

On doing ‘being witty’:¹ the performative construction of conversational dominance in Wilde’s society plays

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I analyse the function of breachings of the rules of polite conversation in Wilde’s society plays. In these plays, as will be argued, characters strive to achieve conversational dominance at each other’s expenses in order to increase their social capital as defined by Bourdieu, whose description of this facet of social identity, as I point out, is inherently relevant to queer theory because of its emphasis on its performative character. Focusing on key scenes of apparently idle chat between characters, I examine how certain violations of the implied rules of conversation, as described by several sociologists and philosophers of language (Garfinkel, Grice, Sacks), allow the characters to increase their authority (and therefore their social capital), by gaining the reputation of being brilliant and witty. This is achieved by forcing the other participants into a double bind situation where calling out the breaching is ineffective and potentially awkward, and not calling it out reinforces the conversational dominance of the speaker that performed it, authorising them to double down on it by committing new, more audacious violations, in a self-sustaining mechanism that guarantees the continual increase of their social capital after the initial investment.

KEYWORDS: literary criticism; social science, sociology; Oscar Wilde; paradox.

1. INTRODUCTION

“A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world” (WILDE 1893: 446): Lord Illingworth’s aphorism emphasises the strength of the connection between power and conversation in Oscar Wilde’s society plays.² How this kind of conversational power is achieved, and what it

¹ The phrase, which was suggested to me as a title by Carmen Dell’Aversano, is a nod, not only to Harvey Sacks’ lecture *Doing ‘Being Ordinary’* (1992a), but also to Alessandro Grilli’s article *On Doing ‘Being a Misfit’* (2018), because the methodological approach I adopt in this paper (in particular, the use of sociolinguistic categories as interpretive tools for a literary text) as well as the multidisciplinary notion of queer theory that is a fundamental premise of my main argument, is a direct application of the teachings of professors Dell’Aversano and Grilli, whose courses I have followed at the University of Pisa, and to whom goes my gratitude for providing me with the theoretical framework on which this paper is based.

² I employ the term “society plays” to refer to Wilde’s four plays set in the London of his time,

allows the plays' characters to do, will be the questions this paper attempts to tackle. Their relevance to queer theory will be discussed in the following paragraphs, but since, strictly speaking, the object of my analysis is a problem of literary history, a clarification might be necessary. The theoretical approach I will use in this paper, as well as the subject chosen, might appear unorthodox, because I apply the methodologies of several branches of sociology and philosophy of language to fictional texts, even though some of those methodologies (such as Harvey Sacks' conversation analysis) were specifically designed to analyse instances of actual, recorded conversation. I am aware of this difficulty, and will not claim that this paper's arguments and theses have an immediate applicability to the study, in actual conversation, of the phenomena whose presence they highlight in Wilde's works. My interest is simply in reconstructing how Wilde, unanimously recognised as one of the most brilliant conversationalists of his time, portrayed power dynamics in conversation, showing a deep (although perhaps only intuitive) awareness of their workings. Since the insertion of long scenes of apparently idle conversation is one of the most peculiar features of Wilde's writing style, an analysis of their function, or lack thereof, is of obvious interest to literary scholarship. However, such a portrayal of conversation is relevant to queer theory as well, because, as I will argue, it presupposes a performative understanding of this social phenomenon (that is, the construction of social capital through conversation): the purpose of this analysis is therefore to connect Wilde's representation of conversation with the theoretical constructs of later sociologists and philosophers (such as Bourdieu, Garfinkel, Grice, and Sacks) who analysed the performative nature of social interactions in general, and in some cases, more specifically, of certain conversational dynamics. These scholars are not directly connected to queer theory in its strictest sense, that is, they are not usually considered to be among the forefathers of queer studies, mainly because the main field of interest of their philosophical and sociological inquiries (namely, and very roughly, the unstated laws of social interaction) is somewhat different from the historically prevalent research endeavour of queer studies (which could be summarised, again very roughly, as the deconstruction of culturally relevant identity categories, such as gender identity, race, sexual orientation,

which will be the main field of inquiry of this paper: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (WILDE 1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (WILDE 1893), *An Ideal Husband* (WILDE 1895a), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (WILDE 1895b).

class, species, etc.). At a closer look, however, these two areas appear to be undeniably related, because if identity categories are to be viewed as the product of a performative process of cultural construction (a statement which is among the boldest and most innovative claims of queer theory, and arguably among its most successful and productive achievements), then it is clear that this process must be regulated by socially accepted rules, whose workings are so deeply ingrained in the very fabric of culture that they do not need to be explicitly stated, which is what guarantees the impression of spontaneous naturalness that characterises them in social discourse. The scholars whose theoretical instruments I will employ in this paper have achieved brilliant insights into the functioning, the social enforcement, and the cultural transmission of these implied rules, thus setting a basis for queer theory's subsequent formulations in all other fields: therefore, even though it is difficult to trace a direct and explicit intellectual genealogy that connects the sociology and philosophy departments where Bourdieu, Garfinkel, Grice, and Sacks studied with queer theory's academic history, their work must be taken into account in order to support and deepen queer theory's findings and formulations. Furthermore, pointing out the relevance of these scholars' theoretical tools in the analysis of Wilde's works, as this paper attempts to do, would allow to claim Wilde back to queer theory, ascribing him to its intellectual pre-history, as a precursor of exceptional brilliance, one of the first to explore the hidden mechanisms behind the construction of social identity, and to reveal, with almost disturbing clarity, its performative aspects.

2. CONVERSATIONAL DOMINANCE AS PERFORMANCE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL CAPITAL

What exactly does it mean to "dominate a London dinner table" in the context of Wilde's plays? In order to answer this preliminary question, it is necessary to determine to what field the 'power' that is achieved in conversation applies. In Wilde's works, this form of power has little to do with the narrative structure, whose dramatic resolution is usually dependent on the characters' deliberate actions, such as Mrs. Erlynne's decision to cover for Lady Windermere in WILDE 1892 and Lord Goring's brooch stratagem in WILDE 1895a, or, in WILDE 1895b, on a fortuitous and ostentatiously meaningless coincidence: the scenes of apparently idle conversation in these plays have very few connections with the plot, from which

they are intentionally kept as separate as possible. But Lord Illingworth's aphorism does not allude to power in the ordinary sense of the word either (the power provided by wealth and the influence of family name): the line is addressed to Gerald Arbuthnot, a young man of no wealth and very few prospects, except the position of secretary Lord Illingworth is offering him (when he utters this line, Lord Illingworth has no intention of recognising Gerald as his son yet). What the phrase refers to is a more subtle form of power, which could be described more exactly as an instance of what Bourdieu calls "social capital". In Bourdieu's terms,

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition — or in other words, to membership in a group — which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (BOURDIEU 1986: 246)

In this case, the "recognition" that characters attempt to receive from others in Wilde's plays comes in the form of social prestige: being considered witty, clever, and fashionable allows them in turn to dictate the terms of the conversational exchange, steering it towards whatever direction and conclusion they wish. Social capital, according to Bourdieu, is "relatively irreducible to the economic and cultural capital", although "never completely independent of it": therefore, its influence is separated from that of other forms of capital, and does not necessarily have perceivable effects outside its own sphere. This description fits well with the role of conversation in Wilde's plays, where it acts as a separate, self-centered domain, "superbly sterile" like art itself (WILDE 1890: 151), where the only thing that matters is the internal development of the conversation itself (the first act of WILDE 1893 was described by the author himself as "a perfect act, [...] because nothing happens in it", as reported in RABY 1997: 151), although the characters involved in conversation usually belong to the upper classes, and use it both as a pastime and as another field where their social prestige can be strengthened and reinstated. But what is most interesting about Bourdieu's definition of social capital, for the purposes of this paper, is its performative character:

The existence of a network of connections is not a natural given, or even a social given, constituted once and for all by an initial act of institution, represented, in

the case of the family group, by the genealogical definition of kinship relations, which is the characteristic of a social formation. It is the product of an endless effort at institution, of which institution rites — often wrongly described as rites of passage — mark the essential moments and which is necessary in order to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits” (*ibidem*).

The continual repetition of the everyday ritual that is idle conversation in the upper class society of Wilde’s time is proof of the volatile character of conversational prestige, and of social prestige in general: in order to achieve it, the performance of conversational brilliance must be repeated whenever possible. In other words, being witty is a performative construction, whose workings are virtually identical to those described by Butler with regards to gender:

Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions — and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness. [...]

In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. (BUTLER 1999 [1990]: 178)

The relevance for queer theory of such a similarity is immediately evident: since social capital is an essential element of one’s social identity, the possibility of analysing a facet of this construct, such as conversational brilliance, revealing its performative character, and describing its functioning is of undeniable theoretical interest from a queer perspective.³

³ For the relevance of the application of Butler’s notion of performativity to other fields of queer theory, not necessarily related to gender identity, see (DELL’AVERSANO 2018: 36-37).

2.1. CONVERSATIONAL BREACHING AS SOCIAL CAPITAL INVESTMENT

Bourdieu's terminology is particularly useful, because the analogies between the different forms of capital are not limited to the name. The economic metaphor is active, and is meant to describe the workings of cultural and social capital, highlighting their similarities with the more widely recognised mechanisms of economic capital: for example, with regards to the possessors of social capital, Bourdieu emphasises how it "entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word".

A feature of extreme interest that social capital shares with its economic counterpart is its cumulative tendency:

Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. (BOURDIEU 1986: 247)

This tendency is not unrelated to the "credit" social capital provides, but the accumulation takes place in a specific form, due to the "embodied" character of social capital. Bourdieu's remark that "most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment" can be easily extended, at least with regards to the reputation of conversational brilliance, to social capital: therefore, in this case, the "credit" is to be understood as personal credibility or authority. By participating in a conversation, the speaker invests a credit, presenting their remarks as acceptable in the exchange: a higher credibility capital allows for risky investments (*i.e.*, allows one to present controversial statements as acceptable), and, as is the case with economic capital, the higher the risk, the larger the dividends.

A first, very simple example of how credibility works is provided by a short dialogue from Wilde:

HESTER: I dislike Mrs. Allonby. I dislike her more than I can say.

LADY CAROLINE: I am not sure, Miss Worsley, that foreigners like yourself should cultivate likes or dislikes about the people they are invited to meet. Mrs. Allonby is very well born. She is a niece of Lord Brancaster's. It is said, of course, that she ran away twice before she was married. But you know how unfair people often are. I myself don't believe she ran away more than once. (1891: 418)

In this passage, Lady Caroline claims that Hester is not entitled to express her opinions on Mrs. Allonby, then immediately proceeds to do so herself. Of course what allows her to do what she has just reproached Hester for is the difference in their social position: Lady Caroline is a respected English lady, not a young “foreigner”, and therefore can afford to talk scandal of another “very well born” lady like Mrs. Allonby. But even though in this case the emphasis is on class rather than conversational proficiency, the principle is the same: if a character has enough authority, however achieved, they can get away with small breaches of etiquette, and breaches of etiquette can be very powerful in a conversation. An example of primary importance are interruptions, which are usually considered rude, but can assert a participant’s conversational strength at the expenses of another with extreme effectiveness. Here is an example from Wilde 1892: 398:

LORD AUGUSTUS: My dear boy, when I was your age—

CECIL GRAHAM: But you never were, Tuppy, and you never will be.

Cecil Graham’s paradoxical reply cuts through Lord Augustus’ reproachful remark, taking away all its momentum, and the fact that he did not even let Lord Augustus finish his sentence is overlooked by the other participants. What allows Cecil to interrupt his senior, in this case, is not a difference in social status, but a superior authority acquired in the course of the conversation.

3. THE IMPLIED RULES OF CONVERSATION: BREACHING EXPERIMENTS AND THEIR EFFECT ON PHATIC-EPIDEICTIC COMMUNION

That nobody points out Cecil Graham’s breach of a basic norm of conversational etiquette (do not interrupt other speakers) is due to the fact that these norms are usually taken for granted, and it is considered unnecessary to reinstate them explicitly. This is acknowledged by several sociologists who studied conversation: in the words of Harold Garfinkel, “common understandings” are a fundamental interpretive tool for the speakers engaged in everyday conversation:

These properties of common understandings stand in contrast to the features they would have if we disregarded their temporally constituted character and

treated them instead as precoded entries on a memory drum, to be consulted as a definite set of alternative meanings from among which one was to select, under pre-decided conditions that specified in which of some set of alternative ways one was to understand the situation upon the occasion that the necessity for a decision arose. The latter properties are those of strict rational discourse as these are idealized in the rules that define an adequate logical proof.

For the purposes of conducting their everyday affairs persons refuse to permit each other to understand “what they are really talking about” in this way. The anticipation that persons will understand, the occasionality of expressions, the specific vagueness of references, the retrospective-prospective sense of a present occurrence, waiting for something later in order to see what was meant before, are sanctioned properties of common discourse. They furnish a background of seen but unnoticed features of common discourse whereby actual utterances are recognized as events of common, reasonable, understandable, plain talk. [...] Departures from such usages call forth immediate attempts to restore a right state of affairs. (GARFINKEL 1991 [1967]: 42)

According to Garfinkel, everyday conversation is based on the presupposition that all participants have enough social competence to guess implied contextual information (“the specific vagueness of references”) and anticipate the direction of the conversation itself (“waiting for something later in order to see what was meant before”). If the “unnoticed features of common discourse” are tampered with, the fact is immediately perceptible. In fact, this characteristic of conversation has been exploited, for research purposes, by Garfinkel himself, who devised specific “breaching experiments” in order to make “common understandings” explicit: he proposed to his students several tasks, based on the deliberate breaching of certain norms of social, and often conversational, etiquette. For example, they were asked to interrogate other speakers on the meaning of perfectly ordinary sentences they uttered in everyday life, such as “I had a flat tire” or “How is your girlfriend feeling?” (*ibidem*). The other speakers were often confused and scandalised: in Garfinkel’s words,

The operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation; and to produce disorganized interaction should tell us something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained. (38)

The notion of breaching experiment can be connected with another essential characteristic of everyday conversation, namely, its tendency to reinforce phatic-epideictic communion, whose definition, coined by Alessandro Grilli (2018: 113-114), is based on a reworking of Malinowski's original concept of phatic communion:

According to Malinowski, who in this anticipates a foundational premise of pragmatics, the purpose of language is not exclusively to convey information (symbolic, propositional meaning) but to act as an instrument of social exchange; Malinowski points out in particular that in many situations language is used only in order to display the speakers' availability for social contact. [...]

I have found it necessary to rework this concept to include an important caveat. More precisely, I would like to question Malinowski's view that in phatic communion content (the words' symbolical, propositional meaning) is irrelevant: [...] I maintain that, on the contrary, propositional meaning is deeply relevant, since phatic communion is the locus where socially shared knowledge about the world is ritually rehearsed and socially transmitted. This is why I have chosen to replace Malinowski's concept of "phatic communion" with that of a "phatic-epideictic dimension" of discourse. In Western rhetorical tradition "epideictic" designates a kind of speech which is aimed not at persuading the audience but at rehearsing already shared beliefs. However, such a rehearsing is only apparently neutral, since it shapes the socially shared sense of reality.

A deliberate contradiction of phatic-epideictic communion is by definition a form of breaching experiment, because it violates one of the implied rules of conversation, where "already shared beliefs" are generally not supposed to be questioned, because their explicit statement is aimed at confirming general agreement on matters considered as neutral and already settled, rather than at being informative. Therefore, it is not surprising that the reactions described by Garfinkel with regards to breaching experiments are very similar to those of the characters in Wilde's comedies, when they face a breaching of phatic-epideictic communion and conversational etiquette.

3.1. THE NEVER-ENDING CYCLE OF CONVERSATIONAL BREACHINGS

Of course, there are some differences between the former and the latter case, mainly due to their different function: breaching experiments are tools of theoretical research, and, as such, tend to make the assumptions underlying conversation as explicit as possible. Wilde's characters' paradoxes and other forms of breaching, instead, are stylistic tools in a literary

work, and, from the characters' point of view, their main conversational weapon: therefore, they are meant to simply hint at those assumptions, exploiting them for their potential of suggestion, without actually making them explicit. But in both cases, the 'victim' of the breaching reacts by asking the speaker to clarify their meaning, or if they really meant what they said (sometimes by rejecting the possibility altogether), which is the very same defensive strategy that the speakers interviewed by Garfinkel's students unconsciously adopted ("She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered, in a hostile way: 'What do you mean, 'What do you mean?' A flat tire is a flat tire'": 42):

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits, Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean. (WILDE 1892: 361)

KELVIL: Are you serious in putting forward such a view? (WILDE 1891: 423)

MRS. ALLONBY: Men always want to be a woman's first love. That is their clumsy vanity. We women have a more subtle instinct about things. What we like is to be a man's last romance.

LADY STUTFIELD: I see what you mean. It's very, very beautiful.

LADY HUNSTANTON: My dear child, you don't mean to tell me that you won't forgive your husband because he never loved any one else? Did you ever hear such a thing, Caroline? I am quite surprised. (432)

LADY HUNSTANTON: How clever you are, my dear! You never mean a single word you say. (434)

LADY HUNSTANTON: Ah, I am afraid the heat was too much for her last night. I think there must have been thunder in the air. Or perhaps it was the music. Music makes one feel so romantic!—at least it always gets on one's nerves.

MRS. ALLONBY: It's the same thing, nowadays.

LADY HUNSTANTON: I am so glad I don't know what you mean, dear. I am afraid you mean something wrong. (457)

LORD CAVERSHAM: (*Turning round, and looking at his son beneath his bushy eyebrows*) Do you always really understand what you say, sir? (WILDE 1895: 516)

In the first passage quoted, Lord Darlington's answer to the Duchess of Berwick is worth reporting: "LORD DARLINGTON: (*coming down back of*

table) I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out" (*ibidem*). This answer provides a good explanation of how the mechanism of conversational breaching works in the construction of social capital: since it subverts the hearer's expectations with regards to the conversational common points on which phatic-epideictic communion is based, without calling them explicitly into question, it keeps the speaker in a safe position, where they do not risk being "found out". If a speaker's breaches are unintelligible, they cannot be called out without making them explicit, which would defeat the purpose, because, as has been seen with regards to breaching experiments, highlighting the conventional nature of a conversational remark, by asking what one means by uttering it, elicits a hostile response in the other participants. In other words, if a speaker manages to perform an implicit breaching of conversational etiquette, for example by violating phatic-epideictic communion through a roundabout or paradoxical allusion,⁴ the unpleasant job of explicitly appealing to the rules of polite conversation is left to other speakers. In the examples quoted above, it is only the second speaker, not the first, that has to resort to the "what do you mean?" formula. This forces the victim of an indirect conversational breaching into a double bind: they can ask for an explanation, which would inevitably come across as awkwardly self-conscious for the reasons listed above, and would moreover indicate that they do not understand what the speaker says, thereby putting them at a disadvantage in the struggle for the reputation of cleverness and brilliancy. Alternatively, they can only accept the violation, without being able to call out the speaker's breaching of conversational etiquette, and actually reinforcing the speaker's authority. This also makes the mechanism repeatable: the speaker can double down on their paradoxes, interruptions, and all other sorts of impolite remarks, exploiting their newfound, unquestioned authority. Thus, the initial credibility investment (that is, the breaching), if successful, yields a return in authority (that is, the entitlement to break conversational rules) that can be reinvested, allowing for the construction of a continuative increase of social capital based on the repeated performance of provocative wit.

⁴ Such as Lord Darlington's remark that elicits the Duchess of Berwick's request for an explanation in WILDE 1892: 361 "I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it".

3.2. COUNTER-STRATEGIES TO CONVERSATIONAL BREACHINGS

The variations on the “what do you mean” formula in the examples above, that is, “you cannot be serious” and “what you said is just nonsense and even you could not explain what it means”, are interesting as well: they are attempts to circumnavigate the double bind in which the victim of the conversational breaching finds themselves. By denying the seriousness of the previous speaker, the victim attempts to neutralise their breaching, brushing it off as a mere joke, or to point out (always implicitly) that the violation is performed for its own sake, and that even the one who committed it has no actual motive or reasonable explanation. Both of these strategies can be described, once again, with the tools of the sociology of conversation: in this case, Harvey Sacks’ conversation analysis provides examples of these conversational moves, examining their effectiveness in different contexts. The possibility of rejecting the seriousness of an utterance is dealt with in *On suicide threats getting laughed off* (SACKS 1992b),⁵ while the second strategy (denying that one has a reason for uttering a certain remark) is an alternative method of asking for an account, which is one of the most important notions of Sacks’ theory of conversation:

Now, I’ll consider many times the use of “Why?” What I want to say about it just to begin with, is that what one does with “Why?” is to propose about some action that it is an ‘accountable action.’ That is to say, “Why?” is a way of asking for an account. (1992b: 4)

One of the most important characteristics of accounts is that they put the speaker that is required to provide them in a vulnerable position, because

What we can see is that there are ways that accounts seem to be dealable with. If a person offers an account, which they take it provides for the action in question being done – for example, the caller’s name being given – then if the other can

⁵ Sacks’ example (the tendency of people involved in suicide attempts to laugh off the suicide threats addressed to them as jokes) is very specific, and focuses mainly on the fact that jokes are an instance of what he calls “ceremonials” (p. 14), which means that they have predetermined, self-conclusive responses (in jokes’ case, laughter). According to Sacks, since those responses do not require further continuation of the interaction, they are exploited in order to dismiss the suicide threat without leaving room for further argument. Claiming that one is not serious is the same conversational move, and although in the case of paradoxical conversation the focus may be on dismissing the semantic content of the utterance as absurd, rather than on putting an immediate end to the interaction, the mechanism is practically identical, because it is based on the negation of the previous utterance’s propositional content.

show that the interest of that account can be satisfied without the name being given, the name doesn't have to be given. That is, if the account is to control the action, then if you can find a way that the account controls the alternative action than it proposed to control, you can use it that way.

It seems to be quite important, then, who it is that offers the account. Because the task of the person who is offered the account can then be to, in some way, counter it. Where, alternatively, persons who offer an account seem to feel that they're somehow committed to it, and if it turns out to be, for example, inadequate, then they have to stand by it. (5)

This is exactly what the victim of a conversational breaching is trying to do with the "you can't be serious" move. Asking for an account of the violation would be a way to signal to the other participants that there has been one, and to force the speaker who performed it to give an explanation, but, once again, it is a risky move, because it violates the principle that the rules of conversation should be kept as implicit as possible (one of the first things children are taught about conversation is that "Why?" is a question that can only be asked a certain number of times, and not about everything). Therefore, the victim tries to deny the possibility that an account can be provided at all, attempting to force the speaker either to prove them wrong by providing one, or to admit that they were not being serious, that is, that they were not convinced of the truth of their utterance's propositional content, and that they said what they said just as a *boutade*, in an attempt to strengthen their conversational position by sounding brilliant and provocative. At this point, the speaker can either double down on the provocative breaching, as Lord Goring does in the last passage, by ironically answering "Yes, father, if I listen attentively" (WILDE 1895a: 516), or refuse to provide the explanation requested, like Lord Darlington in the scene I have examined, or do both, like Lord Illingworth, who, in the scene I will examine next, first claims the seriousness of his view, and then berates Kelvil for even asking such a stupid question "Quite serious, Mr. Kelvil. (*To MRS. ALLONBY*) Vulgar habit that is people have nowadays of asking one, after one has given them an idea, whether one is serious or not" (WILDE 1891: 423).

4. CLAIMING THE FLOOR: LORD ILLINGWORTH'S PERFORMANCE IN A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

This introductory section, though perhaps lengthy, provides a fairly accurate description of a process that takes place in many scenes of Wilde's comedies, where a character gradually gains the center of the conversation through a series of conversational breachings: a particularly clear instance is the following passage from WILDE 1891:

Enter LORD ILLINGWORTH.

LADY CAROLINE: [...] These American girls carry off all the good matches. Why can't they stay in their own country? They are always telling us it is the Paradise of women.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: It is, Lady Caroline. That is why, like Eve, they are so extremely anxious to get out of it.

LADY CAROLINE: Who are Miss Worsley's parents?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: American women are wonderfully clever in concealing their parents.

LADY HUNSTANTON: My dear Lord Illingworth, what do you mean? Miss Worsley, Caroline, is an orphan. Her father was a very wealthy millionaire or philanthropist, or both, I believe, who entertained my son quite hospitably, when he visited Boston. I don't know how he made his money, originally.

KELVIL: I fancy in American dry goods.

LADY HUNSTANTON: What are American dry goods?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: American novels.

LADY HUNSTANTON: How very singular!... Well, from whatever source her large fortune came, I have a great esteem for Miss Worsley. She dresses exceedingly well. All Americans do dress well. They get their clothes in Paris.

MRS. ALLONBY: They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.

LADY HUNSTANTON: Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go to?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Oh, they go to America.

KELVIL: I am afraid you don't appreciate America, Lord Illingworth. It is a very remarkable country, especially considering its youth.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilisation goes they are in their second.

KELVIL: *There is undoubtedly a great deal of corruption in American politics. I suppose you allude to that?*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: I wonder.

LADY HUNSTANTON: Politics are in a sad way everywhere, I am told. They certainly

are in England. Dear Mr. Cardew is ruining the country. I wonder Mrs. Cardew allows him. *I am sure, Lord Illingworth, you don't think that uneducated people should be allowed to have votes?*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: I think they are the only people who should.

KELVIL: *Do you take no side then in modern politics, Lord Illingworth?*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: One should never take sides in anything, Mr. Kelvil. Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore. However, the House of Commons really does very little harm. You can't make people good by Act of Parliament!—that is something.

KELVIL: *You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor.*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: That is its special vice. That is the special vice of the age. One should sympathise with the joy, the beauty, the colour of life. The less said about life's sores the better, Mr. Kelvil.

KELVIL: *Still our East End is a very important problem.*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Quite so. It is the problem of slavery. And we are trying to solve it by amusing the slaves.

LADY HUNSTANTON: Certainly, a great deal may be done by means of cheap entertainments, as you say, Lord Illingworth. Dear Dr. Daubeny, our rector here, provides, with the assistance of his curates, really admirable recreations for the poor during the winter. And much good may be done by means of a magic lantern, or a missionary, or some popular amusement of that kind.

LADY CAROLINE: I am not at all in favour of amusements for the poor, Jane. Blankets and coals are sufficient. There is too much love of pleasure amongst the upper classes as it is. Health is what we want in modern life. The tone is not healthy, not healthy at all.

KELVIL: You are quite right, Lady Caroline.

LADY CAROLINE: I believe I am usually right.

MRS. ALLONBY: Horrid word 'health.'

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Silliest word in our language, and one knows so well the popular idea of health. The English country gentleman galloping after a fox!—the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.

KELVIL: *May I ask, Lord Illingworth, if you regard the House of Lords as a better institution than the House of Commons?*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: A much better institution, of course. We in the House of Lords are never in touch with public opinion. That makes us a civilised body.

KELVIL: *Are you serious in putting forward such a view?*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Quite serious, Mr. Kelvil. (To MRS. ALLONBY) Vulgar habit that is people have nowadays of asking one, after one has given them an idea, whether one is serious or not. Nothing is serious except passion. The intellect is not a serious thing, and never has been. It is an instrument on which one

plays, that is all. The only serious form of intellect I know is the British intellect. And on the British intellect the illiterates play the drum.

LADY HUNSTANTON: *What are you saying, Lord Illingworth, about the drum?*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: I was merely talking to Mrs. Allonby about the leading articles in the London newspapers.

LADY HUNSTANTON: *But do you believe all that is written in the newspapers?*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: I do. Nowadays it is only the unreadable that occurs. (422-424)⁶

In this passage, I have underlined the questions addressed to characters different from Lord Illingworth, or to no one in particular: such are the first four interrogative sentences of the scene, and Lord Illingworth takes it upon himself to answer all of them. In Sack's terms, Lord Illingworth appropriates the floor, despite not being the designated speaker.⁷ The other participants react to this repeated appropriation of the right to answer by addressing the following nine questions⁸ directly to him, endorsing the authority he has implicitly claimed.⁹

It is interesting to notice that Lord Illingworth's answers all have something in common: in one way or another, they always subvert, or at least do not satisfy completely, the expectations of the character from whom the question comes. Sometimes the question is not answered at all ("LADY CAROLINE: Who are Miss Worsley's parents? LORD ILLINGWORTH: American women are wonderfully clever in concealing their parents"); sometimes the answer is playful ("LADY HUNSTANTON: What are American dry goods? LORD ILLINGWORTH: American novels") or downright sarcastic ("LADY HUNSTANTON: Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go to? LORD ILLINGWORTH: Oh, they go to America"): sometimes, after initially agreeing with the other speaker's statement, the answer subverts its meaning completely, by offering a totally different interpretation of what has just been agreed upon, practically turning

⁶ Even though the scene is very long, I chose to quote as extensively as possible, because the progressive tendency of addressing the questions exclusively to Lord Illingworth is shown very clearly. The italics and the underlinings are all mine.

⁷ For an account of the means speakers have to select the next speaker in a conversation, yielding the "floor" to them, see SACKS 1992c.

⁸ Actually, two of these are not technically questions ("*You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor*" and "*Still our East End is a very important problem*", both uttered by Kelvil), but they clearly imply, through such phrases as "you cannot deny" and "still", that somebody's opinion (Lord Illingworth's, in this case) is requested.

⁹ Other scenes in the comedies where a character gradually claims the floor with a series of paradoxes can be found in WILDE 1893: 430-434, 448-451, and in WILDE 1895a: 479-482.

the sentence into a statement of the opposite of what the original speaker meant (“LADY CAROLINE: [...] These American girls carry off all the good matches. Why can't they stay in their own country? They are always telling us it is the Paradise of women. LORD ILLINGWORTH: It is, Lady Caroline. That is why, like Eve, they are so extremely anxious to get out of it”). In the second part of the passage, the rhetorical strategies employed by Lord Illingworth are yet again different: many of his answers, in this 'second phase' of his maneuver to seize control of the conversation, state the opposite of what the questions (usually rhetorical ones, whose expected answer was suggested by the way they were formulated) presented as true (“LADY HUNSTANTON: I am sure, Lord Illingworth, you don't think that uneducated people should be allowed to have votes? LORD ILLINGWORTH: I think they are the only people who should; KELVIL: Do you take no side then in modern politics, Lord Illingworth? LORD ILLINGWORTH: One should never take sides in anything, Mr. Kelvil”; “KELVIL: May I ask, Lord Illingworth, if you regard the House of Lords as a better institution than the House of Commons? LORD ILLINGWORTH: A much better institution, of course. We in the House of Lords are never in touch with public opinion. That makes us a civilised body”), although the stratagem of subversion is still present as well (“KELVIL: You cannot deny that the House of Commons has always shown great sympathy with the sufferings of the poor. LORD ILLINGWORTH: That is its special vice. That is the special vice of the age. One should sympathise with the joy, the beauty, the colour of life. The less said about life's sores the better, Mr. Kelvil. KELVIL: Still our East End is a very important problem. LORD ILLINGWORTH: Quite so. It is the problem of slavery. And we are trying to solve it by amusing the slaves”). Surprisingly enough, the other characters react to this frustration of their expectations by encouraging Lord Illingworth to continue, asking him question after question: somehow, his dismissive and provocative attitude does not come off as impolite, but as fascinating and compelling, making sure that he always keeps the floor, and actually reinforcing his authority.

5. PARADOX AS A FORM OF CONVERSATIONAL BREACHING

This subversive aspect of Lord Illingworth's punchlines is a telling example of an essential feature of Wilde's writing style: Lord Illingworth's answers

are all paradoxical, in one way or another, and paradox is one of the most common forms of conversational breaching in Wilde's plays. But in order to describe its influence in conversation, it is necessary to formulate a definition that takes into account the peculiar form it takes in the plays. Usually, the term refers to a self-contained statement, which in some way defies logic or common sense, but in a dialogue, such as those of Wilde's plays, the paradox is often built collaboratively by several speakers, either by taking each other's hints or by contradicting each other.¹⁰ Even though the dialogic form of drama seems at odds with the nature of paradox, from another point of view it allows to determine more accurately where exactly the paradoxical element lies in a statement. This has always been problematic, because, in its history, the term has found a much wider applicability than its original field (logics), to the point that Wilde himself employs it in the generic sense of 'witty aphorism'.¹¹ If classical examples from logics, such as the

¹⁰ Of course, the former and the latter case presuppose very different interactions between the characters. Intentional collaborative paradoxes occur when characters engage in witty banter, usually with no other purpose than to entertain themselves and show off their brilliance to each other, as in this scene between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby, where the playful and flirtatious element is prevalent on the competitive one:

MRS. ALLONBY: Lord Illingworth, there is one thing I shall always like you for.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Only one thing? And I have so many bad qualities.

MRS. ALLONBY: Ah, don't be too conceited about them. You may lose them as you grow old.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: I never intend to grow old. The soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life.

MRS. ALLONBY: And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Its comedy also, sometimes. But what is the mysterious reason why you will always like me?

MRS. ALLONBY: It is that you have never made love to me.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: I have never done anything else.

MRS. ALLONBY: Really? I have not noticed it.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: How fortunate! It might have been a tragedy for both of us.

MRS. ALLONBY: We should each have survived.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation.

MRS. ALLONBY: Have you tried a good reputation?

LORD ILLINGWORTH: It is one of the many annoyances to which I have never been subjected.

MRS. ALLONBY: It may come.

LORD ILLINGWORTH: Why do you threaten me? (WILDE 1893: 428)

On the other hand, if a character systematically contradicts another, as Lord Illingworth does with Kelvil in the scene analysed above, it is usually in order to assert their conversational dominance, and the other speakers' involvement in the construction of a paradoxical statement is not intentional on their part. In both cases, however, the paradoxical element is determined with regards to the previous utterances, rather than as a feature of the individual sentence itself.

¹¹ In WILDE 1905: 26, for example, Wilde calls *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* "a

liar's paradox, are easily defined as statements whose truth value cannot be determined because of their own formulation, which makes them necessarily self-contradictory, it is clear that such a narrow definition cannot apply to other fields where paradoxes are produced,¹² and yet a more general one has, to my knowledge, never been proposed. In the case of Wilde's plays, although some self-contradictory statements are present, the dialogic situation provides another fundamental element: as has been seen in the scene above, the frustration of the previous speaker's expectations is systematic in Lord Illingworth's answers. In conversation, such expectations are much more simple to determine explicitly, because questions allow a speaker not only to select another one as their follower in the conversational sequence, as has been seen, but also to influence the choice of topics available to other speakers, and sometimes even the opinions they express on such topics.

5.1. SEMANTIC SELF-CONTRADICTION

A first elementary form of subversion is semantic self-contradiction, which ignores one of the most pervasive and fundamental rules of ordinary language, that is, that one should not contradict oneself. Here are some examples:

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: and although they never talk scandal, they – well, of course – they remark on it to every one. (WILDE 1892: 373)

CECIL GRAHAM: Well, there's nothing in the world like the devotion of a married woman. It's a thing no married man knows anything about. (*ibidem*: 399)

SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You prefer to be natural?

MRS. CHEVELEY: Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up. (WILDE 1895a: 477)

LORD GORING: I adore political parties. They are the only place left to us where people don't talk politics. (WILDE 1895a: 481)

page of paradoxes originally destined for the *Saturday Review*, despite the fact that it includes aphorisms with no trace of a paradoxical content, like "In examinations the foolish ask questions that the wise cannot answer".

¹² It is interesting to notice that a similar definition of paradox has been maintained for the analysis of certain elements of everyday conversation by Sacks (1992d), who defines paradoxes as "statements which have the property that if they're true then they're false" (p. 694). However's Sacks' definition is tailored on very specific examples drawn from particular conversational contexts, and he has no interest, for the purposes of his argument, to broaden it.

LORD GORING: A man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person. (*ibidem*)

ALGERNON: It is awfully hard work doing nothing. (WILDE 1895b: 561)

CECILY: I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy. (*ibidem*: 567)

In all these cases, the speaker employs a word in a sense that is completely incompatible with its standard usage, or provides a definition of it that is the opposite of the one indicated by the dictionary, as in the fifth and in the last example. In these cases, the subversion is present on a semantic level, and it could be argued that the semantic incongruence is not sufficient in itself to achieve the momentary shock of a paradox. It is not casual that, in the examples above, the semantic field where the subversion occurs is always related to matters of morals (marital devotion, being natural as opposed to posing, reasonableness, productiveness, good and evil, hypocrisy), or at least of social etiquette (talking scandal, not talking politics). All these witty remarks hide under their surface a more or less explicit critique of generally accepted moral rules and of etiquette.¹³ But even if that were not the case, they would still represent a breaching of the implied rules of conversation, as outlined by Paul Grice (1991 (1975)): according to Grice, if an utterance in a conversation does not comply with a series of rules aimed at maximising the clear and quick exchange of relevant information, meeting certain criteria with regards to quantity, quality, relation and manner (28), it is interpreted by the addressee either as a blatant and intentional, and therefore hostile, violation of those rules, or as carrying an implicature.¹⁴ In some of the paradoxes quoted above, the latter could very

¹³ It is not a coincidence that many of the best creators of paradoxes in Wilde's plays, such as Lord Illingworth and Lord Darlington, are playfully called "evil" by other characters: "DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Dear Lord Darlington, how thoroughly depraved you are!"; (WILDE 1892: 371); "DUCHESS OF BERWICK: (*who has risen*) What a charming, wicked creature! I like him so much. I'm quite delighted he's gone!" (*ibidem*, 372: in this case, the paradoxical remark underlines the ambiguous fascination that the Duchess, a minor character without any particular conversational brilliance, and probably suspicious towards Lord Darlington's morals, cannot help feeling for his antics); "LADY STUTFIELD: The world says that Lord Illingworth is very, very wicked" (WILDE 1893: 421).

¹⁴ "A man who, by (in, when) saying (or making as if to say) that *p* has implicated that *q*, may be said to have conversationally implicated that *q*, provided that (1) he is to be presumed to be observ-

well be the case: for example, Cecil Graham's remark that "there's nothing in the world like the devotion of a married woman. It's a thing no married man knows anything about" carries the implicature that actually there are no women who do not cheat on their husbands, and Mrs. Cheveley's remark that being natural is "such a difficult pose to keep up" indicates that she believes that there is in fact no such thing as being natural. But even in the cases where any sort of implicature or rational explanation of the statement seems impossible (for example, Lord Goring's oxymoron that "a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person"), the effect is still the same: the violation of the rules of conversation occurs in an otherwise perfectly acceptable speech, with no trace of overt hostility towards the hearers, and, more importantly, no apparent motive behind the breaching, apart from the act itself. Therefore, this form of deliberate, implied, pointless provocation is as effective a claim to conversational authority (in this case, the authority of talking nonsense, leaving it to the other speakers to figure it out) as the stronger forms of breaching that have been analysed earlier.

5.2. THE REVERSAL OF FIXED EXPRESSIONS

Even though the passages quoted above are not the opposite of fixed expressions, the strong semantic contradictions they contain make it easy to perceive that they represent the inversion of a standard form which would be commonplace, or even tautological, instead of paradoxical (for example: "There is nothing in the world like the devotion of a married woman. It's a thing no unmarried man knows anything about"; "A man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly reasonable person"). This impression is still more strongly felt when actual fixed expressions, such as proverbs and figurative language, are subverted:

CECIL GRAHAM: Now, my dear Tuppy, don't be led astray into the paths of virtue.
(WILDE 1892: 398)

ing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; (2) the supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that, q is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say p (or doing so in those terms) consistent with this presumption; and (3) the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) is required" (*ibidem*: 30-31). The "conversational maxims" and the "Cooperative Principle" are the rules envisioned by Grice earlier in the article as necessary in order to guarantee an effective communication in the conversation.

DUMBY: The youth of the present day are quite monstrous. They have absolutely no respect for dyed hair. (*ibidem*)

ALGERNON: The amount of women who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. (WILDE 1895b: 552)

In these cases, it is actually possible to indicate which term has been changed in comparison with the standard expression (“the paths of sin”, “respect for white air”, “washing one's dirty linen in public”). What is particularly interesting is that fixed expressions of this kind frequently employ figurative language, whose connotative implications usually pass unnoticed. By modifying it, the expression is no longer automatically perceived as a unity, and the undertones can be made explicit: for example, “respect for white hair” alludes to the respect due to old age, but since in the reformulated expression “white” is replaced with “dyed”, the attention is drawn to the fact that old people often dye their hair in an attempt to look younger. The subversion calls implicitly into question the ambiguous attitude of society towards old age: old people are respected in theory, but nobody wants to be considered one of them. In the same way, “washing one's dirty linen in public” alludes to the scandal that surrounded flirting outside one's marriage in Wilde's time, employing the metaphor of dirtiness to indicate shamefulness. In this perspective, flirting with one's husband is not scandalous (therefore “clean”), but the fact of “washing one's clean linen in public” betrays either a tedious ostentation of morality, or a wish to scandalise, which might be interpreted as the attempt to revive within the safe context of marriage the feeling of doing something forbidden, hinting at the view that marriage kills all passion in a couple, which is a recurring joke in Wilde's plays, and perhaps at the fact that a little scandal is actually necessary to fuel passion, and profitable in order to make sure one is not completely forgotten by society. Thus, on the extradiegetic level as well, the subversion of expectations leads to a questioning of commonplace discourse of Wilde's times in matters of morals and social norms, with its proverbs and fixed expressions: within the conversational exchange, this form of paradox breaks phatic-epideictic communion by definition, since the use of proverbs and fixed expressions is one of the most common ways to achieve it.

5.3. OTHER FORMS OF CONVERSATIONAL BREACHING THROUGH PARADOX

Not all instances of paradox are as clear-cut as the examples presented here. In many cases, paradoxical sentences are simply unrealistic, such as the following: "LADY HUNSTANTON: No, dear, he was killed in the hunting field. Or was it fishing, Caroline? I forget".¹⁵ Sometimes they even border on the nonsensical ("CECIL GRAHAM: By the way, Tuppy, which is it? Have you been twice married and once divorced, or twice divorced and once married? I say you've been twice divorced and once married. It seems so much more probable" (WILDE 1892: 382); "LADY HUNSTANTON: there was also, I remember, a clergyman who wanted to be a lunatic, or a lunatic who wanted to be a clergyman, I forget which"¹⁶), and in these cases even the range of topics is wider, less limited to potentially controversial issues of morals. However, even in these examples an element of subversion of the expectation can be detected, since one of the two possibilities is perceived as much less likely than the other, and yet they are presented as equally possible. Speaking more generally, since these remarks are unlikely to be uttered by a character that is seriously convinced of their truth, they do not respect Grice's quality maxim "do not say what you believe to be false" (1991: 27), and therefore represent, assuming that such a violation is deliberate, yet another form of conversational breaching.

4. CONCLUSION

Of course, the acquisition of conversational dominance is not an automatic process, and many other factors weigh in, both internal and external to the conversation, such as the utterances' formulation, the social position of the participants, their age, intelligence, relationships with other characters, intellectual ruthlessness and role in the play: this is not surprising, since, as explained by Bourdieu, different forms of capital, although in part independent, are not completely isolated from one another. However, the examples I have quoted also show how the internal development of conversation has itself an influence in the construction of the peculiar

¹⁵ (WILDE 1892: 438) In this case, the unrealistic detail is the possibility of an accidental killing, which is plausible "in the hunting field", but hardly imaginable during such a quiet activity as fishing.

¹⁶ (WILDE 1893: 438). Like many other minor characters, such as Lady Stutfield and Agatha, Lady Hunstanton often repeats a basic conversational pattern (in her case, the "I forget which" structure, although it is also used by other characters in other plays).

form of social capital that is ‘being witty’: for example, Cecil Graham has to spend an entire act talking in paradoxes, before he can interrupt Lord Augustus so abruptly. By highlighting these mechanisms in his plays, emphasising them in an almost caricatural manner, Wilde manages not only to make them more evident, but to underline their highly artificial aspect. The characters’ struggle for conversational dominance is interesting from a queer perspective because it is a performance in the strictest sense of the word, based as it is on continual repetition, elaborate bluffs, and calculated risks, and its autonomy from all other forms of struggle for power is a strong indicator of the entirely illusory character of this facet of social identity. Faced with these prolonged, deliberate scenes, as fascinating as the plot itself, the reader really has the impression that, as Jack says to Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, all that Wilde wants his characters to do is to “to argue about things” (WILDE 1895b: 561): at which Wilde might have answered, like Algernon, that “that is exactly what things were originally made for” (*ibidem*).

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