

EDWARD BOND'S USE OF SOCIOLECTS IN HIS DRAMATIC WORK

Hilde Klein
Universidad de Málaga

The disintegration of human society into smaller societies, each with a different history and culture, is manifest in the differences between natural languages and the linguistic subsystems of these languages, which in turn have considerable effects on the interaction among people. Language has always fulfilled a social function and is closely related to the social structure and value systems of society. Consequently, the interest of the sociolinguist lies in what Fishman has called the «patterned covariation of language and society»¹, that is, the relation between linguistic structure and social structure. In recent years, indeed, the main interest of sociolinguists has shifted from areas of dialectology —language variability in a geographic or horizontal (diatopic) dimension—, towards the social or vertical (diastratic) dimension of linguistic varieties, denominated sociolects².

Many proposals have been made in research to classify linguistic signs typical of groups that use a subsystem belonging to a natural language, yet no unanimous criterion has been found to define the fundamental concept «sociolect» and other concepts related to it. In his book Kubczak³ analyses and criticizes different theories concerning the classification of the term «sociolect» in order to establish a satisfying evaluation of the concept. He concludes that, although there is no complete agreement as to the division of the linguistic differences of a language community in their social dimension, most researchers point out that sociolects refer to the linguistic variety speakers use belonging to a specific social stratum

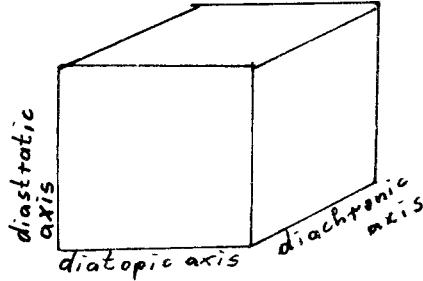
¹ «Introduction» to J. A. Fishman (ed.), *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, Mouton, 1968, quoted in S. Pit Corder, *Introducing Applied Linguistics*, Harmondsworth, 1979 (1973), p. 54.

² Vid. Wolfgang Steinig, *Soziolekt und soziale Rolle*, Sprache der Gegenwart 40, Düsseldorf, 1976; W. A. Wolfram & R. W. Fasold, *The study of social dialects in American English*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1974.

³ Vid. Hartmut Kubczak, *Was ist ein Soziolekt?*, Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1979.

(*Schichtenzugehörigkeit*). The term «stratum» (*Schicht*) is defined by Kubczak following the new tendencies in sociological discussions as «a group of people who are located within the same social rank following the social rank hierarchy (*Schichtung*), evaluated and established by the members of society»⁴.

Sociolects, then, as defined explicitly by many sociolinguists, are linguistic subsystems of communication used by a specific single stratum, though, of course, two strata (*Schichten*) can use the same sociolect and one stratum (*Schicht*) can consist of several sociolects⁵. The subsystems form a part of suprasystems or diasystems. The most frequent division of diasystems into subsystems is established in relation to their diachronic, diatopic or diastratic differences. José Pedro Rona⁶ represents an ideal diasystem by a cube:



The base of the cube represents the diatopic axis or geographical dimension, the height the diastratic axis or socio-cultural dimension and the side the diachronic axis or temporal dimension. Most sociolinguists establish this three-dimensional division, but others, as Kubczak, prefer divisions which include differences related to style and situation, denominated diaphasic or situational differences (*Diaphasische oder situative Unterschiede*), although Kubczak stresses that the most important aspect in the investigation of sociolects is the diastratic dimension. Flydal should be mentioned here as the author of the term «diastratic dimension», whereas the spatial and temporal dimension developed from work by de Saussure:

⁴ Kubczak, *op. cit.*, p. 96 (... eine Gruppe von Personen, die in einer durch Bewertungen der Gesellschaftsmitglieder etablierten sozialen Ranghierarchie (Schichtung) auf demselben Rang lokalisiert sind).

Vid. Parson's attempt to define the concept social stratification: Talcott Parsons, «An Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification», in *Essays in Sociological Theory*, Glencoe, 1954, quoted in Kubczak, *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵ Vid. W. Labov, «Where do grammars stop?», in R. W. Shuy (ed.), *Sociolinguistics. Current trends and prospects*, MSL 25, 1972, G.U.P., Washington, 1973, pp. 43-89.

⁶ Vid. José Pedro Rona, «A Structural View of Sociolinguistics», in *Method and Theory in Linguistics*, Den Haag, 1970, pp. 199-211, quoted in Kubczak, *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34; W. Klein, *Variation in der Sprache-Ein Verfahren zu ihrer Beschreibung*, Skripten: Linguistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft 5, Kronberg Ts., 1974.

Outre que les structures linguistiques se succèdent dans le temps et dans l'espace, elles se succèdent aussi, dans les sociétés à hiérarchie sociale suffisamment développée, à mesure que l'on descend ou que l'on monte l'échelle sociale⁷.

The significance of the diastratic dimension of sociolects to reflect the social stratification of society is obvious in Edward Bond's literary work, but before I start to illustrate his use of sociolects, I consider it of importance to point out the reason for Bond's specific choice of different linguistic varieties. Edward Bond, one of the most outstanding contemporary British playwrights, is essentially a didactic writer who feels the urgent need to change the world through his theatre: he considers our Western society morally insane, dehumanized by its technology and politicians. The author has repeatedly expressed his great concern about our society's dependence on an industrial ecology that is beyond control. Unless society changes, Bond argues, it will destroy itself through violence⁸. Thus Bond sketches a negative anthropology in his work by means of the argument, the scenic events and the language spoken by the different characters, with the focus on the distortions of the argument, the scenic events and the language spoken by the different characters, with the focus on the distortions of the human being produced by an irrational system.

Most critics have agreed on the playwright's skilful use of language:

... he is one of the few craftsman-like writers, who approach their work [...] and the craft of writing [...] quite consciously as a skill»⁹.

Bond, in order to convey his message, has always consciously looked for adequate styles of speech for each situation presented in his plays to accentuate the character's rôle in the action. The language employed varies according to the social and/or moral attitude of the speaker. Thus we are confronted with inarticulate speech where the vulgar and the obscene dominate, or with highly stylized speech where the rhetorical, pompous or finely poetic prevails.

Many of Bond's plays disturb the audience because of their blatant linguistic exaggeration, yet the author uses these devices deliberately to draw the spectator's attention to the dialectic of the facts exposed in his social criticism. Language is an important instrument in the propagation of the author's message, though Bond invites the audience to construct their own interpretation of the situation presented in his plays in a rational and discriminating way.

In Bond's first two plays, *The Pope's Wedding* (1962) and *Saved* (1965), the speech is an accurate reproduction of the aspects of English diasystems in their

⁷ Leiv Flydal, «Remarques sur certains rapports entre le style et l'état de langue», in *Nords Tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap* 16, pp. 240-257, quoted in Kubczak, *Ibid.*, p. 51: Vid. E. Coseriu, *Los conceptos de "dialecto", "nivel" y "estilo de lengua" y el sentido propio de la dialectología*, LEA 3/1 (1981), pp. 1-33.

⁸ Vid. Charles Marowitz, «If a House Is on Fire and I Cry 'Fire'...», *The New York Times*, January 2, 1972.

⁹ William Gaskill, quoted by Irving Wardle in «An Interview with William Gaskill», *Gambit* 5, 17, 1970, p. 39.

diatopic and diastratic dimension to describe a concrete social class, while in other plays the speech is chiefly meant to reflect the characters' social rôles or to establish a social difference with the upper classes, so that the variety employed is diastratically, but not regionally, based. It is not surprising that Bond should have chosen regionally recognizable dialects for his first two plays, as this is in keeping with the realistic appearance of the plays in their portrayal of contemporary society.

The speech found in *The Pope's Wedding* is a transcription of rural Essex dialect and that of *Saved* is South London. The author has commented:

The language (of rural Essex) was more of a distancing device. It enabled me to see the characters with an objectivity I might have lacked if they were talking like the people next door to me ¹⁰.

In this way Edward Bond makes use of the language to convey objective information about the speakers' social environment and depicts their social status. The author, at the opening of *The Pope's Wedding*, indicates the cultural and material poverty of the environment through the conversation maintained by some of the young labourers:

BYO. Bloody work tmorra.

JOE. Yoo wouldn't know what a doo with yoorself if it wasn't.

BYO. I'd know what a doo with yoo.

...

JOE. Got a smoke?

BILL. Chriss, I'd sell my sister if I 'ad one.

LORRY. Yoo thirsty?

LEN. If she was anythin' like yoo t'ent likely yoo get much for 'er.

BILL. 'Op it. Oi, I saw that Butty girl bendin' down in 'er yard when I come by. Neigh come off my bike.

BYO. Yoo like it fat.

BILL. Soft, mate, soft.

SCOPEY. Where they come from?

BILL. Saw right up 'er arse. Chriss — where's that beer? ¹¹

The youngsters talk about work, money, smoking, drink and sex, topics pointing towards their main interests. The adjective «bloody» insinuates that they do not enjoy their work, yet consider it as a necessary means to avoid complete boredom and to earn some money, which is spent on cigarettes and beer and hardly covers their necessities from one pay-day to the next. Women have for these young men the same function as drink or smoke, being only objects to satisfy the youngsters' physical needs and to kill their boredom.

¹⁰ Interview with Edward Bond, *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, Sixteen Interviews from *Theatre Quarterly* 1970-1980, ed. by Simon Trussler, p. 27.

¹¹ Edward Bond, *Plays: One (Saved, Early Morning, The Pope's Wedding)*, Methuen, London, 1985 (1977), p. 231. (all subsequent references to these plays will be noted in the text; abbreviations: S., E.M., P.W.)

The speech reflects the labourers' lack of culture and motivation, both in the subject of the conversation and their style of speech, which consists of very short sentences, frequent omission of verbs, ellipsis, contractions, etc. The speech is semantically poor, although accurate in expression¹². Remarkable about this speech is its quick rhythm, its energy, characteristics which we shall meet again in *Saved*, *The Fool* or *Bingo*. The speech reveals something of the need to release this energy, not wasted in a daily monotonous routine, an energy which in Bond's opinion can easily explode in violence¹³.

In *Saved* Bond again gives evidence of his skill as a writer in the reproduction of South London speech with astonishing accuracy and authenticity. This speech produces a certain amount of difficulty in comprehension for the spectator because of its idiom and accent. It is of interest here to quote William Gaskill's opinion on the casting of *Saved*, where he refers to Bond's use of language:

As a director casting Bond text, the speaking of it is almost the first essential, It's got to sound right. And certainly in *Saved* it was essential to have a high proportion of London— born people in it to speak it properly. Because it's extraordinarily inflected with a London ear¹⁴.

The use of this specific sociolect has again the function of reflecting the social reality of the environment and of indicting society for the desolate situation of the characters' lives. *Saved* deals with the South London working class, culturally and morally deprived, who are not capable of any emotional response and who suffer from the difficulty of communicating between one another. The characters' mutual relationship is based on aggression, egotism, conceit and sex. In the play Bond wants to show how an industrialized society, which is based only on consumer values, is completely dehumanizing and creates states of tension which finally lead to violence¹⁵.

The state of incommunication is reflected in the structure of the language in a perfect manner. The speech consists chiefly of short affirmative propositions, frequently incomplete and grammatically wrong (the *g* of the ending *-ing* and the *h* are omitted, *you* or *your* are reproduced as *yer*, contractions like *that's* and *what's* are even more simplified into *thass* and *whass*, etc.). We get the impression that the characters talk to one another, yet do not communicate. An example of this is a first contact between Pam and Len, a pick-up whom Pam takes home for sex:

LEN. Wass yer name?
PAM. Yer ain' arf nose.
LEN. Somethin' up?

¹² Vid. Basil Bernstein's theory on restricted code vs. elaborated code, quoted by Peter Trudgill in *Sociolinguistics*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974, pp. 52-53.

¹³ Vid. Edward Bond, *Plays: One*, Author's Note «On Violence», op. cit., pp. 9-17.

¹⁴ William Gaskill, quoted by Wardle in: «An Interview...», op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁵ Vid. Interview with Edward Bond in: «Drama and the Dialectics of Violence», *Theatre Quarterly* 2 (1972), pp. 4-14.

PAM. Can't I blow me nose? ...
 LEN. Wass yer name?
 PAM. Wass yourn? ...
 LEN. 'Ow often yer done this?
 PAM. Don't be nosey. (S., pp. 21-22).

Len and Pam are undoubtedly at cross-purposes with each other and Len's questions remain unanswered. One American critic has observed in this respect that:

The people of *Saved* mistrust words, as they mistrust any human symbol or extension (sic) that might reveal them to themselves. [...] (in *Saved*) language as a tool functions only to hold others at a distance, [...] Pam is willing to share her body, but avoids all other contact¹⁶.

Scharine's observation can be applied again to Pam's parents, who have not spoken to each other for years. Harry, in order to avoid any discussion with his family, has escaped into silence and advises Len to adopt the same attitude:

HARRY. Don't speak to 'em at all. It saves a lot of misunderstandin'. (S., p. 130).

The only link still existing between Pam's parents is based on a material level Pam, questioned by Len on her parents' incommunication, simply answers:

PAM. Nothin' t'say. 'E puts 'er money over the fire every Friday, an' thass all there is. ... (S., p. 35).

When the silence between Harry and Mary is finally broken, the speech takes on the form of an attack, which is, on the whole, the basic mode of the speech of *Saved*. Scharine has explained this phenomenon as «the attack of the teased, trapped animal, striking at anything that comes too close to it out of fear»¹⁷.

The idea of the trapped animal as a metaphor for the human being who lives in an irrational society is a recurrent theme in Bond's plays. He affirms that:

As animals we react to threat in a natural biological way; [...] mentally, emotionally and morally. [...] We respond aggressively when we are constantly deprived of our physical and emotional needs¹⁸.

This state of aggression is masterly reflected in Bond's language, first in a quarrel between Pam and Len (Scene Eight), because of Pam's infatuation with Fred and her stubborn wish for Len to leave the flat. Their row goes no further than a verbal attack, but the discussion between Mary and Harry ends in personal violence, due to Mary's flirtation with Len and the hatred accumulated over many years:

¹⁶ Richard Scharine, *The Plays of Edward Bond*, Associated University Presses, London, 1976, p. 61.

¹⁷ Scharine, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁸ Edward Bond, *Plays: Two* (Lear, The Sea, Narrow Toad to the Deep North, Black Mass, Passion), Methuen, London, 1978, pp. 9 and 3-4. (All subsequent references to these plays will be noted in the text; abbreviations: L.-Lear, Sea-The Sea).

MARY. Don't you dare talk to me! -
 ...
 HARRY. I'll juss say one word. I saw yer with yer skirt up. Yer call me filth?
 ...
 HARRY. I don't want to listen.
 MARY. Filth!
 ...
 She (Mary) hits him (Harry) with the teapot. The water pours over him...
 MARY. 'Ope yer die!
 HARRY. Blood.
 MARY. Use words t' me!
 HARRY. Blood.
 PAM. Mum!
 HARRY. Ah!
 LEN. (off) Whass up!
 HARRY. Doctor.
 ...
 HARRY. Scalded!
 PAM. Whass 'appenin'??
 HARRY. She tried t' murder me! ...
 (S., pp. 117-120).

This extract demonstrates Bond's proficiency with language and his musical ear; there is a regular rhythm in these lines of few syllables which, according to the situation, transmits either the atmosphere of incommunication or of aggression, an aggression which in *Saved* is released by Fred's gang in the killing of an innocent baby.

Whereas in *The Pope's Wedding* and *Saved* the characters all use the same sociolect diatopically and diastratically based (E. Essex in P.W. and South London in S.), in other plays Bond employs different speech levels to establish a difference between social classes, as for instance in *Restoration*, *Bingo* or *The Fool*, or to emphasize the mental constitution of a character, as in *Early Morning* and *Lear*.

In *Early Morning*, Gladstone's speech changes rapidly from one register to another. At one point when giving lessons on how to torture more efficiently, he cites in a regional dialect constitutional rules which support his brutality and then proceeds to recite a piece of poetry.

GLADSTONE. ... Rule nineteen. Drive slow an yer'll never bump into yerself comin' back. 'Oo uses a nose rag. ...
 ...
 Time! Time! Suddenly the birds come, it's spring, suddenly they mate, ...
 (E.M., pp. 171-172).

Thus Bond wants to point out the corruption of the ruling class that hides brutality on the pretence that they are *only* following rules. The use of vulgar speech testifies to Gladstone's mental constitution, while the use of poetry in the context of the play is an indication of the character's platitude and emptiness.

Thus Bond wants to point out the corruption of the ruling class that hides brutality on the pretence that they are *only* following rules. The use of vulgar speech testifies to Gladstone's mental constitution, while the use of poetry in the context of the play is an indication of the character's platitude and emptiness.

A similar treatment is to be found in Lear's daughters in Bond's *Lear*. Although royal, the speech of Bodice and Fontanelle is symptomatic of the soldiers' vulgar idiom and mirrors the royal daughters' baseness and corruption. In this way Bond confirms the general tendency to associate types of speech with types of people.

Both in *Early Morning* (Scenes IV & XVI) and *Lear* (Act II, Scene I), Bond directs his criticism towards professional strata within the legal and medical professions, whose sociolects are normally included in the diastratic dimension. The trials in both plays are mock trials and the charade is perfectly reflected in the language. Bond wants to demonstrate that the leading classes are the definers of guilt by establishing their laws, laws they themselves break. However, from their position of power, they consider the actions of the citizens as social deviations which have to be punished¹⁹. Like this, striking injustice is concealed behind the mask of a fake legislation.

VICTORIA. We call no evidence. (*She grabs her papers.*) Members of the jury, we speak to the mothers among you. (*They are all men.*) My son used to be a disappointment to me. Then he killed us all. ... The defence confidently asks for a verdict of guilty. (*She puts her papers away.*)

ALBERT. Members of the jury, your verdict. (*The JURY put their heads together.*)

FOREMAN. We order trial by ordeal.

ARTHUR. This is —

VICTORIA. The usual formality. (E.M., p. 199).

While in *Early Morning* no evidence is required, in *Lear* witnesses are bought in order to secure the sentence:

BODICE. This is a political trial: politics is the higher form of justice. The old king's mad and it's dangerous to let him live. Family sentiment doesn't cloud our judgement. I've arranged to call the people who upset him most.

FONTANELLE. I'm a witness. (L., p. 46).

In the same way as Bond indicts an unjust legal system through the use of legal jargon, so he proceeds with medical terminology in order to condemn the members of this profession who collaborate with the system. The most outstanding example is found in *Lear*, where the prison doctor, who emphasizes proudly that he is «in good standing with the government» and will be given shortly «a post of more obvious trust and importance» (p. 72), is in charge of Fontanelle's autopsy and the posterior blinding of Lear. Bond exposes how an abominable crime on human nature is camouflaged behind the pretext of an exact and reliable experiment, performed with a bloodcurling ruthlessness:

¹⁹ Vid. Edward Bond, Preface to *Lear* in: *Plays: Two, op. cit.*, pp. 3-12.

FOURTH PRISONER. With this device you extract the eye undamaged and then it can be put to good use. It's based on a scouting gadget I had as a boy.

...

Understand, this isn't an instrument of torture, but a scientific device. See how it clips the lid back to leave it unmarked.

...

Nice and steady. (*He removes one of LEAR's eyes.*)

... (L., p. 77).

In his plays Bond uses vulgar speech or highly poetic language or rhetorical speech according to the situation; these differences in style are included by most researchers in the diaphasic dimension. When characters begin to acquire an insight and try to rectify the mistakes they have committed, their speech is full of symbols and metaphors. Lear's reflections on his past life and the consequences of his mistakes are expressed in a poetic language; we find dream imagery, parables and symbols of tortured, oppressed human beings. Lear's language as a dictator, however, was functional, straightforward and direct. There are passages of a highly polished rhetoric in *The Sea*, as for instance Willy's powerful speech which reflects his capacity to confront life in a reasonable way, (*Sea*, p. 148) which contrasts with Mrs. Rafi's stereotyped, farcical and hollow voice of command or the disrupted speech of a madman like Hatch.

No matter which sociolect Bond might choose, it is selected as a necessary and an appropriate instrument to forward his urgent message to alter the path towards human destruction.

 INDICE