ISHIGURO'S DIALOGUES (I) (IF ONLY WORDS COULD SPEAK…)
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPLIED TO SOME DIALOGUES FROM 'AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD' BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Motto:
What history is to a nation, memory is to the individual
Both serve to locate us, to tell us who we are by reminding us
of what we have been and done.
And both are open to selection, repression and revision.
(Kazuo Ishiguro)

Abstract: The paper intends to read between the lines of Kazuo Ishiguro's dialogues from 'An Artist of the Floating World', and thus, to analyse them from the point of view of their power to depict the British and Japanese post-war society. Analysing the discourse of the dialogues, it tries to demonstrate how representative they can be for the author's view of the world. Therefore, a fine touch of the discourse analysis approach would help us understand better the main character's intensions, and implicitly, the author's.

Keywords: discourse analysis, Ishiguro, dialogue, 'reading between the lines'

Discourse analysis is sometimes defined as the analysis of language 'beyond the sentence.' It is, therefore, the examination of languages use by members of a speech community. It involves looking at both language form and language function and includes the study of both spoken interaction and written texts. It identifies linguistic features that characterise different genres as well as social and cultural factors that aid in our interpretation and understanding of different texts and types of talk. A discourse analysis of written texts might include a study of topic development and cohesion across the sentences, while an analysis of spoken language might focus on these aspects plus turn-taking practices, opening and closing sequences of social encounters, or narrative structure.

The study of discourse has developed in a variety of disciplines-sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology and social psychology. Thus, discourse analysis takes different theoretical perspectives and analytic approaches: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis and variation analysis (Schiffrin, 1994). Although each approach emphasises different aspects of language use, they all view language as social interaction.

A few words about the author

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954 and moved to Britain in 1960. At the time, his parents thought that they would soon return to Japan and they prepared him to resume life in his native land. They ended up staying and Ishiguro grew up straddling two

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societies, the Japan of his parents and his adopted England. Ishiguro attended the University of Kent at Canterbury and the University of East Anglia.

All of Ishiguro's novels have received critical acclaim. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, won the Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature; his second, *An Artist of the Floating World*, won the 1986 Whitbread Book of the year Award; *The Remains of the Day* was awarded the 1989 Booker Prize, then *The Unconsoled* (1995), is the winner of the Cheltenham Prize, the novel *When We Were Orphans* was shortlisted for the 2000 Man Booker Prize and last but not least, the novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) was shortlisted for the 2005 Booker Prize, for the 2006 Arthur C. Clarke Award and for the 2005 National Book Critics Circle Award. It also received an ALA Alex Award in 2006.

In all first three of his books the protagonist looks back on his or her life, trying to assess the events that have shaped it. In *A pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro's first novel, a widow in post-war Japan recalls her life in Nagasaki. Characteristically, Ishiguro tells the story without once mentioning the Bomb, just as the Suez Crisis of 1956 silently stands behind *The Remains of the Day* as the novel's present time setting. In his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono, the protagonist, also reflects on the events shaping his life.

An Artist of the Floating World is the story of a life of an old man, Masuji Ono, an artist and retired art teacher, told by himself in a very interesting way. The readers find out about certain events that had taken place in his life, by travelling on the memory lane together with the story-teller.

The book is organised in four chapters: October 1948, April 1949, November 1949 and June 1950. It would seem that the author limits the plot only to these periods of time, but, in fact, they are but the central line, which is completed by many other events from young, bohemian art student to retired, successful artist. In the 1930s, Ono took great pleasure in visiting the 'red light' districts of Japan, but after his marriage, he settled down and devoted himself to his family and his paintings. Ono and his late wife had three children. Sadly, his only son died during the war. His loss still affects Ono greatly, as it always will. His elder daughter, Noriko, has not been quite as successful where marriage is concerned. Her first marriage negotiations were broken off and she is now involved in a second attempt.

The present in the book is placed in the years following the 2nd World War, in a not named city in Japan and Ono is preoccupied with the negotiations around his younger daughter's proposed marriage.

In one of the most intriguing sections of this book, Ishiguro describes the marriage negotiations that used to be routine in Japan. These negotiations are called a 'miai' and involve what resembles a British high tea. First, the parents must be matched, as the two families involved must be within the same social and economic class. Once it has been decided that the parents of both the prospective bride and the prospective bridegroom are a 'fit,' the couple is allowed to meet for the very first time. Only after everyone has given their stamp of approval can the actual wedding finally take place. Unfortunately, Noriko's first marriage negotiation failed when she was considered to be of a lower social class that her prospective bridegroom. Ono, who was a darker past than one might initially assume, is worried that it may possibly come to light and harm Noriko's marriage negotiations, causing them to fail for a second time, as previous last year Noriko's marriage negotiations with another young man were unexpectedly terminated by the groom's family. Almost without

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self-awareness, Ono begins to question whether his artistic support of the imperialistic movement in the thirties and during the war now places his daughter's prospects in jeopardy. Therefore, he starts visiting some former colleagues and pupils intending to clarify his image.

Although Ono sees himself as a modest man, he overstates the impact that his military and patriotic art had in conditioning the Japanese people for the impending imperialistic war effort. It is never quite clear just how popular and widespread his war posters actually were. In contrast, Ono seems incapable of recognising the magnitude of his crime against his best student, Kuroda, whom he betrayed to the authorities. He rationalises that Kuroda's years in prison now give him credibility in the new Japan and that he will fare well in the post-war period. He is even so naïve as to believe that Kuroda might be persuaded to overlook the past and thus support, or at least not hinder his daughter Noriko's ongoing marriage negotiations.

Wandering in time, i.e. past and present, the story comes out like a nicely woven web, which touches some important matters, not only to the Japanese world, but also to the whole world itself. The author, through the main character, draws the reader's attention to the importance of family relationships, the condition of the artist, the symbol of the teacher, the meaning of the wedding, the symbol of the reception room as the centre of the house and others.

Ishiguro enjoys slowly revealing his characters through their recollection of events long past. The memories are often fragmented, sometimes hazy, sometimes simply untrustworthy. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the situation is further complicated by the tendency of its protagonist to misinterpret his own memories.

The memorial mindscapes find an appropriate metaphor. 'It is perhaps a sign of my advancing years,' admits Ono, 'that I have taken to wandering into rooms for no purpose.' Ishiguro's narrators do wander through the rooms of their memories, and their conscious intentions in doing so are often subverted by the profound workings of memory itself: its ellipses and elisions, its divisions, its distortions of the past and conflicts with present experience. In this intricate, ironic novel, Ishiguro explores the ways in which individual memory and national history can amount to acts of (necessary) self-deception.

Ono is an artist who had, in his youth, lived and moved in the 'floating world': 'the night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink which formed the backdrop for all our paintings,' a realm of bohemian pleasure and remote purity that shaped the artistic aesthetic of pre-war Japan. But Ono's eventual rebellion against his teachers and his campaigns, serving the imperialist movement that brought Japan into the World War II. Now, living in an unnamed, devastated city in the post-war 1940s, surrounded by images of loss, paranoia and recrimination, Ono finds himself reconsidering his life and work - his own part in creating a world that has come to reject him.

That part has not been without its personal pain. Ono's wife was killed in a bombing raid, which also destroyed parts of his house, and his only son died fighting Chinese forces in Manchuria. But Ono does not dwell on these losses; indeed, he barely alludes to them, choosing instead to drift through his damaged house or the rubble-strewn pleasure district of the city. But as he does so, Ono also wanders in and out of a shifting, kaleidoscopic tour of his past: his youth as an artist of the floating world, or his later days as a *sensei*, a master teacher greatly revered by his own students.

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As started previously, this delicately patterned, complex mosaic of memory is set in motion by the engagement of Ono's younger daughter, and by his elder daughter's concern that the engagement may be broken if Ono's imperialist past is discovered. These elements, and the apparent instability of the memories themselves, combine to form the novel's essential ironies: Ono's modest intimations of his fame as an artist are belied by the assumption that his past can remain hidden, and his visits to old associates, meant to prevent 'misunderstandings about the past' from coming to light, actually reveal to the reader the misguided path that Ono took, and his reasons for taking it.

Above all, Ono's Japan is a nation that wishes to break with the past, to reinvent itself and its history by exorcising its memories and re-imagining its future. 'Our nation,' Ono concludes, 'whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well.' (the sentence which concludes the novel).

An Artist of the Floating World is therefore a carefully woven, subtle novel about teachers and pupils, parents and children, doctrine and rebellion. It is also a profound exploration of memory and history, a meditation on living in a world that we have failed to make.

In order to enter the world of subtlety of the author's style, we are going to pick some fragments from the novel and approach them from the discourse analysis point of view…

"(…) It must have been in 1935 or 1936, a very routine matter as I recall - a letter of recommendation to an acquaintance in the State Department, some such thing. I would have given the matter little further thought, but then, one afternoon while I was relaxing at home, my wife announced there were visitors for me at the entryway.

'Please show them in,' I said.

'But they insist they won't bother you by coming in.'

I went out to the entryway, and standing there was Shintaro and his younger brother – then no more than a youth. As soon as they saw me, they began bowing and giggling.

'Please step up,' I said, but they continued simply to bow and giggle. 'Shintaro, please. Step up to the tatami.'

'No, Sensei,' Shintaro said, all the time smiling and bowing. 'It is the height of impertinence for us to come to your house like this. The height of impertinence. But we could not remain at home any longer without thanking you.'

'Come on, inside. I believe Setsuko was just making some tea.'

'No, Sensei, it is the height of impertinence. Really.' Then, turning to his brother, Shintaro whispered quickly: 'Yoshio! Yoshio!'

For the first time the young man stopped bowing and looked up at me nervously. Then, he said: 'I will be grateful to you for the reminder of my life. I will exert ever y particle of my being to be worthy of your recommendation. I assure you, I will not let you down. I will work hard, and strive to satisfy my superiors. And however much I may be promoted in the future, I will never forget the man who enabled me to start on my career.'

'Really, it was nothing. It's no more than you deserve.'

This brought frantic protests from both of them, then, Shintaro said to his brother: 'Yoshio, we have imposed enough on Sensei as it is. But before we leave, take a good look

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again at the man who has helped you. We are greatly privileged to have a benefactor of such influence and generosity.'

'Indeed,' the youth muttered, and gazed up at me.

'Please, Shintaro, this is embarrassing. Please come in an we'll celebrate with some sake.'

'No, Sensei, we must leave you now. It was the greatest impertinence to come here like this and disturb your afternoon. But we could not delay thanking you for one moment longer.'

This visit – I must admit it – left me with a certain feeling of achievement. It was one of those moments, in the midst of a busy career allowing little chance of stopping and taking stock, which illuminate suddenly just how far one has come. For true enough, I had almost unthinkingly started a young man on a good career. A few years earlier, such a thing would have been inconceivable and yet I had brought myself to such a position almost without realising it.' (…)" (20-21)

Ono remembers this episode in October 1948, some years after the war has ended. The fragment is interesting because it reveals the Japanese way of showing gratitude to someone, but here, the way of displaying gratitude seems to be a little exaggerated (at least to a non-Japanese reader), especially since even the person the gratitude is addressed to feels a little embarrassed by the situation. He would rather invite the two young men in to celebrate the happy event by serving sake, but the two are already feeling guilty for having disturbed the one who has done them such a favour. The young Yoshio's words are very impressive and sound like a promise, like a pledge, which almost leaves the Sensei without reply. Maybe the young man had the speech prepared in advance, since it sounds as if it were part in a drama, but maybe not, maybe he was just passionately willing to express his gratitude and the words came directly from his heart. Whatever the case, it is interesting how his elder brother, Shintaro, former student of Sensei's, insists on making Yoshio aware of the importance of the situation. We, as readers, cannot know for sure whether this happened as stated by Ono, since all that we find are only the words and thoughts of the character in question, but not the author's himself. The main character has gained such independence that we have to take his words for granted.

An interesting fragment brings into the foreground family relations of the Japanese family in a post-war society, when the Japanese traditions are still solid. We are going to take a look at the fragment in which Mr. Ono's elder daughter, Setsuko, tries very 'clumsily' (as she herself pretends) but in fact, quite cleverly, not to offence or hurt her father's feelings, to remind him that he should do something concerning her sister's marriage negotiations.

"(…) As I recall, Setsuko had seated herself before the Buddhist altar and had begun to remove the more tired of the flowers decorating it. I had seated myself a little behind her, watching the way she carefully shook each stem before placing it on her lap, and I believe we were talking about something quite light-hearted at that stage. But then she said, without turning from her flowers:

'Excuse me for mentioning this, Father. No doubt, it would have already occurred to you.'

'What is that, Setsuko?'

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‘I merely mention it because I gather it is very likely Noriko’s marriage negotiations will progress.’

Setsuko had begun to transfer, one by one, the fresh cuttings from out of her vase into those surrounding the altar. She was performing this task with great care, pausing each flower to consider the effect. ‘I merely wished to say,’ she went on, ‘once the negotiations begin in earnest, it may be as well if Father were to take certain precautionary steps.’

‘Precautionary steps? Naturally, we’ll go carefully. But, what precisely do you have in mind?’

‘Forgive me, I was referring particularly to the investigations.’

‘Well, of course, we’ll be as thorough as necessary. We’ll hire the same detective as last year. He was very reliable, you may remember.’

Setsuko carefully repositioned a stem. ‘Forgive me, I am no doubt expressing myself unclearly. I was, in fact referring to *their* investigations.’

‘I’m sorry, I’m not sure I follow you. I was not aware we had anything to hide.’

Setsuko gave a nervous laugh. ‘Father must forgive me. As you know, I’ve never had a gift for conversation. Suichi is forever scolding me for expressing myself badly. He expresses himself so eloquently. No doubt, I should endeavour to learn from him.’

‘I’m sure your conversation is fine, but I’m afraid I don’t quite follow what you are saying.’

Suddenly, Setsuko raised her hands in despair. ‘The breeze,’ she said with a sigh, and reached forward to her flowers once more. ‘I like them like this, but the breeze doesn’t seem to agree.’ For a moment, she became preoccupied again. Then, she said: ‘You must forgive me, Father. In my place, Suichi would express thing better. But of course, he isn’t here. I merely wished to say that it is perhaps wise if Father would take certain precautionary steps. To ensure misunderstandings do not arise. After all, Noriko is almost twenty-six now. We cannot afford many more disappointments such as last year’s.

‘Misunderstandings about what, Setsuko?’

‘About the past. But please, I’m sure I’m speaking quite needlessly. Father has no doubt thought already of all these things and will do whatever is necessary.’

She set back, pondering her work, then turned to me with a smile. ‘I have little skill in these things,’ she said indicating the flowers. (…)” (48-49)

But the fragment quoted show, Setsuko’s skill in debating upon a very delicate matter. She chooses her moment carefully, pretends to be interested more in the flowers and just mentioning about the real problem. She tries very gentle to remind her father that he has certain ‘precautionary steps’ to take. The readers are not given any information about Mr. Ono’s real thoughts. All that they get are the answers he gives to his daughter: he pretends not to understand clearly what she implies, which puts her into a greater difficulty, she gets to a point when she ‘admits’ her lack of conversational gift. Maybe she just tries to apologise in advance in case her father would feel offended by her words. For this, she tries many tactics to make him understand what she means, since she is aware that the ‘naked truth’ would only cause him distress. She pretends to be overwhelmed in taking arranging the flowers, she leaves certain moments between her replays, ‘admits’ that she ought to learn to speak more eloquently, as her husband does. All her attitude shows that she cares a lot about what happens to her family, she loves her sister and her father equally, and wouldn’t want to create

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trouble to any of them. And if this means having to take some action in a very delicate problem, she takes her chance. As stated before, she keeps on apologising but in the end, she quickly utters the words: 'the past'. But immediately after that, as if trying to smoothen the impact of the words, she says that she knows him to have already been taken care of things. Her father may have already spent a lot of time thinking about this matter, or maybe he just realised he had to do it when his daughter brought this up to him. Whatever the case, he took some action after having had this conversation, therefore his daughter clumsy-clever attempt paid off.

The book we approached for our analysis here offers many other fragments that deserve our attention since the style and language in which the author chose to lay the facts are sweet and inviting.

Words… they seem to be powerful, even more powerful than we are ready to believe, sometimes. We could analyse every dialogue that took place between our characters and see that their shared, but hidden behind words, love is very obvious.

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