

MULTIMODAL PRAGMATICS AND THE STYLISTICS OF DRAMA Meaning-Making in Performance in David Hare’s *Skylight*

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Abstract – This article applies a multimodal pragmatic approach to David Hare’s *Skylight*, examining how characterisation and power relations are constructed through the interaction of verbal and non-verbal modes in theatrical performance. By combining pragmatic inquiry with the semiotics of drama, it underscores the importance of analysing recorded drama not merely as scripted text but as embodied, performed discourse. As a case study, the article focuses on the 2014 production directed by Stephen Daldry and starring Carey Mulligan and Bill Nighy, exploring how paralinguistic, proxemic, and kinesic features interact with language to convey interpersonal conflict, emotional tension, and ideological divergence. The analysis demonstrates that meaning in *Skylight* emerges from the orchestration of multiple semiotic modes, each contributing to the pragmatic force and narrative complexity of the performance. More broadly, it shows the explanatory potential of a multimodal pragmatic approach for understanding how characters are constructed and how ideological tensions are dramatised through the interplay of language, body, and space on stage.

Keywords: Multimodal pragmatics; stylistics; *Skylight*; semiotics of drama; David Hare.

Transcription conventions:

- (.) slight pause
- Capital letters strong salient emphasis
- ↓ _marked pitch leap downwards
- ↑ _marked pitch rise
- ? **marked** rising intonation (not necessarily question)
- , slightly rising intonation
- . marked falling intonation (not necessarily statement)
- () includes transcriber’s comments
- “ _marked as ‘quoted’ _by intonation/voice quality
- / . . / indicates suppressed speech by transcriber

1. Introduction

Recent work in stylistics increasingly argues that a full understanding of drama requires a multimodal and multisemiotic approach, one that complements rather than replaces traditional analysis of the written script, exploring how “language, interactional strategies and characterization interact” (Busse 2011, p. 155). Plays are no longer seen as fixed literary artefacts with stable, recoverable meanings. Instead, they are understood as multimodal texts whose significance is continually reshaped by the choices made in performance and staging.

This shift follows a long-running debate about whether dramatic texts should be studied primarily as literature or as performance scripts. Scholars who favour the authority of the written text (Short 1998) highlight its relative stability, while those who privilege performance (Furlong 2014) argue that meaning is only fully realised when the text is embodied on stage. These positions have often been set against each other: textual approaches criticise performance for being inherently transitory and unstable (Short 1998), whereas performance-centred approaches claim that the written text alone cannot convey “the interpretation and the effects the writer intended” (Furlong 2014, p. 72), since drama is written to be performed rather than simply read. Both perspectives, however, are limited when taken in isolation. While the play text can offer cues for performance, these are neither complete nor prescriptive: a single script may support multiple, highly diverse but equally valid stagings. On the other hand, any performance draws its interpretive basis from the text itself; directors and actors do not create meaning independently of it, but reinterpret and reshape it through voice, gesture, movement, and space. Both the interpretation derived from reading the play and the one constructed through performance can be regarded as valid and appropriate; their ontological differences do not entail that one is inherently superior to the other. Like any act of interpretation, each offers only a partial perspective on the dramatic work. A reading-based interpretation is necessarily limited by its lack of access to audiovisual dimensions, elements such as gesture, movement, and sound design that often play a crucial role in shaping meaning and emotional impact on stage. Conversely, an interpretation grounded in performance is also partial, since any single staging represents just one of many possible realisations of the play in production; however, although any performance constitutes only one of many possible realisations of the play, a stylistic analysis that integrates performance and production elements provides a more comprehensive account of meaning and, importantly, enhances rather than diminishes the interpretive potential of the written script (McIntyre 2008; Macrae 2014). Recent digital innovations have reshaped both the production and reception of drama, offering new opportunities for stylistic analysis. Platforms such as

National Theatre Live, *National Theatre at Home*, *Digital Theatre*, and even traditional broadcasters like the BBC now make theatrical performances accessible to a far broader audience. In addition to widening access, recorded and streamed productions provide a level of stability previously unavailable in live theatre, since performances can be revisited multiple times for closer examination and comparative study. While, as McAuley observes, a video recording is already an interpretation of performance, foregrounding certain features while obscuring others (1994, p. 187), it must be remembered that the camera's intervention in recorded drama is usually minimal and is not comparable to its role in telecinematic discourse, where it assumes a narrative role.

Multimodal approaches offer particular value for the stylistic study of drama, as they enable analysis that accounts for the full "range of semiotic resources available, arising from the contribution and interaction of linguistic and non-linguistic modes" (Tan *et al.* 2016, p. 14). Dialogue – language itself – can thus be understood as only one among several semiotic modes operating within the dynamic texture of dramatic performance. The meaning generated by dialogue is therefore best examined in relation to other semiotic resources, including *mise en scène*, kinesics, proxemics, and paralinguistic features, rather than in isolation. This perspective highlights how even apparently straightforward lines of text may be radically reinterpreted in performance: the same utterance, when delivered with a hesitant tone, an assertive gesture, or an altered spatial configuration on stage, can signal very different interpersonal dynamics or shifts in power relations. In this way, multimodal stylistics does not merely supplement linguistic analysis but reframes it, situating verbal meaning within a broader system of interacting signs.

Multimodality is also profoundly enriching when combined with a pragmatic analysis of interaction and dialogue on stage. However, existing research has not yet explicitly addressed the integration of multimodal stylistics and pragmatic theory in the analysis of drama. This paper seeks to address that gap by bringing together the semiotics of theatre and pragmatic theory – particularly the analysis of conversational strategies – within a multimodal framework, with a specific focus on the construction of characterisation and interaction in performance. Focusing on Stephen Daldry's 2014 production of David Hare's *Skylight*, starring Carey Mulligan and Bill Nighy, it examines how characterisation, interpersonal conflict, and ideological opposition are constructed through the orchestration of verbal and non-verbal resources. In doing so, it argues that the apparent opposition between Tom and Kyra is less a matter of irreconcilable values than of surface contrasts masking deeper pragmatic similarities. The article is structured as follows: Section 2 contextualises *Skylight* and its central themes; Section 3 outlines the principles of multimodal pragmatics and their

relevance to drama; Section 4 presents a detailed analysis of the 2014 production; and Section 5 concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of a multimodal pragmatic approach for the stylistics of drama.

2. “You’re right from your side, I’m right from mine”¹: David Hare’s *Skylight*

In the introduction to his collection of plays from the 1990s, David Hare explains why, after many years of writing epic plays with large casts and foreign settings, he turned instead to more intimate, classically structured plays set in single rooms. The epic form, he admits, carries great energy and dynamism, yet “it can also mean that the people you create are not able to put down roots on stage” (Hare 2008, p. vii). This image of characters growing roots captures Hare’s poetics in *Skylight*, signalling the centrality of character construction in the play. The action unfolds entirely within one small flat in north-west London and spans the course of a single night, with two ex-lovers almost constantly alone together on stage. Their interaction shifts between moments of shared nostalgia and intimacy and moments of sharp, combative opposition, combining closeness with conflict. The power of the play lies in its form as a classic two-hander, sustained entirely by the relentless, tightly woven dialogue between its two protagonists.

Promoting the 1996 American run of *Skylight*, Michael Gambon – who at the time played the role of Tom Sergeant, later interpreted by Bill Nighy – offered what is perhaps the most succinct and insightful description of what the play is about: “Two people know each other, they’re in love with each other, but can’t live together”². *Skylight* is at once a love story between two seemingly incompatible people and a symbolic representation of the clash between two visions of England shaped by the Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite eras. Its political undercurrents are unmistakable, embodied in the opposition between the two protagonists. On one side stands Tom Sergeant, a middle-aged, energetic, and restless multimillionaire restaurateur, accustomed to a life of luxury and openly contemptuous of banks. On the other side is Kyra Hollis, a young teacher who has dedicated her life to educating disadvantaged children in East Ham, living in almost monastic conditions in the working-class neighbourhood of Kensal Rise.

Within the space of two acts, Hare slowly but attentively constructs the two characters and their relationship through incessant dialogue, taking “his audiences to the heart of his characters’ spiritual lives without sermonising”

¹ Bob Dylan, *One Too Many Mornings*, CBS Records, 1964.

² Michael Gambon’s interview is available at <https://charlierose.com/videos/8964>.

(Wu 2007, p. 79). Unsurprisingly, the relationship between the two ex-lovers is built on conflict and resentment: Tom is a man stricken by grief, masking his loneliness behind a continuous flow of words, trying to show self-control and distance. His bombastic and egocentric narration is a form of denial: “his life is a kind of lie, an untruth forged out of a desire to cocoon himself with material comforts” (Wu 2007, p. 81). Much of the emotional turmoil that he tries, unsuccessfully, to hide from Kyra derives from his feelings of guilt and from his deficiencies; as Hare explained, Tom “is a hopeless male, a man condemned to maleness, and all the ridiculous feelings that go with it” (2008, p. ix).

Kyra, on the other hand, who once shared Tom’s way of life, has now completely repudiated it. She lives in a flat with barely functioning heating and teaches mathematics in a deprived area of London. For Kyra, teaching is more than a profession: it is a mission, a conviction, a life choice. The difficulty of her existence emerges vividly in the stories she recounts about her school, which testify to the daily struggles faced by her pupils and, by extension, by herself:

Kyra: At the moment? It’s doing fine. I mean, we had a not-bad head teacher, truly she really wasn’t too bad, but then – it always happens – things started wearing her down. She has got a bottle of red wine and has begun to open it. People started stealing her car. It was sort of a challenge or something. We think it must have been some of the kids. Then they broke into her flat. She lost her stereo. Also they got hold of her cat. She came back one night. The cat had been baked in the oven. (Hare 2008, p. 37)

These difficulties, however, are inseparable from the life Kyra has deliberately chosen, one defined by compassion for the struggles of others and a sincere commitment to helping those most in need. Tom appears unable to accept Kyra’s way of life. To him, she is wasting her talents by working and living as she does, and he accuses her of having become narrow, engrossed, and rigid in her ideology. He also feels reduced to the embodiment of what she opposes: “For you,” he bitterly remarks, “people are no longer people, it seems. Now they’re symbols. And I am a symbol of...what does it matter? Something you’re plainly angry with” (Hare 2008, p. 94). By the end of the first act, the two ex-lovers appear to have rekindled some connection, and the possibility of reconciliation momentarily arises. Yet in the second act, crucial and violently charged, they retreat into their respective trenches, unable to compromise. In Tom’s eyes, Kyra’s new life is born out of guilt and resentment; he sees her as punishing herself, retreating, giving up. Kyra, for her part, is torn between what she feels to be morally right and what once was comforting and familiar: though tempted to believe that some remnant of their old love might survive, she is painfully aware that their present lives move in irreconcilably different directions.

When the play ends with the definitive separation of the two lovers, the audience is left to question where their sympathies lie. Some critics have dismissed Tom as dislikable, a man defined by a “commodified, materialistic view of things” (Wu 2007, p. 81), casting him as the negative counterpart to Kyra’s moral integrity. Yet both Hare and Stephen Daldry, the play’s original director, resisted this reductive opposition.³ Tom’s flamboyance, rudeness, and excesses are also signs of a man battling grief and desperately, if awkwardly, trying to reconnect with the woman he once loved. Crucially, he shows an ability to confront his own flaws, even if without resolution. Kyra, by contrast, is marked by a striking coldness. Hare described her as living in “a kind of voluntary exile, making her life hard for herself” (Hare 2008, p. vii). While her devotion to teaching disadvantaged children reflects sincerity and conviction, Tom is not entirely mistaken when he challenges her with the claim: “Do you think I don’t see it? Loving the people’s an easy project for you. Loving a person... now, that’s something different. Something that will take you right to the brink” (Hare 2008, p. 96). Kyra may indeed be a young woman in search of identity, attempting to erase her past in order to redefine herself. Yet in her refusal to engage fully with Tom’s pain or acknowledge the family she once professed to love, she risks appearing not compassionate but evasive, raising questions about whether her stance is moral strength or a defensive withdrawal.

The difficulty the audience faces in taking sides stems from the fact that both characters, and their relationship, are constructed with remarkable depth and complexity. *Skylight* is far from a play built on simple oppositions; rather, it foregrounds the intricacy of human communication and the mystery of human choices. In general, the play can’t easily be reduced to the representation of the clash between political and private, between ideology and materialism: deep down there is “a parallel concern with interiority and the subjective, with the determining power of emotion and the irrational” (Lacey 1999, p. 157). While this complexity is already suggested in the written script, it is my view that it becomes fully legible only in performance. Hare provides some cues through stage directions, but it is through the actors’ embodiment – through paralinguistic features such as tone, pitch, and rhythm, and through proxemic choices in movement and use of space – that the subtle communicative dynamics between the two characters are most clearly revealed. In what follows, I outline how multimodal pragmatics can illuminate these processes, showing how language interacts with paralinguistic, kinesic, and spatial resources to produce a fuller stylistic interpretation of dramatic performance.

³ See Theater Talk: David Hare and Stephen Daldry on *Skylight*. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot6VS-KbOsA> (27.03.2015).

3. Multimodal pragmatics and the stylistics of drama

The importance of approaching dramatic texts in a way that accounts for the multimodal dimensions of performance has been emphasised by both stylisticians and semioticians (Martin 1997; Ghazvineh 2025; Lavender 2021; McIntyre 2008; Tan *et al.* 2016). Martin, for example, develops a systemic-functional model for theatre that draws on Halliday's linguistics (1985, 1993) and on multimodal semiotics, in particular Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design (1996). While Martin's work is valuable for showing how theatre represents and organises social experience, it proves less helpful for understanding how characterisation actually works in dramatic practice. Its focus falls on the parallels between theatre and broader social semiosis rather than on the specific mechanisms by which characters are created, developed, and perceived on stage. Ghazvineh's contribution is equally significant in that it shifts attention to the ways in which semiotic resources operate simultaneously rather than in isolation, "elucidating the mechanisms through which these modes converge and collaborate within the dynamic network of signs" (2025, p. 4). McIntyre's approach is also particularly illuminating, bridging stylistics and multimodal analysis to show how filmed drama can be examined rigorously as both text and performance (2008). Yet while McIntyre demonstrates that film studies provides valuable tools for the analysis of filmic adaptations of dramatic texts, I would argue that these frameworks are less fruitful for examining recorded stage productions, where the specificity of theatrical sign systems calls for a semiotic framework grounded in theatre rather than cinema. My own approach is therefore based on multimodal pragmatics, combining theatre semiotics with pragmatic and metapragmatic analysis, as this offers a productive framework for investigating characterisation and the dynamics of character interaction in performance.

Multimodal pragmatics is a branch of pragmatics that studies how meaning is created and interpreted in communication through the interaction of language with multiple semiotic modes. Traditional pragmatics focuses on how speakers use language in context to convey meaning based on contextual aspects, "such as the background of the speakers and the nature of their social relationship and respective intent and other factors in the situational and cultural context of the interaction" (O'Halloran *et al.* 2014, p. 239). Multimodal pragmatics extends this by considering that meaning is often co-constructed across several channels simultaneously, examining how speech constructs meaning in cooperation with gesture, movement, proxemics and audio-visual resources. A multimodal pragmatic analysis therefore offers a richer account of how communicative acts are produced, coordinated, and

interpreted across multiple layers of meaning. Such an approach proves particularly valuable when applied to the stylistics of drama: more specifically, I argue that a multimodal pragmatic approach enables a fuller examination of what Martin (1997, p. 202) calls the interpersonal metafunction of drama, namely the interactive meanings that express and signify the relationships between the *dramatis personae* on stage. A multi-semiotic analysis makes it possible to show how characters are constructed through non-verbal behaviour such as body language, spatial management, and paralinguistic features, while a pragmatic analysis of dialogue highlights the interactive dimension of speech. Taken together, these perspectives help us to understand “the significance of the issues raised by the composite actions and interactions of the world of the play” (Herman 1991, p. 97).

The analytic framework for the study of multimodality in this paper draws on the semiotics of theatre (Fischer-Lichte 1992; Elam 2002). Recognising what Elam describes as “the discursive nature of meaning making” (2002, p. 2), theatre semioticians have examined how multiple sign systems collaborate in performance. Meaning is generated not only through linguistic signs but also through paralinguistic features, understood as “the kinds of language-related behaviour accompanying the utterance” (p. 89), as well as through the organisation of space, gesture, and bodily movement. Taken together, these semiotic resources work in cooperation with verbal language to construct characters, both at the subject level – characters as individuals – and at the intersubjective level – characters in interaction with one another (Fischer-Lichte 1992, p. 19).

Paralinguistic signs such as intonation, pitch, loudness, and rhythm operate at the subject level by conveying information about “the speaker’s mood, feeling, stance, etc. at the moment of linguistic production” (Fischer-Lichte 1992, p. 26). At the same time, they are equally important at the intersubjective level, signalling a speaker’s orientation toward the conversation and toward other participants in the interaction. These features are often decisive in determining whether an utterance is understood as ironic, sarcastic, or literal, “serving further (in conjunction with kinesic factors) to disambiguate the speech act” (Elam 2002, p. 89). Their interpretative significance lies in the distinctive imprint they leave on performance, often shaping, or even transforming, not only the construction of a character but also the audience’s understanding of an entire play. In the 2014 performance of *Skylight*, for example, Bill Nighy’s emotionally layered portrayal of Tom is marked by a rapid tempo and a voracious manner of speaking, which infuses the character with a sense of urgency and restlessness. Nighy’s agitation and gestural performance also add a light, funny tone to his character, so that at many points in the play the audience laughs, giving a touch of comedy to a play that is essentially profoundly dramatic.

Proxemic signs play a crucial role in theatrical meaning-making, since “the theatrical text is defined and perceived in spatial terms” (Elam 2002, p. 67). Space itself functions as a sign in multiple ways: it can be ideologically charged, reflecting the social conditions and ways of life of the characters represented on stage; and, when examined as a sign in interaction, spatial relationships can indicate the physical distance or proximity between interlocutors, thereby revealing “the social distance between characters” (Culpeper 2014, p. 222) or their closeness. Body movements are part of what theatre semioticians describe as kinesic-proxemic interaction. The way a character manages space constitutes an embodied spatial code, revealing dimensions of personality, social status, or emotional state. For example, deliberately invading another character’s personal space can be read as an implicit act of dominance or threat.

As previously argued, within a multimodal pragmatic approach, these paralinguistic and kinesic-proxemic signs do not function in isolation but are examined in relation to language use in context and to one another. As Herman acutely argues, dramatic language is always connected with praxis – with action – and its meaning is related to “users, participants, and the assumptions and inferences they bring to bear with in communication” (2005, p. 164). A pragmatic approach to dramatic dialogue thus favours the analysis of the complexity of the interaction, not simply examining what is being said but how and with what intent utterances are delivered, assuming that “the expressive power of the not-said, the indirect, the unfinished, the elliptical, the understated, is integral to the pragmatic functioning of language” (Herman 2005, p. 244). A pragma-linguistic analysis of dialogue is revealing at both the subject and intersubjective levels. Characters frequently exhibit highly distinctive speech styles that contribute significantly to their characterisation. These linguistic features, however, are not merely stylistic; they also function as strategies deployed with particular communicative intentions. For instance, verbosity might dominate a conversation or compel another speaker to respond, while questions may be used not only to seek information but also to secure agreement or exert pressure, depending on the context. Such strategies do more than define individual characters; they operate as communicative acts that produce concrete effects on interlocutors, shaping the dynamics of interaction on stage.

Lakoff and Tannen (1984) offer an insightful framework for analysing conversational strategies that proves particularly useful for examining dramatic dialogue, as it highlights different levels of cooperation – or apparent cooperation – between interlocutors on stage. In their study of dialogue in Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage*, they identify the specific linguistic strategies that characters employ and conceptualise them as pragmatic synonymy, pragmatic homonymy, and pragmatic identity (1984, p. 330). Pragmatic synonymy arises when characters “use different linguistic

devices to achieve similar ends” (p. 330), meaning that their conversational forms differ on the surface but converge toward the same goal. Pragmatic homonymy occurs when characters employ “similar linguistic devices to achieve different ends” (p. 330), producing apparent alignment at the linguistic level while pursuing divergent communicative purposes. Finally, pragmatic identity is observed when interlocutors share almost identical pragmatic strategies, creating a high degree of alignment in both form and intent. This framework sheds light on the conversational aims of participants, revealing how their individual speech styles align or conflict at the levels of form, intention, and communicative effect. Its value lies in showing how apparent conflict at the surface – such as markedly different speech styles – can mask deeper alignment at the level of communicative intent. In this paper, I draw on this framework to analyse interaction in *Skylight*, examining how linguistic strategies are structured at the levels of form, intent, and effect, and how these strategies contribute to characterisation and the dynamics of argument between the two protagonists.

In the next section, I show how looking at *Skylight* through a multimodal pragmatic lens brings out the different ways characterisation and rapport are built on stage through the mix of dialogue and other semiotic resources. This approach identifies the surface resources – gesture, space, prosody – through which interaction is materially realised; the pragmatic perspective, rooted in linguistics, accounts for how speakers manage these interactions through conversational strategies and communicative intentions. The performance I analyse here was directed by Stephen Daldry and captured live from Wyndham’s Theatre in London’s West End in 2014. I have chosen this play because it is structured entirely around the dialogue and arguments of two characters: this emphasis on verbal conflict makes it an ideal case for analysing how characterisation and interaction are constructed through both linguistic and paralinguistic means. My analysis reveals that the sense of conflict comes not only from what is said but also from the clash of contrasting speech styles and non-verbal cues. At a deeper level, however, it becomes clear that the two protagonists share more common ground than it first appears, particularly in the pragmatic strategies they use and, ultimately, in their communicative goals.

4. A multimodal pragmatic analysis of the play

Stephen Daldry’s production of *Skylight* foregrounds the conflictual, oppositional dynamics at the heart of the play, embodied in the sharply contrasting personalities of Tom and Kyra. As Daldry himself observed, the

drama is essentially “a battle between two people with two very different value systems”.⁴ Yet this confrontation is never purely combative: alongside its duelling quality, the dialogue also takes on the rhythm of a dance. The two protagonists know each other intimately, and their exchanges often carry the sense of anticipation, as if each can predict the other's moves. This interplay is constructed multimodally, through the fusion of language with paralinguistic, proxemic, and kinesic resources. Crucially, it arises from the tension between the surface features that mark Tom and Kyra as distinct individuals – differences in speech style, bodily movement, and spatial use – and the deeper layer of their communicative goals. As I will argue, while the characters diverge strikingly in how they speak and perform, their pragmatic aims are surprisingly aligned. What emerges is that the very features that seem to make their relationship impossible are, in fact, only superficial. At a more profound level, Tom and Kyra are too similar, and it is this sameness, expressed through pragmatic synonymy and pragmatic identity, that ultimately prevents them from moving forward as a couple. In order to prove my point, I shall begin by examining the communicative surface features that characterise Tom and Kyra, and I will later integrate them with a pragmatic analysis of their communicative aims.

In terms of individual style, Tom and Kyra radically differ. Tom speaks with great verbal energy, often at a rapid tempo, piling up words in a way that reflects his restless, domineering personality. His speech is characterised by verbosity and a tendency to interrupt, overlap, or pre-empt responses, which makes his dialogue feel like a performance of authority as much as an act of communication. He frequently uses rhetorical questions, exaggerations, and emphatic repetitions to assert control over the conversational space. At times Tom's tempo is so rapid that he stutters, creating the impression that his thoughts are moving too quickly for his words to keep pace. His delivery is strongly shaped by his emotional state, and one of his most striking features is his tendency to leave words unfinished, as if the words themselves were chasing one another. His preference for hyperbole lends his speech a performative, almost ostentatious quality: he often appears to be pontificating, with elaborate syntax and a tone edged with sarcasm. A particularly telling instance of his rhetorical skills occurs when Tom tells Kyra how he responded to his son's accusation that he was a cold entrepreneur:

TOM (*Spoken extremely fast*) I said perhaps it's TRUE perhaps I'm not brilliantly contemplative(.) perhaps I do not stop like some Oxford (.)

⁴ Carey Mulligan & Bill Nighy Chat About the Broadway Revival of David Hare's *Skylight*. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LCD4GpR5sl>.

SMARTARSE philosopher to ask myself the “purpose of it all” but the rough effect of all my endeavour my putting my house my mortgage my car the whole of my bloody life on the line as ↑I REMINDED him I have done in my time has been to embody this unspeakably crude ASSUMPTION that it’s still worth human beings TRYING to GET SOMETHING DONE... (Act 1, 32:20-32:41)

Nighy delivers this section at high speed, with no pauses, conveying how emotionally charged Tom’s defence of his actions is. The paraverbal features – the velocity of his speech, his refusal to allow silences, the syncopated rhythm of his utterances – reflect Tom’s underlying aggressiveness. His verbal behaviour, and as I will later show, not only his verbal behaviour, resembles a siege: through his incessant tirades against banks, his complaints about young people who “don’t understand the importance of business,” and his recurring *o tempora, o mores!* stance, Tom seeks to disarm Kyra, to invade her space, and ultimately, quite explicitly, to win her back. His tone is deliberately ironic and sarcastic, coloured with a forced camaraderie after three years of absence. A clear instance of this ironic style occurs when, in response to Kyra’s request that he take off his coat, Tom sarcastically replies:

TOM Well I would of course if you’d get CENTRAL HEATING (.) Then of COURSE I’d take my coat off but since you’ve made a STYLE choice to live in Outer Siberia (.) I think (.) for the moment I’ll keep my coat on. (Act 1, 23:23-23:34)

These paralinguistic features are accompanied in Nighy’s performance by an intelligent, sapient use of proxemic and kinesic signs. The way Tom takes possession of the space is particularly relevant and indicative of both his character and his attitude toward Kyra. As previously noted, space is a crucial semiotic resource, as it can signal degrees of intimacy or social distance between characters, while its transgression may signal aggression. In this scene, Tom quite literally invades Kyra’s space: first by ringing the bell for more than sixty seconds – a strongly face-threatening act – and then by marching uninvited into her apartment. This sense of intrusion is heightened by kinesic signs, particularly Tom’s body language. From the moment he enters, he paces restlessly, handling Kyra’s books, objects, and even the cans of tomatoes she is cooking with. His incessant movement, combined with the habitual shifting of objects – at times even with his feet, as when he repeatedly nudges a chair (see figure 1) – lends Nighy’s performance a balletic grace, reinforcing the impression of a dance-like presence that both unsettles and dominates the space.



Figure 1
Tom's restlessness.

Tom's refusal to sit and his constant movement serve two distinct functions. On the one hand, they contribute to his characterisation, reinforcing the energetic personality and restlessness that Kyra later identifies as his defining quality. On the other hand, his behaviour constitutes a violation of Kyra's space, as if appropriating her and her environment; he scrutinises the external elements of her existence in order to reassert control. This dimension of Tom's character, and of his relationship with Kyra, is only briefly suggested in the script, but it becomes markedly more evident in performance, where the extent of his restlessness is made visible and coheres with his speech style.

Kyra is the absolute opposite of Tom, both from the point of view of speech style and of proxemic and kinesic signs: where Tom's speech is expansive, fast, and overflowing, Kyra's is typically more measured and restrained. She tends to choose her words carefully, often speaking in shorter, more economical turns that reflect both her self-discipline and her defensive stance in the conversations. At times, her speech takes on a didactic tone, which positions her as someone who explains, instructs, and justifies. Yet this same controlled style can also make her seem emotionally distant. Unlike Tom, who reveals his turmoil through his excessive language, Kyra often withholds, deflects, or resists, and her silences or pauses are as significant as her words. Her verbal style matches both her proxemics and kinetics: she keeps a safety distance from Tom through the entire first act, avoiding eye contact or touching. The distance she keeps from Tom during the majority of the first act shows her defensive attitude, also reinforced by her tendency to cross her arms and to stand still – thus also visually opposing Tom's constant gesturing (see figure 2 below).



Figure 2
Tom's gestures and Kyra's defensiveness.

These paralinguistic, proxemic, and kinesic features contribute significantly to Kyra's characterisation, placing her in complete opposition to Tom not only in terms of values or ideology (which are clearly conveyed by the content of their exchanges), but also by marking their differences and their conflicts at the level of behaviour, attitude, and style. It can be argued, then, that the main conflict of the play emerges in the clash of verbal and non-verbal surface features, which bring out the distance between the two characters as individuals. However, if these aspects are examined in isolation and not considered within the context of their conversational strategies and overall communicative metastructure, a stylistic interpretation of the play would remain incomplete. In fact, it is the analysis of the pragmatic competence of the two interlocutors, integrated with other semiotic resources, that provides a fuller understanding of the communicative mechanisms at work in the play, because it shows what communicative intent the different individual styles aim at.

An attentive analysis of Tom and Kyra's communicative metastrategies reveals that their interactions are characterised primarily by pragmatic synonymy and pragmatic identity (Lakoff and Tannen 1984, p. 330). This means that, in conversation, they either employ different linguistic devices to achieve similar ends, or they use similar linguistic devices directed toward the same end. At the level of communicative intent, then, Tom and Kyra are remarkably alike, while the conflict seems to operate mainly at the surface level of their exchanges, in the form of style, tone, and delivery.

A telling example of pragmatic synonymy can be found in the contrasting verbal strategies they use to project self-control and dominance over the interlocutor. Tom relies on repetitions, rhetorical questions, and an almost compulsive verbosity, strategies that allow him to assert authority and to present himself as unaffected by Kyra's decision to leave him. His manner suggests determination to control the conversational ground. Kyra, by

contrast, adopts the opposite strategies: long pauses, calculated silences, and short, clipped utterances. Yet despite the different linguistic forms, her aim mirrors Tom's: she too seeks to project indifference, to maintain an appearance of composure, and to deny Tom the satisfaction of provoking an emotional response. Both characters, in their different ways, attempt to seize control of the situation and to demonstrate self-mastery, thereby enacting pragmatic synonymy.

Many times, however, Tom and Kyra employ identical strategies in order to achieve the same communicative goals, particularly when seeking to challenge the validity of the other's perspective. These exchanges typically unfold in two stages. First, when one interlocutor presents his or her point of view, the other responds with apparent cooperation, signalling agreement through nodding or brief follow-up moves such as one-word answers. Yet once the small talk falls away and they begin to articulate their true position, they abruptly and forcefully question the validity of everything their partner has just said, thereby exposing the extent to which their initial compliance concealed their real stance. Two examples illustrate this strategy. In the first, Tom has been speaking at length about his business and his aversion to banks. As can be seen, Kyra initially appears perfectly cooperative, though not especially talkative:

TOM /.../ The banks are running the wor- you think oh fuck I'll I'll I'll run a business I'll build a business (.) You remember Kyra we started out my God it was grea- actually COUNTING the money, you counted it with me . . .

KYRA Of course.

TOM Actually HANDLING the money each morning after you'd joined us totting it up each Saturday night

KYRA I remember.

TOM Then ↑oh Christ there's this fatal moment EXPANSION

KYRA Sure. (Act 1, 28:26-28:45)

An identical situation presents itself in the second act, but this time it is Kyra who has been talking about her job and her life decisions:

KYRA Tom these are kids from VERY TOUGH backgrounds. /.../ At the very least you (.) offer them support you care for them you offer them security you give them an environment where they feel they can grow but also (.) you make BLOODY sure you CHALLENGE them (.) you make sure they realise LEARNING IS HARD. /.../

TOM I see that.

KYRA I TELL you it's fucking interesting

TOM I'm sure

KYRA FINDING that ↓balance

TOM Sure. (Act 2, 9:17- 9-59)

In both passages, the characters initially signal their understanding of what the other has said by providing very brief confirming responses (“sure”, “I remember”, “oh yeah”, “I see that”, “I’m sure”). These function as conversational strategies aimed at reassuring the interlocutor that their point is being acknowledged and, ostensibly, agreed with. However, once the exchange moves beyond small talk, they resort to almost identical phrasing to undermine and invalidate the other’s point of view. In the following examples, both employ the strategy of echoing the other’s statements to challenge their validity.

KYRA Do you think(.) do you think I’ve BELIEVED this STUFF you’ve been telling me?

TOM Stuff?

KYRA (*She imitates his voice and movements as she speaks, and speaks with no pauses*) “I’m enjoying the business, it’s wonderful I get on great with my son Alice dying was hard but of course I survived it no problem I just dropped round to see you no reason I just thought it was TIME . . .” (.) and ME (.) I’m standing here, nodding smiling agreeing like some APE and thinking (.) is this man lying to me DELIBERATELY? Or does he not even notice? Or is he so used to LYING TO HIMSELF? (Act 1 60:10- 60:22)

Tom does the exact same things a few scenes later:

TOM (*Speaking extremely fast, raising his voice*) I mean I’ve been LISTENING I’ve been listening to this STUFF you’ve been telling me ↑the BUS! The SCHOOL! even the kind of place that you choose to live and I’m thinking (.) my God my dear old friend Kyra’s joined some ↓OBSCURE RELIGIOUS ORDER (.)↑The Kensal Rise chapter! She’s performing an act of CONTRITION. (Act 2, 24: 31-24:35)

Kyra and Tom employ almost identical wording in formulating their negative evaluations of the preceding exchange (“I’m thinking, is this man lying to me deliberately?”; “I’m thinking, my dear old friend Kyra’s joined some obscure religious order”). Both resort to superficial communicative strategies that signal apparent agreement, only to reveal that they have concealed their true thoughts and, in fact, not only disagree with but also despise each other’s point of view. Pragmatic identity is revealed here in the way the protagonists deploy the same tactics to achieve the same goal: persuading the other of the absurdity of their respective positions.

Pragmatic synonymy and pragmatic identity reveal the profound nature of the interactional and communicative structure of these two characters, which is based on non-acceptance, and ultimately on asserting control and power over the other person. It is at this level that the conflict of power really emerges and becomes unsolvable, in that “in the inter-personal sphere, attempted changes in beliefs can also function as assaults on the mind of one

participant by another and as a means to power” (Herman 2005, p. 236). This analysis suggests that what renders the relationship impossible – and the conflict so powerful on stage – is not merely the superficial incompatibility of values, but rather the absolute identity of communicative intent. Both characters are driven less by a desire to understand one another than by the determination to “win the argument”, and it is this dynamic that ultimately prevents them from moving forward together. On the one hand, Kyra wants Tom to admit that what he’s been doing for his entire life is soulless, arid, oppressive:

KYRA I mean, like earlier (.) earlier this evening. you were going on about BUSINESS (.) no one understands business that’s what you said (.) Suddenly I must say I hear it everywhere. (*Talking very slowly*) These so-called ACHIEVERS telling us they have a grievance (.) The WHOLE OF SOCIETY must get down on their KNEES and thank them, because they do something they no longer call MAKING MONEY. Now we must call it something much NICER (.) Now we must call it ‘the creation of wealth’. (Act 2, 33:34- 33:50)

Tom, on his part, wants Kyra to admit that she is wasting her talent, that her choice is futile, oppositional, immature:

TOM Kyra, ↑ look at you now! it won’t even work it can’t work (.) because it’s built on a negative (*he stutters*) it’s it’s it’s built on escape (.)WHAT is it in you? This thing that you have? Why doesn’t it YIELD? ↓I don’t UNDERSTAND it. (Act 2, 38:59-39:11)

Unable to accept the other for who he or she is, Tom and Kyra are imprisoned in their own trenches (see figure three below). It is this shared rigidity, conveyed through similar pragmatic strategies, that prevents the achievement of compromise or common ground, and ultimately results in non-communication at the deepest level, “that of the effect on the other participant” (Lakoff and Tannen 1984, p. 344). The analysis of these three levels of communication, thus, helps to explain both the battle and the dance that characterise the dialogue of the play: the battle is most visible at the level of surface features, where Kyra and Tom appear radically different, while the dance emerges at the deeper levels, where the similarity of their pragmatic strategies and communicative intentions becomes apparent.

To conclude, it can be argued that *Skylight* cannot be fully explained either by differences in ideology or by contrasts in style alone. The semiotics of theatre makes visible how meaning is embodied in gesture, space, and paralinguistic features, while pragmatics reveals the deeper identity of communicative intent that drives the exchanges. Taken together, these approaches show that Tom and Kyra’s relationship collapses not simply because of their ideological distance, but because of their shared

communicative rigidity: they are locked in a struggle where both seek victory rather than mutual understanding.



Figure 3
The position of Tom and Kyra on stage.

5. Conclusions

This paper has argued that a multimodal pragmatic perspective can account more fully for how *Skylight* communicates meaning in performance than approaches that privilege either the written text or performance in isolation. By examining paralinguistic, kinesic, and proxemic resources alongside dialogue, the analysis has shown that what appears to be a stark conflict between Tom and Kyra at the level of surface features – speech tempo, rhythm, gesture, spatial use – coexists with a deeper alignment in communicative intent. The concepts of pragmatic synonymy and pragmatic identity help to articulate this paradox: the protagonists often pursue similar interpersonal aims while enacting them through contrasting verbal and non-verbal strategies. This layered patterning explains why the play reads as both battle and dance, opposition and attunement, rupture and recognition.

The findings also underscore a methodological point. Treating recorded theatre as embodied discourse permits close, revisitable attention to interactional details that typically elude page-bound readings. In the 2014 production examined here, the orchestration of language with movement and space makes the complexity of Tom and Kyra's relationship legible: Nighy's high-velocity prosody and insistent spatial encroachment meet Mulligan's controlled economy of turn-taking and guarded proxemics, producing a communicative texture in which similarity of aim is masked by dissimilarity of form. Multimodal pragmatics provides the descriptive tools to track that texture and to show how characterisation, rapport, and power are negotiated

in real time on stage.

At the same time, the analysis remains provisional in two respects. First, it focuses on a single production, and therefore on one legitimate but non-exhaustive realisation of the play's semiotic potential. Second, it draws on a filmed performance, which, while valuable for systematic observation, is itself a mediated interpretation. Future research might test the robustness of these claims by comparing multiple stagings and performance styles, or by extending the framework to different dramatic genres and ensemble dynamics where multimodal coordination is distributed across larger casts.

More broadly, the approach set out here has implications for stylistics and theatre studies. For stylistics, it suggests that the interpersonal meanings of dramatic dialogue are best understood when verbal choices are analysed together with the embodied choices that accompany them. For theatre studies, it offers a principled way to describe how ideological tensions are dramatised not only in what characters say but in how they time, place, and embody saying it. In *Skylight*, the ultimate dramatic insight is that communicative failure does not stem from irreconcilable differences alone; it also arises when two speakers are, beneath the surface, too alike in their pragmatic aims. A multimodal pragmatic lens makes that insight analytically visible.

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