leaves” on the tree are evidence contradictory to the possibility of a dead tree and the season encompassing “next day” may well be early spring or deep autumn. Chances are higher that it is late autumn, since in early spring more buds and fresh leaves might cover a willow, instead of “four or five leaves” in a season when most leaves have fallen. Be it spring or autumn, the time gap between the two days in Act I and Act II may be one season or even one year, which has been curtailed to that of two consecutive days. Disordering flow of story time deviates from the conventional conception which traps the readers in a haze for the signified of “next day”, which in the drama is an unidentified segment with no specific position in chronological time. Beckett dispels conventional meaning of time with “next day” and imbues time as blank sign with empty signified.

2.3 Disrupted continuity of story time

The international standard unit of measurement for time as one of the seven fundamental physical quantities is second. The continuity of time is never affected or stopped by any external force, which guarantees incessant cognition of

human beings. In contrast to this, the story time in *Waiting for Godot* disrupts the conventional continuity of time, creating a phantasm time stagnation which categorizes time categories as blank signs.

The disrupted continuity of time is realized through the characters' oblivescence of the past, i.e., forgetting the happenings in the past due to their poor memory. The two tramps do not remember where they are from, where they have been and what they have done when they were young. They cannot even remember the event in the previous day, so they ask each other and question the other's answer. Estragon cannot remember the past event since he is "not a historian" (Beckett 1954, p. 56) and any effort forcing him to remember the past is fatigue and torture to him.

VLADIMIR: You don't remember any fact, any circumstance?

ESTRAGON: [weary] Don't torment me, Didi.

VLADIMIR: The sun. The moon. Do you not remember?

ESTRAGON: They must have been there, as usual.

(Beckett 1954, pp. 56–57)

They can only remember such eternal entities as the sun and the moon, whose existence transcends the past and the future and cannot be signs representing the past. What is stored in the memory of the tramps is Godot will come tomorrow, so the time system for them encompasses only the present and the future, with the absence of the past.

Pozzo is another character with poor memory who stresses his incapability in remembering about the past. In Act II, they meet again:

VLADIMIR: And you are Pozzo?

POZZO: Certainly I am Pozzo.

VLADIMIR: The same as yesterday?

POZZO: Yesterday?

VLADIMIR: We met yesterday. [Silence.] Do you not remember?

POZZO: I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today. So don't count on me to enlighten you.

(Beckett 1954, p. 79)

Pozzo says he does not remember happenings ‘yesterday’ and he will forget about today, showing that in Pozzo’s mind, time is disrupted into dispersed segments which disappear when they become events in the past. There is even no difference between the present event and those in the past, implying that in a time system void of the past, the present and the future do not exist anymore, since the present will disappear in the imminent future as those past events having disappeared in the time system, as Sartre (1998, p. 154) holds about the non-existence of the past, the future, and the present, which are segmented infinitely to the extent that they do not physically exist, resulting in the nothingness of time as a system.

When the continuity of time is broken, “Time has stopped.” (Beckett 1954, p. 28), as uttered by Vladimir. The stopping time which cannot be used to describe the movement of substance or the process of events composes blank signs, which mark the collapse of time system—the meaningless existence of time.

2.4 Resolution of tokens in story time

Time is categorized as an abstract identity in philosophy symbolizing changes in physical world. Knowledge of human beings about time can be attained through decoding some tokens of time system in the mental space of each other, fixing the signifieds of these time tokens.

The pivotal token in *Waiting for Godot* prominent for symbolizing time is a watch, a “half-hunter” belonging to Pozzo, “A genuine half-hunter, gentlemen, with deadbeat escapement! [Sobbing.] Twas my grandpa gave it to me!” (Beckett 1954, pp. 36–37), which is literally interpreted as a watch with a table cover and three buttons used by the rich and elite for hunting, a watch which is differentiated from some modern famous brands in that it displays only minutes and hours, without displaying date and time zone. The first time when Pozzo meets the two tramps, he is aware of the time, “[he consults his watch] ... yes ... [he calculates] ... yes, 6 h, that’s right, 6 h on end, and never a soul in sight ...” (Beckett 1954, p. 16). A time duration, 6 h, is quite acceptable for a trip master. But after his talk with the tramps, the signifieds become ambiguous—a shift in his conception about time.

POZZO: But for him all my thoughts, all my feelings, would have been of common things. [Pause. With extraordinary vehemence.] Professional worries! [Calmer.] Beauty, grace, truth of the first water, I knew they were all beyond me. So I took a knook.

VLADIMIR: [startled from his inspection of the sky] A knook?

POZZO: That was nearly sixty years ago ... [he consults his watch] ... yes, nearly sixty. ...

(Beckett 1954, p. 25)

As is discussed in Section 2.3, Pozzo, incapable of memorizing about the past, is always strenuously seeking for tokens of time, the most manifest being of his half-hunter, which can only display ongoing minute or hour, with no readings of a moment in the past, including such a long span as sixty years. The consulting of “nearly sixty” conveys the resolution of watch as a token for time sign, a collapsed token properly actualizing the disintegration and loss of time as a sign system.

Though there is no reading for a moment sixty years ago, any date sixty years ago was displayed by the rotating of some hour hands in a watch, a perspective illustrating that whichever moment sixty years ago or eighty is just the same, since the markings remain the same day after day, conveying that standstill time has lost its design features.

The dial plate not displaying changes of time proves “Time has stopped.” (Beckett 1954, p. 28), but contradictory to that, the ‘tiktik’ of meter hands evidences the flow of time. Pressing the half-hunter close to his ear, Pozzo confirms the functioning of the watch and rejects Vladimir’s statement on the stopping of time. Since he is afraid of the resolution of time, he tries repeatedly to “fumble” his half-hunter, the only proof of the existence of time.

POZZO: ... [he fumbles in his pockets] ... let me wish you ... [fumbles] ... wish you ... [fumbles] ... What have I done with my watch? ...

VLADIMIR: Perhaps it’s in your fob.

POZZO: Wait! [He doubles up in an attempt to apply his ear to his stomach, listens. Silence.] I hear nothing. [He beckons them to approach. Vladimir and Estragon go over to him, bend over his stomach.] Surely one should hear the tick-tick.

...

VLADIMIR: It’s the heart.

...

ESTRAGON: Perhaps it has stopped.

(Beckett 1954, pp. 36–37)

Unable to find the watch, the characters try to hear the tiktik of meter hands, the token for time which is not connected to the watch because it is confirmed as heartbeats. The panic is of no avail, because the half-hunter as the only proof of time is missing or has stopped, incapable of proving the existence of time. Time is utterly resolved together with its token. Thus the blank sign of time figuratively construes the meaninglessness of time, in turn, the meaninglessness of human existence.

3 Absence of signifiers of narrative time

“Narration is a basic pattern for human beings to perceive events and allocates them through the dimension of time” (Hu 2018, p. 165). Timeliness as an evident feature of narration permeates “plot timeline, rhythm, slow and fast beats, ordering of clues, flashback and breakpoint, skip and extension, mental time and conclusive lingering sound” (Wang 1998, p. 64). During the narration of an event, the linear process may be disrupted or the extension may be displaced. Stagnation and emptiness through narration result in deviation from extension of linear time: narrative time as endless rotation, disconnected linear points, or stillness of narrative time, which are subtypes of blank sign—absence of signifier and presence of signified.

3.1 Void flow of narrative time

Theatrical drama is generally composed of onset, development, climax, and denouement, among which the denouement and onset can be identified even in flashback. Flow of narrative time brings forth shift as coordinate point from stage to stage in narration, drawing the axle of narrative time, which, in *Waiting for Godot*, becomes void due to the empty positioning of coordinate point.

The plot in *Waiting for Godot* is ‘waiting’, two tramps standing at empty crossroad waiting for Godot, as narrated at the beginning of Act I.

ESTRAGON: ... [He turns to Vladimir.] Let’s go.

VLADIMIR: We can’t.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: Were waiting for Godot.

(Beckett 1954, p. 6)

As Act II comes to finish, the two tramps are still waiting for Godot at the crossroad, expecting his arrival “tomorrow”.

ESTRAGON: Oh yes, let’s go far away from here.

VLADIMIR: We can’t.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We have to come back tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: What for?

VLADIMIR: To wait for Godot.

(Beckett 1954, p. 83)

Waiting, in addition to functioning as the onset of the plot, runs through development, climax and denouement, as shown through the words of Estragon, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes ...” (Beckett 1954, p. 32). Narration in this drama is futile and mere repetitions of one point, showing the degrading of plot to a motionless point. Undifferentiated onset and denouement result in the stillness of narrative time on a point in the axle.

Between the two acts of *Waiting for Godot*, Act II is a reiteration of Act I, with the freeze-frame waiting image of the tramps at finis. In Act I,

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let’s go.

[They do not move.]

(Beckett 1954, p. 45)

In Act II,

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let’s go.

[They do not move.]

(Beckett 1954, p. 85)

It can be supposed that some possible Act III and Act IV may well be repetition of previous Acts. In each Act, actions of characters are repeated, i.e., repeating other’s words, repeating their own moves, repeating meetings with passersby, repeating acceptance to waiting ... endless repetition of others and selves, all key word being fixed on “repetition” in the drama. All their repetitions serve one sole purpose—to fleet time. There is neither start nor ending for their actions but waiting: superficially the narration proceeds, while in essence, it is simply an endless rotation. Narrative time becomes some void and meaningless flow with no start, no consequence, implying the emptiness of human existence.

3.2 Discontinuity of narrative time

Dramatic texts consist of actor's lines and stage direction, with actor's line as the pivotal element, subcategorized into dialogue, monologue, and voice-over. The ordering and turn-taking of actor's lines stick to the development of drama plot, simultaneously accompanied by the flow of narrative time. Actor's lines are brief and turn shifts are frequent with high rates of repetition in *Waiting for Godot*. Among the brief turns, Beckett (1954) devised 83 pauses which ease the rhythm of actor's lines and function as breakpoints on the continuity of timeline.

The pauses among the actor's lines are not punctuations between utterances, but elaborately inserted durations to construe particular implications. According to the functions, the pauses in *Waiting for Godot* can fall into two categories: the empty durations which carry the signifieds of the blank signs, i.e., exact meanings; the empty durations which label choices or deliberations for interpretation. Pauses contrived in this way appear as "pressure of being" (Zhao 2018, p. 2), which conjures the presence of absent interpretation.

These pauses appear in this drama are mostly performed as evident worries of characters while talking, which incur the deliberate pauses to avoid or purposely hide the true signifieds.

POZZO: ... Ah yes! The night. [He raises his head.] But be a little more attentive, for pity's sake, otherwise we'll never get anywhere. [He looks at the sky.] Look! [All look at the sky except Lucky who is dozing off again. Pozzo jerks the rope.] Will you look at the sky, pig! [Lucky looks at the sky.] Good, that's enough. [They stop looking at the sky.] What is there so extraordinary about it? Qua sky. It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day. [Pause.] In these latitudes. [Pause.] When the weather is fine. [Lyrical.] An hour ago [he looks at his watch, prosaic] roughly [lyrical.] after having poured forth even since [he hesitates, prosaic] say ten o'clock in the morning [lyrical.] tirelessly torrents of red and white light it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale [gesture of the two hands lapsing by stages] pale, ever a little paler, a little paler until [dramatic pause, ample gesture of the two hands flung wide apart] pppfff! finished! it comes to rest. ...

...

POZZO: [fervently] Bless you, gentlemen, bless you! [Pause.] I have such need of encouragement! [Pause.] I weakened a little towards the end, you didn't notice?

(Beckett 1954, pp. 28–29)

In this long turn of Pozzo's monologue, he elaborates the contrast between the brief and powerless daytime and lengthy and dangerous night: even sunglows lack vitality, in that their sparkling glow is transient. The two pauses actualize Pozzo's evasion of saying directly that daylight makes no difference from darkness; the

third pause paints his avoidance in saying the cruel truth that daytime is to be replaced by dark night. With the help of two other pauses, he tells the truth powdered under the false appearance with language—he feels incapable and needs encouragement and agreement from others. Well-devised pauses creating breaks in narration uncover the signifieds of the narration.

ESTRAGON: What for?

VLADIMIR: To wait for Godot.

ESTRAGON: Ah! [Silence.] He didn't come?

VLADIMIR: No.

ESTRAGON: And now it's too late.

VLADIMIR: Yes, now it's night.

ESTRAGON: And if we dropped him? [Pause.] If we dropped him?

(Beckett 1954, p. 83)

The first pause of Estragon shows the reason of “to wait for Godot” is “he didn't come”, a situation he is reluctant to accept. But after a sigh with regret, he conveys through the empty duration of pause to others his agony while facing the fact of “he didn't come”. He repeats his own words after the second sigh with different intentions: the uttering for the first time conveys a question for choice, possibly choosing “not to wait for Godot”; the repetition of the clause after the pause makes clear his willingness in choosing not to wait for Godot, which might terminate the agony he has been taking.

Similar pauses appear in Vladimir's turn, such as [VLADIMIR] “We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. [Pause.] Unless Godot comes” (Beckett 1954, p. 84). Hanging themselves is the path to death and termination of their suffering. After the pause, he says an alternative relieving from suffering can be waiting for Godot's arrival, confirming waiting as his decision.

Pauses analyzed above prove their contribution to the unfolding of respective signifieds. The absence of signifieds through pauses creates disruptions in narrative time, but the narration flows smoothly with the presence of signifieds. The blank signs depicted as disruptions of narrative timeline create space for the presence of signifieds.

In addition, while the two tramps are waiting for Godot, they meet Pozzo and Lucky in both acts and they witness the performances between the master and servant as spectators. The hearing loss of Pozzo and sight loss of Lucky exercise no significant effect on the two tramps who continue their waiting for Godot after the

master and servant leave, just like Estragon says, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!” (Beckett 1954, p. 32). Waiting is the only event throughout the drama, without clearly defined start and finish. The story time is only a straight line with “waiting” as a point, as deviated from conventional time segment. The insertion of meta-drama disrupts the continuity of narrative time, and verifies through the emptiness in narrative time the fragility of narration. The narration without reliability signifies the absurd existence of the world, since any narration to prove existence is unreliable, which constitutes the signified of the drama.

3.3 Invalidity of narrative time

In addition to the application of pauses, Beckett also devised silence for the construal of blankness in narration, which can fall into two categories: voiceless silence and voiced silence. Voiceless silence as the noumenon of silence includes verballessness and extended pause; voiced silence as symbolized actualization of silence includes invalid actor’s lines and pauseless monologue. While emptiness in narration from voiceless silence creates stagnation in narrative time, emptiness in narration from voiced silence facilitates the continuity of the invalid narrative time. However, the invalidity of narrative time does not incur absence of meaning, but prompts and highlights the signifieds.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the tramps’ circular talking while waiting seems to prove their existence, but in essence to verify the invalidity of language: facts which they want to depict with language can never be encoded in language. Characters who cannot understand each other strive for the floor of conversation. When they perceive that their intention cannot be actualized, they try to use more signifiers, as Zhao holds, “The existence of a sign is to trigger respective meaning, and untriggered or uninterpreted meaning is reason enough for the existence of the sign” (2018, p. 3). The numerous and complicated actor’s lines umbrage the meaning which is superficially invisible but inherently exists, which illustrates that the more complicated sign system is further detached from the real signified. The frequent turn shift and complicated words, contradictory questions and answers, repeated utterances with emphasized but ambiguous meanings constitute voiced silence.

Pauseless lengths of monologue constitute voiced silence either. In *Waiting for Godot*, Lucky, living under the torture of his master’s whip and rope, does not have right or freedom. On receiving the order from his master “to think”, Lucky who gets the hard-earned chance to talk launches his harangue like a starving person gluttonizing food without 1 s’s pause, not even for breath. Lucky’s lines in the

drama do not even have a punctuation mark. The strenuous effort of Lucky does not enlighten any of other people, for they cannot comprehend his thoughts. They fling him on the ground, Vladimir snatching away his hat and forcing him to stop “thinking”. Pozzo treads on Lucky’s hat and deprives him of his right to talk, and says “There’s an end to his thinking” (Beckett 1954, p. 36). What Lucky wants to convey through the broken clauses from *The Bible* is not actualized, the inherent meaning being sealed up under the language chunks of the meaningless lengthy harangue. The other people cannot reconstruct the signifieds from the broken harangue and hence cannot be allies of Lucky in comprehending the meaning. The invalid monologue with only signified is voiced silence.

Episodes of voiced silence are widely used in the drama and the hunting for their interpretations runs through the narration. Narrative time flows meaninglessly due to the invalidity of narration, which is the real intention *Waiting for Godot* conveys—the invalidity of language puts contemporary human beings who cannot understand each other in loneliness.

The explicit noumenon of voiced silence is silence, which appears 118 times, occurring mostly between turns. The tokens of silence, similar to pauses in *Waiting for Godot*, are clues to the placement of signifieds, but construe more implicit meaning. According to the definition of Wittgenstein, ineffability refers to the things beyond those which are effable, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (2006, p. 105). Therefore, besides voiced silence, silence in true sense is employed to testify the in effable.

POZZO: I must go.

ESTRAGON: And your half-hunter?

POZZO: I must have left it at the manor.

[Silence.]

ESTRAGON: Then adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

VLADIMIR: Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

[Silence. No one moves.]

VLADIMIR: Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

ESTRAGON: Adieu.

[Silence.]

POZZO: And thank you.

VLADIMIR: Thank you.

POZZO: Not at all.

ESTRAGON: Yes yes.

POZZO: NO no.

VLADIMIR: Yes yes.

ESTRAGON: No no.

[Silence.]

POZZO: I don't seem to be able ... [long hesitation] ... to depart.

ESTRAGON: Such is life.

(Beckett 1954, pp. 37–38)

In the above scenario, silence occurs four times in-between the turns of characters repeating each other, echoes which can be uttered. In contrast, frequent occurrences of silence emphasize and foreground the narrative content—when time is deprived of meaning, what is left for human beings to do is mere self-repetition and self-negation, construing the meaninglessness of human existence. As an epitome of blank sign, silence facilitates the manifestation of signifieds beneath the respective signifiers, as held by Heidegger, “Language talks as sound of silence” (1997, p. 23).

The change of Lucky is also a proof: in Act I, he exerts all his effort in addressing his thought; in Act II, he becomes mute, i.e., losing verbal ability as evident contrast, which shows that keeping silence is the unmarked state of Lucky, and can be unfettered only at the temporary moment when Lucky is granted the right to talk. Lucky's change from speechless state to indiscreet talk simlizes the essence of world through the signifiers of blank signs. Contrary to the unmarked elaboration of the significance of existence, contemporary people void of speech ability construe the meaninglessness of human beings.

The scenarios analyzed above validated that voiced silence is the blank sign construed through symbolization and voiceless silence is the noumenon of blank sign. Be it voiced or voiceless silence, occurrences of silence create blankness in narration, encoding the discontinuity in narrative time, with the presence of implicit or foregrounded signifieds.

4 Summary

Time in *Waiting for Godot* is a deviated conception different from that in traditional drama, twisted throughout story time and narrative time. The story time of the drama incorporates a variety of time sign systems, accompanied with ambiguous signifieds, disordering flow of timeline, disrupted continuity, and the overt features of instantiations or tokens of time are dissolved, followed by the systematic collapse and subsequent loss of timeliness for the existing story time. In the narrative process, repetitive structures, temporary pauses, dialectical silence between clauses of actor's lines instantiate different forms of narrative emptiness, which distort narrative time as void flow, discontinuity, and invalidity. These approximately static narrative time tokens facilitate the choices and deliberations of signifieds of blank signs with only the presence of respective signifiers. The two sorts of blank signs, instead of causing cognitive loss or disorder of time, substantiate audience's awareness of time, and construe meaninglessness of human existence as the theme of *Waiting for Godot*.

References

- Aristotle. 1982. *Poetics* [《诗学》] (Luo, Nian S. (Tr.)). Beijing: The People's Literature Publishing House [人民文学出版社].
- Aristotle. 1997. *Poetics* [《诗学》] (Luo, Nian S. & Yang, Zhou H. (Tr.)). Beijing: The People's Literature Publishing House [人民文学出版社].
- Beckett, Samuel. 1954. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press.
- Cantor, Robert M. 2016. Zero sign duality in visual semiotics. *Semiotica* 210. 209–214.
- Chen, Jian N. 2003. Narratological analysis of drama time [戏剧时间的叙事学分析]. *Journal of Shanghai Theatrical Institute* [《上海戏剧学院学报》] 6. 18–23.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1997. *On the way to language* [《在通向语言的途中》] (Sun, Zhou. X. (Tr.)). Beijing: The Commercial Press [商务印书馆].
- Hu, Yi W. 2018. *Theatre: Seomio-narratological of performances* [《戏剧：演出的符号叙述学》]. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press [四川大学出版社].
- Jakobson, Roman. 1984. Zero sign. In Linda R. Waugh & Halle Morris (eds.), *Russian and Slavic grammar*, 1–14. New York: Mouton.
- Metz, Christian. 1996. *Essais sur la signification au cinema* [《电影语言——电影符号学导论》] (Liu, Sen Y. (Tr.)). Taipei: Yuanliu Publishing House [远流出版社].
- Nicoll, Allardye. 1985. *The theory of drama* [《西欧戏剧理论》] (Xu, Shi H. (Tr.)). Beijing: Chinese Play Publishing House [中国戏剧出版社].
- Pfister, Manfred. 2003. *The theory and analysis of drama* [《戏剧理论与戏剧分析》] (Zhou, Jing B. (Tr.)). Beijing: Beijing Broadcasting Institute Press [北京广播学院出版社].
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1998. *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenologic ontology* [《存在与虚无》] (Chen, Xuan L. (Tr.)). Hefei: Anhui Literature & Art Publishing House [安徽文艺出版社].

- Sebeok, Thomas A. 1985. *Contributions to the doctrine of signs*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Sebeok, Thomas A. 2001. *Signs: An introduction to semiotics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Tan, Jun Q. 2014. The unity of time in “The Three Unities” and drama narration [“三一律”的时间整一与戏剧叙事]. *Journal of Sichuan University* [《四川大学学报》] 3. 63–69.
- Tang, Yi P. 2004. The distortion of time: The transformation of the narrative form of contemporary Chinese drama [时间的扭曲——中国当代话剧舞台叙事形式的变革]. *Journal of Shanghai Theatrical Institute* [《上海戏剧学院学报》] 6. 43–53.
- Wang, Yi Q. 2005. *Selected works of western modern drama* [《西方现代戏剧流派作品选》]. Beijing: Chinese Play Publishing House [中国戏剧出版社].
- Wang, Zhi M. 1998. On the art of drama time [《戏剧时间艺术论》]. *Journal of Guangxi Normal University* [《广西师院学报》] 4. 64–68.
- Wei, Shi L. 2012. *Blank-sign* [《空符号》]. Beijing: People’s Publishing House [人民出版社].
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2006. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [《逻辑哲学论》] (He, Shao J. (Tr.)). Beijing: The Commercial Press [商务印书馆].
- Zhao, Yi H. 2013. *A general narratology* [《广义叙述学》]. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press [四川大学出版社].
- Zhao, Yi H. 2016. *Semiotics: Principles and problems* [《符号学：原理与推演》]. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press [南京大学出版社].
- Zhao, Yi H. 2018. The first paradox in semiotics: The absence of the interpretive meaning calls for signs [符号学第一悖论：解释意义不在场才需要符号]. *Journal of Xihua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences edition)* [《西华大学学报》(哲学与社会科学版)] 37. 1–5, 11.

Bionote

Xuejiao Lin

Soochow University, Suzhou 215006, China

Liaoning University, Shenyang 110136, China

linxuejiao0512@126.com

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7850-7344>

Xuejiao Lin, senior lecturer at School of Foreign Languages, Liaoning University, is a doctorate candidate at School of Foreign Language, Soochow University. Her major research interest covers cognitive linguistics, semiotics, cognitive poetics, and narratology.