

## **The Silent Listener: An Analysis of Pragmatics in Robert Browning's My Last Duchess**

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### **Abstract**

Robert Browning (1812-89) is one of the leading poets of the Victorian Age. He depicts a penchant for the psychological aspects of human behaviour. His most enduring poems are in the form of dramatic monologues where a speaker with some eccentric or pathological features expresses his thoughts in the presence of a listener who does not intervene in the narrative. Traditionally, literary critics have focused on the psyche of the speaker in these dramatic monologues. The speaker reveals the machinations of his mind through subtle hints, symbols, allusions and understatements. The silent listener has been regarded as merely a passive character that exists only to allow the speaker to delve on his thoughts or actions. However, to see the role of the silent listener as just a prop would be to do disservice to the artistic finesse of Robert Browning. One of Browning's most anthologized pieces is "My Last Duchess". The poem is a monologue in which a Duke talks to an envoy (a silent listener) about his last duchess. In doing so, the Duke reveals the darker aspect of his psyche. The listener, though silent, is an active participant in the narrative. In this paper I propose to examine this poem as the Duke's Speech Act and draw upon the theories of Linguistics, especially Pragmatics, to throw light on the indispensable role played by the silent listener in the scheme of the poem.

**Keywords :** Dramatic Monologue, Robert Browning, Pragmatics, Speech Act

The Victorian poet Robert Browning (1812-1889), has been hailed as the exceptional optimist in an age of brooding doubt. His fame in English literature rests mainly upon the dramatic monologues in which he captures the psychological state of a speaker who is usually of a more dominant social stature in comparison to his listener. The dramatic monologues explore the hidden and often dark recesses of the human mind. Browning's greatness lays in the fact that the monologues not only reflect the psychological workings of the speaker but also the social equation between the speaker and the listener. Traditionally, the listener, who is silent throughout the conversation, has not been given much critical attention. The focus has been on the speaker's mindset and his point of view. But more recently, the role of the silent listener has come under more alert critical inquiry. One of the most appreciated dramatic monologues of Robert Browning is "My Last Duchess". The poem has a listener whose silence facilitates the antics of a near narcissist speaker. The silent listener is not just a prop but an indispensable part of the context of the poem whose absence would materially alter the meaning of the poem. The theory of Pragmatics, a branch of Applied Linguistics, can offer a refreshingly new insight into the role of the silent listener in the dramatic monologue.

"Pragmatics is the study of invisible meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said or written. In order for that to happen, speakers or writers must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations when they try to communicate. The investigation of those assumptions and expectations provides us with some insights into how we understand more than just the linguistic content of utterances. From the perspective of pragmatics, more is always being communicated than is said." [Yule, 142]

This paper seeks to study the nature of the silence of the listener in the poem "My Last Duchess" and understand whether it serves as encouragement and approval or suggests discomfort and resistance to the speaker.

The presence of the silent listeners in the dramatic monologues essentially turns them into speech acts wherein the speaker(s) perform certain actions through their utterance. In Browning's "My Last Duchess", the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, a man of high stature. The context of the speech act is that he is entertaining an envoy who has apparently come to him with a marriage proposal. The Duke begins his speech thus:

"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now : Fra Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands."

[Browning]

The presupposition in this case is that the envoy (the silent listener) is aware that the Duke is a widower at present. The knowledge of the Duchess's death must have been in the public knowledge. These remarks make a reference to the last Duchess. The adjective 'last' is full of meaning. It hints at a sequence or a series – something which underplays the uniqueness of the Duchess. The possibility of the Duke having a wife before the 'last' one cannot entirely be ruled out. The listener must be aware of this. The other important signifier in the opening remarks is the word 'now'. It is an example of what is called a 'deictic expression' in Pragmatics. It points towards a particular time i.e. 'the present' - as the Duke speaks to the envoy, which is a time after the death of the last Duchess. The word lends ambiguity to the 'implicature' (the implied meaning) of the speaker. The time reference is the present but in terms of the context of the action, 'now' also signifies the time after the death of the Duchess. This obviously opens a new scope of interpretation for the listener. As George Yule observes :

"It must be the case that we use the meanings of the words, the context in which they occur, and some pre-existing knowledge of what would be a likely message as we work toward a reasonable interpretation of what the producer of the sign intended it to convey. Our interpretation of the 'meaning' of the sign is not based solely on the words, but on what we think the writer intended to communicate." [Yule, 143]

It is logical to infer that the envoy is also faced with the question of interpreting the word 'now' in these terms which gives him the reason to doubt the Duke at the onset of the narrative. It is pertinent to note that the envoy is of a lower social stature than the Duke and the power equation between them is heavily tilted in favour of the latter. The envoy maintains his composed demeanour lest he should offend the Duke. The reference to Fra Pandolf is also suggestive. The duke chooses to call that 'piece' a 'wonder' now. He is more inclined towards appreciating the work of art than in showing genuine love for his deceased wife. The words chosen by the Duke are 'there she stands'. Here again, the word 'there' is a deictic expression which may point towards the physical space where the portrait of the duchess is hung or the fact that the duchess is dead in the 'present' time. The reader empathizes with the listener in this monologue.

“As the Duke of Ferrara gradually explains both himself and the select contents of his privy chamber, a reader is cast in the role of listening ambassador opening the preliminaries to the acquisition of the next duchess (the last one having been disposed of). “[Sanders, 435]

The Duke has obvious love for theatrics which is reflected in the manner in which he draws the curtain over the portrait.

“Commentators have sensed that the Duke is staging a show for the envoy by drawing and closing curtains and speaking rhetorically. Critics have stressed the dramatic basis of the Duke's speech and how the monologue sustains a central metaphor of drama and performance. If one pays close attention to the Duke's language and gestures, one notices the extent to which he is involved in a drama of social pretension- of ceremonious posturing, play-acting and verbal artifice.” [Mukherjee, 88]

The above analysis suggests that the speech act of the Duke is as much ‘performative’ (denoting action) as it is ‘constative’ (denoting statement). The listener is constantly aware of this.

“Viewed in terms of the communicative acts, represented or otherwise, the silent listener is absolutely crucial; the dramatic situation itself is obviously only created by the presence of the other, and he is necessary for the delineation of the speaker’s self-portrait. Recent work on the pragmatics of silence has outlined the many ways in which silence is clearly not mere absence of speech but is itself heavy with communicative value; there is communication structured through silence, just as through speech.” [Wagnor-Lawler]

The silent speaker is not just a prop for the Duke to evince his theatrics. He is an active participant in the action. The Duke addresses him at least five times in the middle of his monologue. The first explicit address comes when he draws the curtains on the duchess :

“(since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)”

[Browning]

This reflects on the character of the duke. He comes across as someone who is authoritarian and self-centred to the readers. The statement is in the parenthesis and may indicate an aside or just a thought. It is not clear whether the envoy actually listens this. This is where the problem of interpretation occurs.

“Through the performance of interpretation, the reader distinguishes her/himself from both the speaker and the auditor: in doing so, the reader both fulfills, but also ironically undermines, the speaker’s apparent tyranny over the communicative situation that makes up the discourse of the poem.” [Wagnor-Lawler]

Next reference to the envoy occurs when the Duke talks about the time when Fra Pandolf, the painter was painting the Duchess's portrait.

"...Sir, 'twas not  
 Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps  
 Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps  
 Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint  
 Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
 Half-flush that dies along her throat."

[Browning]

It is clear that the Duke is self-conscious and his actions and speech are well thought out. He insinuates a possible relation between the duchess and Fra Pandolf. This is obviously something that the duke suspects. The manner in which he reconstructs the dialogue between them before the envoy is akin to performance on stage. The manner of utterance of these lines can accentuate the suggestion of an affair between the two. As readers, we may presuppose that this part of the Duke's monologue serves the sole purpose of creating a sniff of doubt in the mind of the envoy about the character of the Duchess. Here more is being communicated than is being said. The monologue obviously takes into consideration and is being shaped by the presence of the listener. The Duke carries forward his narrative about the Duchess

"...She had  
 A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,  
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
 The bough of cherries some officious fool  
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least.”

[Browning]

The phrases like ‘too soon’ and ‘too easily’ impose his subjective referencing upon the listener. He very shrewdly intersperses his monologues with constatives and performatives to drive home his point- that the Duchess was a woman of questionable character. He makes a forceful argument for his case. The use of apostrophe (his addressing the envoy as ‘sir’) is a rhetorical device to convince the envoy about the innuendos that the duke subtly conveys. He talks in the same breath about his ‘favour’ at her breasts (his own authority), dropping of daylight in the West (divine authority), a ‘bough of cherries’ (an insignificant object for the speaker) which some ‘officious fool’ (obviously of a lower social stature than the speaker) brought for her and even ‘the white mule’ (signifying the epitome of offense that can be done to his authority). This is suggestive of his eccentric nature. He goes on :

Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together.

[Browning]

The use of rhetorical question in these lines is intended for the envoy. Though the Duke asks the question, he does not wait for the answer of the envoy. This speaks volumes about the Duke’s overpowering nature. The ‘commands’ are euphemism for death penalty for the Duchess. ‘All’ smiles is another referent which leaves much to be interpreted. It may mean death penalty for the Duchess so as to stop her smiles at various instances. It may also mean the death penalty of the Duchess and all the people connected with her (Fra Pandolf, for instance) whom the Duke was jealous of. The latter inference is substantiated by the use of the word ‘together’. This inference would have been even more appalling for the envoy. Now the Duke, having conveyed to the envoy his side of the story, literally commands the envoy to rise from his seat so that he

pays full attention to his point of ‘dowry’. This is apparently the main intention of the Duke in dwelling at length over his ‘last’ Duchess.

“ Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet  
 The company below, then. I repeat,  
 The Count your master’s known munificence  
 Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
 Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed  
 At starting, is my object.”

[Browning]

The Duke uses the phrase ‘known munificence’ for the Count’s nature, whose daughter’s marriage proposal the envoy has come. He further supplements that with his ‘just pretense’ for Dowry. It is interesting because the phrase is almost oxymoronic. He concedes that he is staging pretence for dowry, but adds ‘just’ to stress that the same is justified (because of his authority and stature). The Count’s ‘fair daughter’ is his ‘object’ which points towards the fact that the Duke is not so much interested in having a wife as he is in having a beautiful object. Again, more is being communicated than is being said. The envoy now begins to proceed downstairs without saying a word. But the Duke stops him:

“...Nay, we’ll go  
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”

[Browning]

He is not finished yet and would not allow leave to the envoy. He commands the envoy to come downstairs along with him. As they step down, the Duke shows to the envoy a bronze casting in which the Roman God Neptune is shown taming a sea horse. The image is bound to convey a feeling of threat to the envoy. The reference to Claus of Innsbruck is almost similar to the prior reference to Fra Pandolf. As the envoy has previous knowledge of the latter’s fate, he



would consider this proposal a dangerous one for the Count and his daughter. All the theatrics and rhetoric of the Duke serves exactly the opposite purpose that he wishes to convey. In all probability, the envoy would not recommend the Duke as the future husband of his Count's daughter. This would mainly happen due to his sound 'pragmatic competence'. It is here that the theory of Pragmatics helps us understand the importance of the presence of the silent listener who alters the scheme of the dramatic monologue and gives it a new significance.

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