'Last' Scenes: Experiments with the Poetic and Phatic, Gender and Genre

Derek Neale

The six audio scenes forming the spine of this article, its artistic argument, are scripted responses to various practice and research questions. The inquiries include: what is the relationship between work-related, everyday language and creativity, as seen in a dramatic script? Can linguistic formations be translated across different dramatic scenarios? How does plotless, comedic drama engage an audience? The performances play with language, with sound shapes and structure, with parallel poetic, phonetic and rhythmic methods. They investigate a recurring and reinvented 'last' scene, while also illuminating a prior 'last' scene.

» Listen to *Last Sausage*, version 1 (liminalities.net/16-4/LastSausage_V1.mp3)

Focused on dialogic repetitions, silences and echoes, the scenes reference and reflect on a predecessor, Harold Pinter's *Last to Go* (which, along with *Request Stop* and *Special Offer*, was first performed in the sketch revue *Pieces of Eight* which opened at the Apollo Theatre, London in 1959; it was first published in 1961). The scenes also play on linguistic aspects that were analysed in David Lodge's essay "Pinter's *Last to Go*: a structuralist analysis" (270-85). The audio tracks consist of cross-gender performances of three scripts, six audio scenes in total (two versions of each script). The scenes are *Last Sausage, Last Body* and *Last Pizza* (Neale, scripts appended). The performances were generated and developed as a result of certain prompts: first, readings of and responses to *Last to Go*, its poetry pitched against its street realism, its comedy next to its banality, and its lack of action nestled alongside seemingly unnecessary, repeated and mundane lines.

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Second, the plays were prompted by the nature of Lodge's investigation of the Pinter sketch and his analysis of its linguistic features, and also to an extent by Deirdre Burton's analysis, where she says of *Last to Go* "the characters are continually questioning and confirming matters that they both already know … and that the audience certainly knows that they know" (13). The scene is paradoxical in that it exemplifies a 'bad' method of handling dramatic exposition; yet, in so doing it reveals that the exposition is empty, there is nothing being said, and that something meaningful about character is nonetheless divulged, a meaning that lies beyond the immediate semantics of words spoken. In this it represents a phatic communion, a term often associated with the anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, meaning verbal exchanges with the sole purpose of creating and sustaining social contact.

In his reading, Lodge discusses the revue sketch in relation to Roman Jakobson's language categories, interrogating how, for instance, the phatic and the poetic operate in the dialogue. The analysis offers a working exposition of Jakobson's linguistic terms, and a practical example of how they can be applied in the context of critical reading. Lodge describes how the poetic, for instance, can occur in everyday language but "doesn't dominate non-literary discourse" (276). Whereas, "utterances that in 'real life' might be classified as referential, emotive, conative … *become* poetic when they occur in an aesthetic context" (277). He goes on to suggest that the ostensible phatic communion between newspaper-seller and barman in *Last to Go*, utterances that seem merely to try to continue and prolong communication, becomes poetic in the context of performance. This explains the phatic repetition as a mix of patterned "typical behaviour", sounding similar in performance to poetic refrains**.** Lodge emphasises the importance of context in how the function of language is operating. In these different emphases he comes to illustrate the ways in which Jakobson's language functions operate, often simultaneously, so the conative can also be referential, the phatic can be poetic, and so forth. The play between the poetic and the phatic influenced these experimental scenes, in particular; the ways in which words with no apparent purpose, other than to perpetuate social contact, gather performative and poetic momentum and resonance, as new incarnations of phatic communion are generated.

» Listen to *Last Body,* version 1 (liminalities.net/16-4/LastBody_V1.mp3)

Third, the casting and performances were prompted and influenced by observations such as those made by David Lister (2005), who noted that Pinter once, when associate director of the UK's National Theatre, blocked an all-male casting of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This was noted in Peter Hall's

diaries: "Pinter's position is clear: an author has certain clear intentions, and Wilde's intentions were not that the women should be played by men." (80, entry: 7 February 1974). Pinter's assertion may seem contentious and at the very least to hang out the writer's influence and authority open for challenge. Aren't plays, once written and out in the world, always re-interpreted? That was Jonathan Miller's argument in advocating the Wilde casting innovation, according to Hall. Lister suggests that "cross-gender casting is a fascinating direction for theatre to explore". Since 1974, and indeed since Lister's article, there have been many such imaginative castings, especially of Shakespeare, but fewer perhaps of the specific variety that Lister suggested – "having major male roles in otherwise convention-ally cast productions played by a leading actress". Lister saw this as a way of in-creasing the number of substantial roles available to older actresses. He thought there would be no playwright's work better placed to embrace such active-gender casting than Harold Pinter's; for instance, Lister imagined Maggie Smith as per-fect for the role of Davies in *The Caretaker.*

» Listen to *Last Sausage,* version 2 (liminalities.net/16-4/LastSausage_V2.mp3)

Lister's project has a wider remit than the scope of these scenes; it is an on-going matter to be taken up by artistic and casting directors, and with a whole range of plays and playwrights, not just Pinter. Yet, in these more confined ex-periments such considerations did form a prominent part of the impulse behind both performance and conception. A play on gender, work and role was involved; a reading of the original sketch and perceptions of the era of its conception sug-gested this exploration. The gender play reflects on old ground but also on new gender assumptions and dynamics, and so finds different aspects of dramatic en-ergy and tension. This was the experience in performance. Playing with gender proved stimulating and prolific during the brief rehearsals, the possible ideas and outcomes only glimpsed in these recordings. The flexibility of the scripts allowed this, which some might suggest reveals their overall artistic limitation; as scripts, they can become many different things in performance. But for the purposes of experimental inquiry, their flexibility was ideal, especially given they were in fact relatively constrained in terms of length, language and structure; creative re-strictions that worked in a similar way to how the fourteen lines and volte of a sonnet might work, allowing for innumerable re-interpretations, if in effect cast-ing further shadows over the sanctity of the script as template for definitive per-formance.

» Listen to *Last Pizza,* version 1 (liminalities.net/16-4/LastPizza_V1.mp3)

The fourth and final prompt for these experiments was a mode of both critical and creative investigation prevalent in linguistic studies over recent decades. Textual intervention operates as an interrogating and transformative mode of critical language analysis. Such 'Interventionist' approaches to linguistic and literary research have gained greater credence with the rise of forms of analysis whereby the critical reader intervenes as writer in the original text. As Ronald Carter explains, "rewriting involves making use of a different range of linguistic choices" (342); in trying them out, the researcher/writer also thinks through their properties and implications. Rewriting can consist of re-centring a scene, for example, or re-working a novel's chapter by writing in the voice of a peripheral character, writing in a different tense or grammatical person, or by changing the geographical or historical setting. It is a *modus operandi* most suited to dramatic writing, where play, re-interpretation and improvisation are the norms. There are numerous potential interventions and, as Carter suggests, this approach has a relationship with both creative writing and critical analysis; it is a more active mode of reading and participating in a text "along a critical–creative–reading–writing continuum" (342). These dialogues serve the double purpose of illuminating language strategies in *Last to Go*, while inventing new characters and situations in relocated contexts. They have been used as pedagogic illustrations for both creative writing, scriptwriting and language students, when purveying the territory between everyday and poetic speech, the relationship between language and creativity and the nature of subtext, repetition and pace in dialogue.

» Listen to *Last Body,* version 2 (liminalities.net/16-4/LastBody_V2.mp3)

The six performances use audio and the genre of radio drama purposefully, to accentuate the role of language and dialogue, playing with genre, gender, era and cultural setting, as well as with what is not said and the suggestion – and it still is only that – of character psychology and back story. Pinter, on seeing Lodge's essay, remarked: "I couldn't believe it … it's only a sketch" (Gussow 34). But Lodge thought his essay (and the sketch) illustrated truths "about Harold Pinter's work and about dramatic dialogue and dramatic structure in general" (Lodge 271). These truths were worth something, according to Lodge, whose essay, by contrast to the revue sketch's brevity, is several thousand words long. Yet, it does not linger over familiar clichéd critical observations about Pinter's pauses. The basic method for designating pace is evident in all these scenes, including the original, and is comparable to the methods voiced by several other playwrights. See, for instance, Alan Ayckbourn, who says: "I use full stops, just because that's the way you musically want speech written. Commas are useful, dashes and dots

are lovely. It's dialogue that's speakable. It's never really meant to be read. It's always meant to be heard, like musical notation." (Neale 2020 20). Pace of delivery and beats are regulated firstly by punctuation, then by explicit pauses and silences, all of which sit on an orchestrated continuum. This pre-directs the actors' rhythms of delivery, lending it comedic possibility, and psychological and semantic potential. The pace, rhythm and any pauses might hold meaning for the characters engaging with one another; meaning for the actors grasping the scene and their characters' action within the scene; and meaning for the audience. But pauses in themselves are part of the whole design and not of special significance. Repetitions are given as much prominence in these rewritings as the pauses. It should also be noted, the actors ultimately interpret the orchestration and are free to ignore or moderate pauses. The repetitions are different. They might be pickup lines, where actors continue or resume the pace. Karen Ascoe, one of the scenes' actors, says of the directed pauses in the scripts: "it's useful technically to have the pause for comic effect or just to allow the audience's thoughts to come in; by the same token, it's very important that we [the actors] know exactly what's filling that [pause]. Even if it's just a character saying to herself 'what do I say next?' As we do in real life sometimes" (2016). The imagined filling of spaces forms a key part of the actor's co-invention of a part.

   » Listen to *Last Pizza,* version 2 (liminalities.net/16-4/LastPizza_V2.mp3)

   The scripts and direction for these experiments embraced possible subtexts such as unrequited love, class and gender conflict, alongside more sinister contexts. The structure and limitations of the phatic communion, as seen in *Last to Go* and translated into these 'Last' experiments, lends them a repeated shape with common features, evolving traits and subtext, alongside what Lodge would term the poetic. The psychology and life-detail of characters is arguably heightened compared to the original, the comedy heightened in some and dulled in other versions. These are isolated experiments in transformative reading, writing, and performance. Rewriting using these – or other – tactics might provide new vantage points to view how rhythm, language and dramatic scripts work, at least with a certain kind of conversational exchange. It also highlights how some cultural aspects shift radically over time. For instance, the notion of a person selling a range of newspapers on the street now seems strange.
   Burton's analysis of *Last to Go* is more forensic in charting the different kinds of repetition (15-18) and in dissecting how the phonetic slant and half rhymes form a constellation, and in effect contribute greatly to the poetry of the dialogue. These performances have an ear for those chimes but are inevitably inexact and

not entirely faithful to original formations. They evolve as separate, while reveal-ing obvious resemblance. They respond to the questions declared earlier, about what happens when certain things are included and excluded, when cultural and generic contexts are shifted, when creative strategies of arrangement, structure and composition are re-aligned. They engage in newly imagined worlds, but per-haps, because of the overall shape of the language and performed contact, they engage with similar themes to those of Pinter: life versus death or, as Lois Gordon says, "presence versus absence manifest in speech versus silence (and pause)" (xxxii) A realisation of that engagement is one of the outcomes from the perfor-mances, along with a realisation that 'last' is being refined and coloured via per-formance: it is of importance as marker of the end of something just gone, but also of life about to go. That is at the centre of this type of conversation, so typical of Pinter.

Playwrights and scriptwriters are, by definition, readers of scripts and per-formance. They are in effect constantly rewriting, or writing in response to, prior performances. In that way, any writer is undertaking a type of transformative text analysis, in the respect that "features of language and textual organisation are con-tinually being drawn to the writer's (and reader's) attention as a result of the text having been deliberately manipulated in some way" (Carter 342). This relates to everyday language as well as antecedent texts and performances. Much is made of Pinter's associations with Beckett, Camus, Kafka, Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd. These scenes to an extent play on those connections and influences, but they allude also to comedic traditions evident in the sketch – music hall double acts and even the non-physical aspects of *commedia dell'arte* that might apply to everyday conversations throughout different eras. A comedic lineage can be seen running through and beyond *Last to Go*, leading to *Monty Python's Flying Circus,* Peter Cook and Dudley Moore and more contemporary TV comedy sketch shows. It is also interesting to see how such dialogues do not quite fit that comedic trajectory; they are related yet are not purely comic. The link to common conver-sational modes is just as relevant, and to the comi-tragic themes of words versus no words.

In this way, the treatment of and regard for predecessors has not been rev-erential or focused on just one aspect of the original method and has not taken the revue sketch format too seriously. The 'Last' scenes might also offer a new slant on discussions about adaptation, fidelity studies and originality. In taking a step back from orthodox and larger dramatic forms and terminologies such as narra-tive arcs, act-structure and dramatic action, this brief discussion and the 'Last' scenes refocus on smaller but nonetheless essential dramatic units: character, scene and line, via the related bits and pieces of language. The effect will be heard

by some to stall conventional dramatic pace. This may or may not be so, but there are benefits. Lodge commends the benefits of his own considered analysis, the clarity of explanation about how drama works resulting from his pausing over a brief sketch; it is "worth spelling out," he says (271). In the same spirit, these experiments are, it is hoped, "worth playing out."

Credits

The 'Last' scenes, recorded audio performances

> writer/director: Derek Neale
> actors: Karen Ascoe and Richard Atlee
> audio producer: Angela Hind
> production: Lambent with The Open University
> studio: Pier Productions, Brighton, UK. 2016

> Use of these audio recordings courtesy The Open University

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Appendix: The 'Last' scenes scripts

Last Sausage

A hairdressers. A **HAIRDRESSER** *and a* **SANDWICH SELLER.** *The* HAIR-DRESSER *sweeps the floor, the* **SANDWICH SELLER** *sits in one of the waiting seats.*

SELLER:	You was dead earlier.
HAIRDRESSER:	What?
SELLER:	Round about twelve.
HAIRDRESSER:	Twelve?
	Pause.
SELLER:	I popped my head round the door.
HAIRDRESSER:	Oh, yes?
SELLER:	You must have been out the back. You was dead. Not a curler in sight.
	Pause.
HAIRDRESSER:	Yes, it was dead this morning.
SELLER:	Yes, I noticed.
	Pause.
SELLER:	I sold my last roll just after. Yes. About twelve thirty.
HAIRDRESSER:	Sold your last then, did you?

SELLER:	Yes, my last roll, sausage it was. Went about twelve twenty five.

Pause.

HAIRDRESSER:	Sausage, was it?
SELLER:	Yes.

Pause.

SELLER:	Sometimes it's the bacon and egg.
HAIRDRESSER:	Ah.
SELLER:	Or the . . . the … whatyacallit.
HAIRDRESSER:	The veggie.
SELLER:	No, not the veggie, the veggies always go quick.
HAIRDRESSER:	The chicken.
SELLER:	That's it, the coronation chicken. Sometimes it's the chicken.

Pause.

SELLER:	All I had left this morning was the sausage.

Pause.

HAIRDRESSER:	Then that went, did it?
SELLER:	Yes.

Pause.

SELLER:	Quick off the mark this morning.

Pause.

HAIRDRESSER:	You didn't have any left, then?
SELLER:	No. Not after I sold that one.

Pause.

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HAIRDRESSER: It was after that you must have come by here then, was it?

SELLER: No, I popped my head round the door before.

HAIRDRESSER: You didn't say hello though, did you?

SELLER: When?

HAIRDRESSER: I mean, you didn't say hello and that, did you?

SELLER: What, about twelve?

HAIRDRESSER: Yes.

SELLER: No, I went up to the office.

HAIRDRESSER: No, I thought I didn't see you.

SELLER: I sold the last roll, then I had to go up to the office.

                Pause.

HAIRDRESSER: Yes, it was dead this morning.

                Pause.

SELLER: I went to see if I could get hold of Liz.

HAIRDRESSER: Who?

SELLER: Liz.

                Pause.

HAIRDRESSER: Liz who?

SELLER: Liz . . . Liz ... whatyacallit.

HAIRDRESSER: Oh, Liz.

                Pause.

HAIRDRESSER: Did you get hold of her?

SELLER: No. No, I couldn't get hold of her. Weren't available.

HAIRDRESSER: She ain't available much now, is she?

Pause.

HAIRDRESSER: When did you last see her then?

SELLER: Oh, I haven't seen her for I don't know how long.

HAIRDRESSER: No, nor me.

Pause.

HAIRDRESSER: Used to be quite a talker.

SELLER: What do you mean, talker?

HAIRDRESSER: Yes, a talker alright.

SELLER: She was never a talker.

HAIRDRESSER: Quite a talker.

Pause.

SELLER: Not when I knew her.

Pause.

HAIRDRESSER: Weren't available then?

Pause.

SELLER: Yes, it was the sausage tonight.

HAIRDRESSER: Not always the last though, is it, though?

SELLER: No. Oh no. I mean sometimes it's the chicken. Some-times it's one of the

other rolls. Even one of the sandwiches.

HAIRDRESSER: Yes?

SELLER: Sometimes. No way of telling. Until you've got your last one on the shelf,

of course. Then you can see.

HAIRDRESSER: Yes.

Pause.

SELLER:	Oh, yes.

Pause.

HAIRDRESSER:	Quite a talker.

Last Body

A hospital lift. A **DOCTOR** *and a* **HOSPITAL PORTER.** *Both wait to reach their floor – an empty wheeled stretcher is also in the lift, the charge of the porter who has just delivered a patient for surgery.*

The lift 'rings' and announces 'please stand clear of the doors'.

DOCTOR:	You appeared to be terribly busy. Earlier. So I believe.
PORTER:	When was that, then?
DOCTOR:	Two. I needed a blood sample sending. Sharpish. No one to be found.
PORTER:	Two, you say?

Pause.

DOCTOR:	I called the porter's room. Repeatedly. No response.
PORTER:	Oh, yes?
DOCTOR:	I dare say you had your hands full.

Pause.

PORTER:	Yes, it was busy earlier.
DOCTOR:	Yes, so I believe.

Pause.

PORTER:	Supposed to be my last run about then. Yes. About two.
DOCTOR:	Your last one, eh. And yet you're still here?
PORTER:	Body to the mortuary. About one fifty.

Pause.

DOCTOR: A fatality, eh?

PORTER: Yes.

Pause.

PORTER: Sometimes it's a blood sample.

DOCTOR: Ah.

PORTER: Or the . . . the … you know.

DOCTOR: One for surgery.

PORTER: That's it, one of these.

Pause.

PORTER: All I had this morning, a body. Nice and tidy.

Pause.

DOCTOR: And that went smoothly, did it?

PORTER: Yes.

Pause.

PORTER: Quick as you like.

Pause.

PORTER: No rings. They can be a problem. Getting them off, and they cause paperwork.

DOCTOR: And you didn't have any further duties?

PORTER: No.

Pause.

PORTER: It was after that you must have called then, was it?

DOCTOR: Yes, it must have been.

PORTER: Short staffed you see. Lots off sick. They asked me to stay on.

DOCTOR: Well, it's very good that you're able to accommodate.

PORTER: I mean, you did get seen to? In the end?

DOCTOR: What, about two?

PORTER: Yes.

DOCTOR: No, I took it upon myself, under the circumstances, to deliver the sample by hand.

PORTER: No, I thought I didn't see you on the list.

DOCTOR: I went up to the lab myself.

Pause.

PORTER: Yes, it was busy earlier.

Pause.

DOCTOR: I went to see if I could get hold of Dr Jenkins directly.

PORTER: Who?

DOCTOR: Dr Jenkins.

Pause.

PORTER: Dr who?

DOCTOR: Jenkins . . . Dr Jenkins.

PORTER: Oh. I see.

Pause.

PORTER: Did you find him?

DOCTOR: No. No, he didn't seem to be open for business.

PORTER: He's not around much now, is he?

Pause.

PORTER: When did you last see him then?

DOCTOR: Oh, I haven't seen him for some time now.

PORTER: No, nor me.

                Pause.

PORTER: Had marital issues. So they say.

DOCTOR: Marital issues?

PORTER: Yes.

DOCTOR: I think you might be mistaken, and in any case ...

PORTER: She left him. So they say.

                Pause.

DOCTOR: No, you're mistaken.

PORTER: For another doctor. So they say.

                Silence.

PORTER: Yes, it was a body to the mortuary. No rings. Looking forward
                to my tea, I was, my last run.

DOCTOR: Not entirely your last though, was it, eh? As it turned out.

                Pause

DOCTOR: So I believe.

PORTER: No. Oh, no. As it turned out.

DOCTOR: Yes, indeed.

PORTER: No way of telling what's round the corner. Until you get that
                call.

DOCTOR: Indeed.

                Pause.

PORTER: Yes, marital issues. So they say.

Lift voice either rings or announces that 'you have now arrived at floor 6'.

Last Pizza

A heli-taxi in the year 2097. **WAITER** *and a* **HELI-TAXI DRIVER** – the waiter is having her usual lift home. Intermittent sound of helicopter blades – but an electric rather than contemporary engine, sounds like a fan.

Automatic announcement 'Please ensure your safety buttons are pressed; do not interfere with belt as it fastens around you; we will be taking off in thirty seconds'. A beeping sound.

WAITER: Looked like you were buzzing all over town tonight.

DRIVER: When was that?

WAITER: When did I see you buzzing?

DRIVER: Yes.

WAITER: When? Nine, thereabouts, when I took my break.

DRIVER: Nine?

                Pause.

WAITER: Nine, thereabouts.

DRIVER: Oh, yes, that's right, I guess. Lot of fares round about then.

WAITER: You weren't bringing the punters here.

                Pause.

DRIVER: No, it's been a buzzing old night.

WAITER: Sold my last pizza thereabouts, nine, just before my break.

                Pause.

DRIVER: Your last one, eh. And you still stayed right til the end?

WAITER: Margatrixa with extra B3 and D1 topping. Three hundred mil.

                Pause.

DRIVER: Margatrixa, eh?

WAITER: Yes.

                   Pause.

WAITER: Some folk like even more of the old time stuff, they want olibs or salani.

DRIVER: Ah.

WAITER: Or . . . or … whatyamacallit.

DRIVER: Cheese.

WAITER: That's it, one of those real old, real cheese pizzas.

                   Pause.

WAITER: Tonight it was just a margatrixa. That was my last one.

                   Pause.

DRIVER: They satisfied with what you give them?

WAITER: Yes.

                   Pause.

WAITER: Down in a flash. Wolfed it.

                   Pause.

DRIVER: And you didn't have any more takers?

WAITER: No, not after that margatrixa.

                   Pause.

DRIVER: It was just after that you saw me, then?

WAITER: What?

DRIVER: Nine.

WAITER: Yes, nine. Thereabouts. Buzzing you were.

DRIVER: You didn't call me though, did you?

WAITER: When?

DRIVER: I mean, you didn't call in for your lift home, early? Not then.

WAITER: What, at nine?

DRIVER: Yes.

WAITER: No.

DRIVER: No, I thought you didn't. Lot of fares tonight. Could have missed you.

WAITER: Yes, I made a call. But not to you.

Pause.

WAITER: Yes, I wanted to get hold of Zamos.

DRIVER: Who?

WAITER: Zamos.

Pause.

DRIVER: Zamos? Zamos who?

WAITER: Zamos. Zamos.

DRIVER: Oh.

Pause.

DRIVER: Did you get through to him?

WAITER: No. No, he didn't take the call.

DRIVER: He doesn't take many calls nowadays, does he?

Pause.

DRIVER: When did you last talk to him then?

WAITER: Oh, I haven't talked to Zamos for a while.

DRIVER: No, nor me.

Pause.

DRIVER: Had very bad eczema.

WAITER: Eczema? Zamos?

DRIVER: Yes.

WAITER: Zamos never had eczema. One of the few people I know who
                didn't.

DRIVER: Very bad eczema.

                Pause.

WAITER: No, he didn't have eczema.

                Pause.

WAITER: Yes, it was a Margatrixa. My last pizza.

DRIVER: Margatrixa was it?

                Pause

WAITER: Yes, a margatrixa.

DRIVER: And nothing after nine.

WAITER: Thereabouts.

                Pause.

DRIVER: Very bad eczema.

Bleeping sound and tenor of electric engine alters – to land.