

**The Functions of Normal Non-fluency  
in Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov**

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## Abstract

Beginning with the mid-nineteenth century realist plays of Henrik Ibsen, the traditional conventions of dramatic conversation were gradually transformed. Whereas before characters were made to converse in elaborate verse, modern dramatists took the decision to make their characters speak in ways that mirrored everyday life. Nonetheless, although dramatic conversation shares certain similarities with everyday conversation, there are certain noticeable differences as well. One of the similarities is the occurrence of normal non-fluency. In conversational analysis, normal non-fluency is theorized as an obstacle that may impede effective communication, becoming a source of trouble or tension between the speakers. Normal non-fluency includes silences, voice fillers, interruptions, same-turn abandonment, failure to hold the floor and overlaps. However, since dramatic scripts are written for subsequent performance, playwrights may opt to eliminate unnecessary normal non-fluent items. The non-fluent items that remain should therefore contain a special dramatic meaning. In this way, normal non-fluency may be exploited as a dramatic device. In this paper, I will analyze the functions of normal non-fluency in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), Strindberg's *The Father* (1887) and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904).

Keywords: *conversation analysis, dramatic language, failure to hold the floor, interruption, modern drama, normal non-fluency, overlap, same-turn abandonment, silence, failure to hold the floor, voice filler*

## Introduction

Beginning with the first modernist experiments of Henrik Ibsen, the traditional convention of dramatic conversation, which involved the use of speech in the form of blank or rhymed verse, were gradually transformed. Modern dramatist now increasingly attempted to represent the speech forms of everyday life in the theatre. One noticeable characteristic of everyday conversation is the regular occurrence of the range of normal non-fluency devices, which include such items as overlaps and interruptions, same-turn abandonments, pauses and silences. In everyday conversation, the occurrence of normal non-fluency is frequently an obstacle to effective communication and sometimes even a source of trouble or conflict between speakers. But since dramatic scripts are written in advance, a playwright has the option of eliminating entirely the occurrence of normal non-fluent items in character speech, if he or she believes the dramatic action would be more effective without them. Conversely, of course, a playwright is free to utilize such items when he or she wishes to convey a special meaning through their deployment. In this way, the occurrence of normal non-fluency may come to be exploited as a dramatic device. In the work of three of the founding fathers of modern European drama, the occurrence of normal non-fluency takes a range of different forms. In *A Doll's House* (*Et dukkehjem*, 1879), Henrik Ibsen shows a fondness for the use of same-turn abandonments; in *The Father* (*Fadren*, 1887), August Strindberg utilizes the device of voice fillers; while in *The Cherry Orchard* (*Вишнёвый сад* or *Vishnevyyi sad*, 1904), Anton Chekhov inaugurates the use of the dramatic pause.

The spontaneous conversation of everyday life may strike the listener as somewhat chaotic and disorderly. One of the main reasons for this impression is the frequent occurrence

of the features of normal non-fluency. According to Mick Short, normal non-fluency refers to oral mistakes that may become obstacles to communication (1996: 176). The features of normal non-fluency include voice fillers; pauses; mispronunciations and ungrammatical utterances; same-turn abandonments; interruptions; overlaps; and failures to hold the floor. In conversation analysis, however, rather than being truly problematic, these features are construed to serve an empirical function in communication. For example, one reason for the occurrence of a pause may be the result of a listener who has trouble understanding a former speaker's utterance (Jefferson, 1973: 69). A second explanation is to provide time for a current speaker to determine whose turn will be next (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974: 715). What is more, conversational analysis may draw functional distinctions may be drawn based on the length of a conversational pause. For example, a pause longer than 0.8 seconds may indicate a forthcoming dispreferred response (Pomerantz, 1984: 58), while a significantly longer pause may hint at a shift in the topic (Maynard, 1980: 265). According to Mick Short, a voice filler is "used to give speakers time to work out exactly what they want to say (e.g. *of course, er, you know* and *I mean*)" (1996:176). In this respect, voice fillers may have do more than simply provide planning time for a speaker. For example, John Heritage analyses "oh" as a spontaneous conversation particle which can be used as a change-of-state token (1984: 299), while Gail Jefferson notes the use of "mm hm" as an acknowledgement token (1983: 3). Conversational repairs can also be explained in functional terms. For example, a self-initiated self-repair in the same conversational turn occur when a speaker initiates an utterance in the same turn and corrects him or herself immediately afterwards (Schegloff, Sacks and Jefferson, 1977: 364). In contrast, same-turn abandonment refers to "grammatical structures which are abandoned part of the way through (e.g. *how did you get—I mean how did you find that side of it.*)" (Short, 1996: 176). In either case, the repair is explained in terms of the speaker's lack of detailed planning before the initiation of the

utterance. Much the same can be said in relation to the occurrence of overlaps and failures to hold the floor. The lack of detailed preparation prior to the onset, particularly when coupled with an uneven balance of power among the speakers, sometimes results in a chaotic series of turn-takings. In everyday conversation, an overlap does not necessarily occur when more than two speakers start and end talking simultaneously; instead, an overlap takes place when one speaker starts an utterance in the middle of another speaker's speech. Finally, the failure to hold the floor refers to "attempts at taking conversational turns which are lost in the general melee" (Short 1996: 176).

Ezra Pound once noted that "the medium of drama is not words, but persons moving about on a stage using words" (qtd. in Barnet, Berman and Burto 23). When a play exists in the form of written text, however, this argument is considerably weakened. Dramatic words reveal both characters and plot; they are the record of everything that is linguistically employed (Barnet, Berman and Burto 23). There are several things that a reader of drama can notice that a theatre audience may not. Readers can discuss the play while it is being performed. The reader can talk about the play even before he finishes reading it; she can underline these parts she appreciates or use her imagination even though she cannot see the settings, costumes or the actors' facial expression.

The representation of conversation in modern drama is typically quite different from the realities of ordinary conversation (Short, 1996: 174). One of the major reasons is that ordinary conversation is regularly full of normal non-fluency, while dramatic conversation tends to eschew such non-fluency in favour of a well-organized representation of character speech. In consequence, many ordinary but unnecessary non-fluent items, particularly pauses, silences, and repetition, tend to get left out (Short, 1996:177). The artistic reasons for this decision are mostly straightforward. While one or two pauses in a dramatic performance may go unnoticed, many pauses would begin to cause difficulty. Voice fillers or same turn

abandonments might mislead an audience into thinking that an actor has forgotten what he is going to say next. Similarly, the audience might tend to blame the presence of mispronunciations and unnecessary repetitions on an actor's inexperience. What this means is that if some features of normal non-fluency are present, the playwright is attaching a special meaning to them (Short, 1996: 177).

### **Same-turn Abandonments in *A Doll's House***

*A Doll's House* was first performed at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark on 21 December 1879. The plot concerns a housewife, Nora Helmer, who borrows money from one of her husband's colleagues, using the fake signature of her father to pay for a rest cure trip for her husband. Later on, her husband finds out the truth about the fake signature and assumes his reputation has been ruined. Nora then realizes that her husband has never treated her in a genuinely human manner. At the play's climax, she realizes she does not love her husband any longer, and she decides to leave her home. *A Doll's House* was translated into English by William Archer and first performed in 1889 in London by Charles Charrington and Janet Achurch (Shaw 1935 xii).

In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen uses same-turn abandonments, usually accompanied by topic shifts. The crux of this play is that Nora does her all in order not to reveal the fact of her borrowing money without her husband's knowledge.

**Rank:** [...] All my patients, too, have the same mania. And it's the same  
with people whose complaint is moral. At this very moment Helmer is  
talking to just such a moral incurable—

**Mrs. Linden:** [Softly] Ah!

**Nora:** Whom do you mean?

**Rank:** Oh, a fellow name Krogstad, a man you know nothing about—corrupt to

the core of his character. But even he began by announcing, as a matter of vast importance, that he must live.

**Nora:** Indeed? And what did he want with Torvald?

**Rank:** I haven't an idea; I only gathered that it was some bank business.

**Nora:** I didn't know that Krog—that Mr. Krogstad had anything to do with the bank?

**Rank:** Yes. He has got some sort of place there. (Ibsen 33-34)

It is in the middle of the first act when Nora, Dr Rank, the best friend of the Helmers and someone who visits her house every day, and Mrs Linden, Nora's old female school friend, gather together and the name of Mr Krogstad is first mentioned. Both Dr Rank and Mrs Linden assume that Nora has nothing to do with Mr. Krogstad, which is why Dr Rank refers to him as "a man you know nothing about". But Nora does know Mr Krogstad: he is the man she has borrowed money from in order to give her husband a rest cure. Even though Nora knows him and knows that he has money, she may not know he is "moral incurable" and "corrupt to the very core of his character". She also may not know he has a position in the same bank as the one where her husband has just been promoted. After uttering the first syllable of his name, "Krog", Nora abandons this form and adopts the form of address that indicates a greater formality and distance. She corrects "Krogstad" to "Mr. Krogstad" to indicate an apparent lack of familiarity with the moneylender. If Nora shows herself to be on casual speaking terms with Mr Krogstad, the knowledge of the loan may follow, if Doctor Rank or Mrs Linden were to challenge Nora about how she has come to know this man.

The following dialogue between Nora and her maid, Anna, takes place at the beginning of the second act. At this point, Krogstad has threatened to expose Nora's secret if Nora cannot persuade her husband not to fire Krogstad. Torvald Helmer has recently been promoted manager of the Joint Stock Bank, and now has the power to hire and fire people,

including Krogstad. What is worse, Torvald Helmer dislikes Krogstad.

*Anna enters from the left, with a large cardboard box.*

**Anna:** I've found the box with the fancy dress at last.

**Nora:** Thanks; put it down on the table.

**Anna:** [Does so.] But I'm afraid it's very much out of order.

**Nora:** Oh, I wish I could tear it into a hundred thousand pieces!

**Anna:** Oh, no. It can easily be put to rights—just a little patience.

**Nora:** I shall go and get Mrs. Linden to help me.

**Anna:** Going out again? In such weather as this! You'll catch cold, ma'am, and  
be ill.

**Nora:** Worse things might happen—what are the children doing?

**Anna:** They're playing with their Christmas presents, poor littler dears.

(Ibsen 62-63)

Nora's words "Worse things might happen" indicates that there is something more frightening than catching a cold or being ill. Everything will be ruined for her if the secret is revealed. As a follow up, it is conceivable that Anna may question Nora what those "worse things" might be. In order not to talk about "worse things", Nora shifts the focus of attention to her children by asking a question not related to her anxiety.

### **Voice Fillers in *The Father***

*The Father* was written by August Strindberg in 1887, and first performed on 14 November 1887 at the Casino Theatre in Copenhagen. It is a three-act play that tells of a captain's conflict with his wife, Laura, over their daughter's education. The captain wants Bertha to be a teacher, while Laura wants Bertha to become an artist. In order to gain legitimate rights over Bertha's education, Laura pretends she has been unfaithful to her husband and subsequently persuades a doctor to say that the captain has become insane. In



the play, Strindberg uses voice fillers are used significantly more often than other normal non-fluency features.

When voice fillers take place, they tend to be properly designated. That is, in a certain scene, one character is set up to produce a voice filler, while other characters are not permitted to utter them. A voice filler does not change the meaning of an utterance; instead, it usually serves to convey more information. At the beginning of *The Father*, voice fillers embedded in dramatic conversations serve the dramatic function of foreshadowing.

In the first scene of Act I, Nöjd, the captain's subordinate, is rumored to have had a love affair with a girl called Emma, who is now pregnant. Nöjd is subsequently questioned by the pastor and the captain as to whether he is the father of the unborn baby. Since Nöjd is guilty, some of his utterances begin with voice fillers. The reason is because he needs extra time to plan his words in order not to incriminate himself. Later in the first scene, Nöjd tries to deny the truth, saying that he is not responsible for the girl's pregnancy.

**Pastor:** Don't be bashful, my lad.

**Captain:** You had better confess, or you know how it will be.

**Nöjd:** Well, then, it was like this; we were at a dance at Gabriel's, and then—and then Ludwig said...

**Captain:** What has Ludwig to do with the story. Stick to the truth.

**Nöjd:** Yes, and then Emma said that we should go into the barn.

**Captain:** Ah, I suppose it was Emma who led you astray?

**Nöjd:** Well, that's about it. And I must say that unless the girl is willing nothing ever comes of it. (Strindberg 5)

In this excerpt, the pastor and the captain urge Nöjd to confess. Nöjd starts his story-telling with "Well, then, it was like this", a beginning which provides him with some more planning time. Additionally, he initiates a self-correction in the same turn. Nöjd admits that he has had

sex with the girl; but he makes it sound as though it was the girl's fault, but rather Emma's fault for seducing him. He hesitates and does not "stick to the truth" by picking up a reference to an irrelevant person to delay his explanation. He is almost successful in misleading the captain and the pastor into thinking it was the girl who was to blame. It may be surmised that Nöjd is not telling the truth because he starts with the interjection "well" instead of directly confirming the captain's ironic inquiry. In addition, his utterance "that's about it" is less confident and weaker than "that's it" since the former expression suggests that there is a little more that might be added, including information that might be of vital relevance.

In the following excerpt, Nöjd is questioned as to whether he is the father of the baby. He is not sure because he suspects that Emma might also have had sexual relationships with other men after the dance party. In this respect, anyone who has had sex with Emma could be the baby's father. Accordingly, Nöjd attempts to shirk responsibility for the fact of Emma being pregnant.

**Pastor:** These are old stories! But listen, Nöjd, you are surely man enough to know whether you are the father or not.

**Nöjd:** Well, certainly, I and the girl—, but you know yourself, Pastor, that it needn't come to anything for all that.

**Pastor:** Look here, my lad, we are talking about you now. You will surely not leave the girl alone with the child. I suppose we can't compel you to marry her, but you shall provide for the child! that you shall do.

**Nöjd:** Well, then, Ludwig must too.

**Captain:** Then the case must go to the Courts. I can't disentangle all this, and after all it doesn't concern me. So now, be off. (Strindberg 7)

In this excerpt, Nöjd denies the truth that he is the father with an initiating "well". He does this by abandoning the completion of "I and the girl did have sex", and shifting the focus to

the pastor in order to distract from his admission and to try once again to avoid responsibility. When the pastor urges Nöjd to provide for the baby, Nöjd again uses a delay which is demonstrated with “well” and “then”, and provides a dispreferred response, right after which Nöjd testifies that Emma also had sex with Ludwig.

The voice fillers in the above two excerpts illustrate Nöjd’s display of uncertainty. Even though the captain says he is not concerned who the father of the baby is, this issue later become a growing concern for him, indeed, the main source of his final insanity. The unfaithfulness of a woman strikes at the captain’s mind to make him think that there is even a possibility that his wife was unfaithful to him and that he is now raising someone else’s child in vain. As he finally suggests, to “slave all one’s life for another man’s child is not pleasant” (8). In Scene I, the voice fillers contribute to the plot by foreshadowing the moment when Laura applies her strategy to make the captain believe he is not Bertha’s biological father. Because Nöjd is urged to take responsibility for the baby, he is in an uneasy position. He is allowed by the playwright to use voice fillers to earn planning time to search for the right responses to shirk and distract attention from his guilt and consequent responsibility.

In contrast, in the fourth scene of Act I, voice fillers are conspicuously absent. The scene begins the battle between the captain and his wife in their argument about their divergent plans for their daughter’s future education. The captain wants his daughter to go to the city to learn something useful; Laura wants Bertha to stay at home. Their opinions are at odds with each other. During their fierce argument, there are no voice fillers. Each of them wants to impose their particular point of view on the other person. Neither will step backward to yield their rights in the power of decision over their child. The absence of voice fillers suggests that the captain and Laura are very clear about their rationales and quite firm in their respective standpoints. They do not need to hesitate about attacking each other. They do not want to yield even a tiny opportunity to be countered. Their intentions are decisive enough

that they do not need the planning time normally provided by voice fillers. In this sense, the use of voice fillers in the earlier scenes of the play perhaps contributes to a sense of the play's quickened speed toward the end.

The employment of the lengthy, significant pause in modern drama originates with Anton Chekhov. There are approximately 30 pauses in *The Seagull* (1896); there are more than 60 pauses in *The Three Sisters* (1901), and there are more than 30 pauses again in *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). Pauses are used by Chekhov to convey character emotion, character conflict and character paralysis.

*The Cherry Orchard* was performed for the first time on 17 January 1904. This play is about a Russian woman, Madame Ranevsky, a landowner. Because of her son's death, she has moved to Paris. After spending five years in Paris, she returns to her home in Russia which possesses a famously beautiful cherry orchard. In order to pay back her debts, she has to sell the cherry orchard. It is her former tenant, the former peasant, Lopakhin, who buys it from her.

### **Pauses in *The Cherry Orchard***

In *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), Chekhov inserts pauses into the play at the key moment when the cherry orchard has just been sold and the owner, Madame Ranevsky, is most worried. The following excerpt is from Act III. The conversation is between Madame Ranevsky and Lopakhin. Madame Ranevsky is Lopakhin's former land lady. Lopakhin has become rich so that he can afford to buy the cherry orchard at an auction. This conversation takes place after Lopakhin has returned from the orchard auction.

**Madame Ranevsky:** Has the cherry orchard been sold?

**Lopakhin:** It's been sold.

**Madame Ranevsky:** Who bought it?

**Lopakhin:** I bought it. (A pause) (Chekhov 138)

The language in these four lines is very plain, and there are no directives to convey the characters' emotions. Madame Ranevsky is supposed to be disappointed because she has lost the ownership of the cherry orchard; and Lopakhin appears to be happy or excited because as the son of a peasant, he has achieved the ownership of the orchard, something which his father and grandfather had dared not even dream of. The central focus is on whether or not Madame Ranevsky will be able to keep the cherry orchard. The adjacent pairs of a yes/no question and a WH question display the emotions of anxiety, disappointment, happiness and excitement. The pause that follows renders the climax in a way anti-climactic; it is a duel without action.

The second function of the pauses in Chekhov is to display conflict between characters. As Lopakhin's former landlady, Madame Ranevsky suggests he should marry Barbara, her foster daughter. The reason why she suggests this is to keep the cherry orchard. However, Lopakhin now is no longer a peasant, but a rich businessman. To him, owning the cherry orchard is more important than marrying his former land owner's foster daughter.

**Madame Ranevsky:** You ought to get married.

**Lopakhin:** Yes, that's true.

**Madame Ranevsky:** Why not marry Barbara? She's a nice girl.

**Lopakhin:** Yes.

**Madame Ranevsky:** She's a nice straightforward creature; works all day; and what's most important, she loves you. You've been fond of her for a long time.

**Lopakhin:** Why not? I'm not opposed to the idea... She's a good girl. (A pause)

(Chekhov 117)

Barbara has been adopted by Madame Ranevsky's family, and Lopakhin has adored her for a long time. However, the fortune of Madame Ranevsky's family is fading as time goes by, and

Barbara is no longer as Lopakhin remembers her. Madame Ranevsky suggests Lopakhin might marry Barbara, but he hesitates to proffer a positive answer. If he accepts this suggestion, it is not necessary for Madame Ranevsky to say very much to Barbara since Lopakhin has known her for a long time. The answer “Well, why not?” is weaker than “Yes.” Since Madame Ranevsky once had power over him, he does not want to reject her suggestion directly. This question-answer pair points to the complex, feudal class relationships that still exist in the minds of the characters and influence what they say. The pause provides a break in the topic of the marriage suggestion so that Lopakhin is able to avoid the deeper discussion of marrying Madame Ranevsky’s foster daughter, Barbara, in order to reduce the risk of losing the cherry orchard. The pause is a signal to Madame Ranevsky conveyed by Lopakhin: “I don’t want to accept your suggestion, and I don’t want to make you embarrassed. Let’s stop talking about it.” In this scene, Chekhov’s use of ellipsis indicates a short pause, while the use of the “pause” directive indicates a slightly longer one.

The third function of the pause is to represent character emotion. In the first act, Lopakhin is waiting for Madame Ranevsky to come back from Paris. He cannot help recalling the past when he spent a good deal of time in the cherry orchard. He remembers that he was once punched by his father and got a bloody nose, and it was Madame Ranevsky who took him to wash himself off and called him a “little peasant”.

**Lopakhin:** I remember when I was a youngster of fifteen my old father (he used to keep the shop here in the village then) struck me in the face with his fist and set my nose bleeding. We had come for some reason or other, I forgot what, into the courtyard, and he had been drinking. Madame Ranevsky, I remember it like yesterday, still a young girl, and oh, so slender, brought me to the wash-hand stand, here, in this very room, in the nursery. “Don’t cry, little peasant,” she said, “it’ll

mend by your wedding.” (A pause) “Little peasant!” ... My father, it is true, was a peasant, and here am I in a white waistcoat and brown boots; a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, as you might say; just turned rich, with heaps of money, but when you come to look at it, still a peasant of the peasants. (Chekhov 89-90)

After recalling Madame Ranevsky’s words, Lopakhin pauses. Then he repeats “little peasant”, which are words he hates to hear. After the pause, Lopakhin not only demonstrates his anger at being called “little peasant” because it is insulting to him but also his explosive excitement at now being rich. He now wears decent suits and has lots of money. He believes that being rich can erase his past identity, which makes him happy and satisfied.

Chekhov’s pauses have multiple dramatic functions. Each pause hides a certain amount of meaning. A pause can be a signal of an action that the character intends to do or not do. It can be a method to display conflict between characters and accordingly slow down the rhythm of dramatic development. It also can show forth a character’s explosion of desperation, excitement, sadness or happiness after she or he has been pressured for a long time.

## **Conclusion**

Being life-like is one of the most important characteristics of modern drama, being with Henrik Ibsen. The traditional convention of dramatic conversation has changed since the Norwegian dramatist, that is, the tendency of characters in modern drama is to speak like ordinary people in real life instead of conducting their speeches in verse. This life-like dramatic conversation shares some similarities with everyday conversation. Meanwhile, to some extent, the two are different as well. One of the similarities is that the occurrence of normal non-fluency is an obstacle in the way of effective communication and even a source

of trouble between speakers. However, since dramatic scripts are written in advance, playwrights have the ability to eliminate normal non-fluent items when they are unnecessary; they also have the right to add some items when these convey special meanings to their readers. They can, in other words, exploit them as dramatic devices. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen exploited same-turn abandonments to hold up the climax. Strindberg used voice fillers to portray character psyche and conflicts in *The Father*. Chekhov applied pauses to demonstrate the static atmosphere in *The Cherry Orchard*.



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