

# NATHALIE SARRAUTE: TROPISMS AND THE DRAMA OF LOGOS<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Nathalie Sarraute created a new style of writing, renouncing the accepted literary forms by discarding conventional ideas about plot, chronology, and characterization. Research in this area has consistently shown that, in Sarraute, language is at the heart of her drama. However, this essay emphasizes that she played with the power of words and silences to make us hear far beyond the social surface of discourse and grasp what is really going on in the minds of the interlocutors. Against the structural linguistics of her time, Sarraute concentrated on every phoneme, every syllable of a word or an expression, testing and retesting it from all angles until those extremely rapid “invisible*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is partly based on my doctoral dissertation in French, entitled “*Écriture théâtrale de Nathalie Sarraute*,” presented at The Graduate School of Chulalongkorn University in 2005. The study is an attempt to understand the theme of Nathalie Sarraute’s plays. I am grateful to my thesis director: Associate Professor Dr. Kachitra Bhangananda, and my co-director: Assistant Professor Dr. Walaya Rukapan, whose suggestions greatly improved my work. And most importantly, I would like to thank Assistant Professor Dr. Paniti Hoonswaeng and Dr. Stephen Coote for their valuable and helpful comments.

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*reactions” that we sense inside us--those inner movements called “tropisms” by Sarraute--become perceptible. Briefly, the prelinguistic impulses, which are the basic emotions underlying everyday human interrelationships, become the key concept of all her short, intense plays under the form of “logodrama.”*

## Introduction

Nathalie Sarraute (1900-1999), a French novelist, essayist, and playwright, is one of the most interesting female writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her works, well known in France, have now been translated into more than 30 languages all over the world. Sarraute has been one of the strongest creative influences on the New Novel or *Nouveau Roman* movement. In the history of modern French Literature, she is classed as one of the leading theorists, along with Noble prize winners Claude Simon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Michel Butor. But her “interpersonal tropisms” were strongly criticized by Robbe-Grillet. For him, the myth of interior movements, as a substance of literature, made her work old-fashioned and based on classical psychology. Ideologically, for this “nouveau romancier,” whose *La Jalousie* (*Jealousy*, 1957) is a very well-known example of the genre, language can be, at one and the same time, both the form and the substance of literature. For Sarraute, on the other hand, language is an all-too-human means of communication to which we only partly or imperfectly accede. What interests her is that which remains ensconced beneath the linguistic surface: the not-yet-verbalized sensations or feelings.

In this paper, I explicate the essential elements of her theatre by analyzing three aspects common to her six plays:

dramatized tropisms, the drama of logos, and the roles of interlocutors without identity.

### The dramatized tropisms

A series of brief passages in Nathalie Sarraute's first work, *Tropisms* (1939),<sup>3</sup> shows that inexpressible human experiences exist and that these indefinable movements slip through us on the frontiers of consciousness. They hide behind our gestures, beneath the words we speak, but they are the origins of our actions, discourse, and the feelings we manifest.<sup>4</sup>

Her tropisms also imply that in reality we do not all see the same things or feel the same way. Thus perception is not an

entirely objective quality. Furthermore, according to her beliefs, literature is not a scientific matter emphasizing facts and information. So, it seemed absurd to her to attempt to describe the external world according to the concept of mimesis that influenced contemporary authors. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, a great writer and critic of Sarraute's time, held that a true literature reflected the real world and aimed to change human life.<sup>5</sup> He admired literary works that represented the actual condition of the world in general and, in particular, the struggle of individuals to define themselves through their responsibilities. In one of her interviews, Sarraute confirmed that she was not interested in this kind of Sartrean existentialism, especially not in his theory of political and social engagement:

[ . . . ] what I write has absolutely nothing to do with social or political events, whatever they might be. No more than in the work of Proust. It's totally removed from that. [...] This is not *littérature engagée*.

(Halicks 1980: 13)<sup>6</sup>

Her writings show how to go beyond the baseline of so-called realism. Against the positivist mode of empirical investigation and documentary that coincides with the rise of realism or naturalism, her entire oeuvre can be labeled *sentimental*, playing on feeling or on the audience's emotions

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<sup>3</sup> In the *Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 27 (1966: 156), *tropism* refers to the involuntary tendency of an organism to react to an external stimulus, as a sunflower, for example, turns toward light. In biology, it is an involuntary movement of an organism or of its parts in response to some external stimulus such as light or chemical agents. The ability to react to environmental influences is a basic and universal characteristic of living organisms. The type of reaction elicited by any given stimulus is generally adaptive, in that it tends to further the welfare of and perpetuate the individual. A human hand brought into contact with a hot stove immediately and involuntarily moves away from the harmful influence. The shoot of a green plant will turn toward light, which is the source of the energy involved in its food-manufacturing processes.

<sup>4</sup> «Ce sont des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons» (Sarraute 1996:1553). All translations in this paper, when not otherwise stated, are mine.

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<sup>5</sup> In his theoretical works, such as *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (What Is Literature? 1948), Sartre investigated the roles of literature and argued that its contemporary function was to change the world.

<sup>6</sup> Cf: <http://www.Wooster.edu/artfuldodge/inter-views/sarraute.htm> [March 10, 2006].

rather than on reason. These qualities become the unifying thread throughout her work, where essential questions that probe the frontiers of little-understood phenomena are presented.

Traditional writers, especially writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Honoré Balzac<sup>7</sup>, Emile Zola, and Mark Twain whose works were termed “realistic” and who took as their subject matter the real world (people, places, and things), believed that an objective picture of the world could be completely represented with words and typically used devices such as plot, characters, and description to accomplish their task. On the other hand, Sarraute abandoned these conventional notions and called into question the traditional modes of literary realism. She took tropisms seriously as her subject matter. Thus the literary point of view comes from inside the human mind and from sensibility. What was represented in her plays was the fleeting and powerful emotions with which one reacts to other human beings. Sarraute made us enter the preconsciousness of each “character” and taught us to understand that truth was intersubjective. So, in her works, binary oppositions like objective/subjective have little or no meaning.

Sarraute poised her microscope to observe and examine these tropisms, which were hidden in a back corner of the spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> In her interview, Sarraute underlined that the work of Balzac was great for his time but his psychological way of creating the realistic characters was too simple for our 20<sup>th</sup>-century world, where many studies have shown that human beings can not be easily described using simplified psychological forms (see Rykner 2002 : 183).

According to her, the writer, as an artist, “creates a new world which comes to enlarge known reality and extends the field further from the visible one” (Sarraute 1996: 1619). But the playwright did not tell about interior adventures. She brought them alive through the interaction between the two poles of the “linguistic interpersonages,”<sup>8</sup> until the stage of the conflict could be skillfully exaggerated. It was not by chance that she chose and put in the high-speed negative tropisms. Although Sarraute asserted that the tropismic reaction could be attraction or repulsion, only negative tropisms were emphasized in her plays to better dramatize the world of her interpersonages. The stage requires conflict and violence.

Here follows her justification in a manifest of 1990:

I prefer to take them when there is a state of conflict; that bubbles more. Otherwise, all is calm. I choose the moment when something does not go, something very light, hardly sensitive. I look then at what occurs when one observes it with a magnifying glass.

(Rykner 2002:194)

To let us sense the inner vibrations, Sarraute privileged the dynamic plays with the mechanism of dialogue and, in particular, with small facts about language: imperceptible silences, the light lie, the abnormal pronunciation or ridiculous intonation, banal expressions. The “characters” feel tiny vibration

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<sup>8</sup> For more details, see Pavis (2002 b).

crossing in them. In fact, no words or definitions can describe what they feel. It is about something deeper, more essential. In a word, these intersubjective experiences constitute the entire reality in each of her plays. And the new aesthetics of truth, especially of human inner reality through the linguistic world, is remarkably focused. In her plays, only negative tropisms are dramatized. With no *dramatis personae*, no stage directions, no actions, her plays portray inner self and interior truths that depend on how each “character” is reacting to the outside world, including other selves. These quasi-emotions, called the tropisms, become central to Sarraute’s art in the form of Language Theatre.

### The drama of logos

Nathalie Sarraute (1996: 1712) announced that in all of her plays, action was absent and replaced by the flux or reflux of language. Rykner<sup>9</sup> has proposed calling her theatrical work the “drama of logos” or “logodrama” (1988: 44). The speakers in each of her plays repeat certain words or phrases along with variants thereof so often that they become odd and unsettling. It seems that the interlocutors are not cognizant of the contents of the strange and often hurtful discourse that they habitually engage in.

Marcabru has underlined that Sarraute’s drama of logos is a “theatre for the blind” because we can understand her plays, feel

and approach tropisms just by listening to the intelligent conversations in her plays:

Nathalie Sarraute wasn’t interested in either the social relationships or physical appearances of her characters. They are spokesmen or, even better, speakers bearing words. Their faces don’t count. They are contained entirely within their spoken words, which reveal and denounce them, and make them fleetingly transparent. Just listen to them. They are dialogues for the blind. [...] Nathalie Sarraute sticks to the word. Words are the be all and end all here, ricocheting off the stagnant waters and stirring up their depths. [...] They betray us and ultimately reveal who we are.

(Marcabru 1999: 1)<sup>10</sup>

The “logodrama” of Sarraute often results when certain words are mispronounced, such as a suffix *-ism* in her play *Isma* (1970). A group of friends feel embarrassed at hearing a couple wrongly pronounce every word ending in *ism* as *isma*: *Structuralisma*, *Syndicalisma*, etc.

Elle, incited: Isma. Isma. Ma. Ma  
. . . Capitalisma.  
Syndicalisma.  
Structuralisma. His  
way of pronouncing  
isma . . . The rising  
ending . . . That gets  
under my skin. . .  
Deeper . . . Always  
deeper. Up to the

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<sup>9</sup> Professor Arnaud Rykner, University of Toulouse, is a specialist in Nathalie Sarraute’s oeuvre. For further details, see <http://w3.univ-tlse2.fr/lla/equipe/fiches/rykner.html>.

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<sup>10</sup>Cf: [http://entractes.sacd.fr/en/n\\_archieves/att/hommages.php](http://entractes.sacd.fr/en/n_archieves/att/hommages.php) [March 15, 2006]. The original French text appeared in *Le Figaro* (Marcabru 1999).

heart . . . Like a  
poison . . . Isma . . .  
Isma . . .

H. 2: Oh goodness. I have to stop  
you. That is all obvious . . .  
It's Meaningless . . .

Elle: What is?

H. 2: This way of pronouncing the  
words ending in -ism, that  
strikes you , doesn't it?

Elle: Yes. Isma . . . At the end of  
the words . . .

(Sarraute 1996: 1440)

Therefore, the end of every word *-ism*  
pronounced as *-isma* "is like the tail of a  
scorpion. It pricks us... it pours out its  
venom in us."

In *Le Mensonge* (*The Falsehood*, 1996),  
the fragments of dramatic dialogue  
between the interlocutors show that  
language is not a kind of undistorting  
mirror of, or perfectly transparent window  
to, the "real." Realism, in the simplified  
sense of a one-to-one relationship between  
the signifier and the thing it represents, is  
questioned. In our daily conversation, we  
always deceive ourselves into believing  
that language can be the right instrument  
for bringing about our ideologically  
constructed sense of the fact or the "real."  
But, in fact, it seems that we never fully  
offer up the world in all its complexity, its  
irreducible plenitude. Its verisimilitude is  
an effect achieved through the deployment  
of certain literary and ideological  
conventions which have been invested  
with a kind of truth value. Pierre, the  
protagonist of *Le Mensonge*, cannot stand  
it when he hears someone telling a lie. He  
becomes quite nervous when Simone  
slides between true and false memories,

between fact and fiction. Finally, he tries  
to understand the simply anodyne lie that  
we meet everywhere in our daily lives.  
His friend Jacques explains how to reject  
preconceived notions of the "real"  
because, for him, there is no objective or  
inherent meaning. Some lines of this  
fragmentary conversation in *Le Mensonge*  
can question our habitual ways of  
perceiving "reality":

Pierre : The facts. The truth. It is  
there.

Jacques : First of all, begin by  
not calling that the  
truth. Change its  
name. It is a name, as  
soon as we pronounce  
it, it imprints itself  
indelibly. We hold fast  
to that as if our life  
depended on it . . . We  
consider it inescapable  
. . . It is necessary to  
change that . . . Call  
that the falsehood . . .  
(Sarraute 1996: 1411)

In others of her plays, certain ways to  
stress some expressions are discussed. In  
*Pour un oui ou pour un non* (*Just for  
Nothing*, 1993), two intimate friends reach  
the point of complete noncommunication  
because of the fatal pause between the  
phrases: "C'est biiiiien . . . ça . . ."-  
("That's... goooooood . . .") :

H. 2: Well . . . You said to me  
sometime ago . . . You said  
to me . . . when I boasted of  
my success . . . I can't  
remember which one . . .  
yes . . . derisively . . . when  
I told you about it . . . you  
said to me : "That's . . . good  
. . ."

- H. 1: Say again, please . . . I can't understand.
- H. 2: You said to me: "That's . . . good . . ." Just with this stress . . . this accent [. . .]
- H. 1: Well, then I said to you: "That's good?"
- H. 2: Not completely so . . . there was a bigger interval between "That's" and "good": "That's . . . gooooood." An accent put on "good" . . . a drawing out: "gooooood . . ." and a pause after "that's" . . . It is not unimportant.  
(Sarraute 1996: 1499)

So what is important in our daily discourse is not only what we say but how we say it. *Pour un oui ou pour un non* also leaves us recognizing how much swerving there is between what we would like to say and what, fatally and unwillingly, we end up pronouncing.

In *C'est beau* (*It's Beautiful*, 1975),<sup>11</sup> Sarraute played successfully with the value cliché. When one says: "It's beautiful" before a great artistic work, one just estimates the unutterable pleasure of art. According to Sarraute, it seems absurd to transmit aesthetic experience in common terms. That's why the protagonist in this play comes to this conclusion: "It is this expression "It's beautiful" that demolishes everything in me. . . It is sufficient that we just stick it on anything and immediately everything takes a sight. . ." (Sarraute 1996: 1467).

In fact, she began this kind of theme in 1964, with her first play, *Le Silence*, where a "character" feels embarrassed, keeps silent, and lets his friend talk about the beauty of poetry. In her plays, silence is a dynamic way of saying something beyond words.<sup>10</sup> Jean-Pierre, "le silencieux", who says nothing during the friendly conversation in *Le Silence*, becomes the center of discussion and "the real poet": "One who says word does not agree. You don't like translating [. . .] As I admire you. You are a poet. The real one . . . A poet, it's you . . ."

(Sarraute 1996: 1389).

So, talking or keeping silent, all of these linguistic trespassings, provoke or reveal tropisms. From her first play, *Le Silence*, to the last one, *Pour un oui ou pour un non*, each of her dramatic works gives the small irritations of the language games and antagonisms of a lifetime the airing that most long intimate relationships require at one time or another. And the discussion is typically focused on the ways in which certain words, phrases, and tones of voice can truly hurt the interlocutors. With no series of events, no dramatic actions, through fragments of dialogue in absurd situations, her "logodrama" aims for a greater understanding, both in detail and in scope, about the inner world, sensations, or all about the interpersonal tropisms.

On stage, two people, or two groups--maybe they are parents and son, maybe they are friends--are talking. But the important thing is not only what they are saying but how they try to communicate their incommunicable feelings. In addition, the drama underneath the dialogue on stage reveals little by little a secret unknown zone of sensations. Often the actors speak words which would

<sup>11</sup> For more details, see Pavis (2000).

normally remain unspoken. And her plays show that the words are always accompanied by, or derive from, sensations or feelings. Sometimes, it is the tone in which it is said that makes people look to the depths of their self. Language is here depicted as emerging into preconsciousness.

However, Sarraute is very far removed from the classic categories of psychology. She did not agree with Freud and Lacan.<sup>12</sup> So her works always show that psychoanalysis is too simple to explicate and analyze our inner worlds.<sup>13</sup> The common practice of analyzing one's feelings is, for Sarraute, something very out-of-date. And she believed that there existed the involuntary movement of our emotions before we recognized them as emotions or as thoughts. What interested Sarraute was a mental universe where psychological terms were not introduced.

According to one of her interviews, psychoanalysis is not only unnecessary for creating literary works, but also harmful:

I don't admire Freud as much as some people do. [...] There was much more in *Hamlet*, which he studied, than in all that he put in it. So I think, of course, he took his substance from literature, but it's not the writers who have to take their substance from Freud. Imagine Shakespeare being aware of the Oedipal complex when he wrote *Hamlet*. It would have been

a disaster. It's lucky he didn't know it existed.

(Halicks 1980: 41)

In her entire oeuvre, she avoided the all-too-predictable psychological analysis and sidestepped the pitfalls of discourse. Consequently, what her "characters" experience is something that happens inside, in the midst of happening, the ebb and flow of the psyche existing at a prelinguistic level during human interaction. Therefore, one never knows how to analyze these nameless fragments of inner reality at the moment that one experiences them. Moreover, the "characters" in her plays are not individual modes of consciousness and thinking that use words as an instrument; rather, they become the instrument of language for examining the limits of discourse. So, her plays are often called avant-garde because they encompass a number of new forms of literary endeavor which get rid of traditional, psychologically "realistic" characters.

### Roles of interlocutors without identity

Nathalie Sarraute considered a human being to be, not a "person," but rather a "vessel of psychic states." And, in all of her works, it is necessary to destroy the traditional concept of identity. This is because all our inner worlds are, for her, the same.

I have no feeling of having an identity. Looking at myself from the outside, I know [what the 'je' is]. I am 'me,' 'je' . . . whatever you want to call it. . . . But on the inside . . . there is no more 'je' . . . I cannot see myself. . . . I cannot imagine for a single instant what

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<sup>12</sup> See Lassalle (2002: 65) and Rykner (2002: 184).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. certain passages of her literary works where psychoanalysis is ironically questioned (Sarraute 1996: 47-48, 343, 1434, 1456-9).

you see of me. It's simply impossible. . . . We see something compact inside ourselves- something with qualities and defects, with character traits that form a 'personality.' Looking at ourselves from the outside, we usually find this 'something' to be likeable, pleasant. Yet if we place ourselves where I do [in my writings] . . . , we are in fact such immensities, and there are so many things going on, that-seen from the inside-there is no identity whatsoever.

(Benmussa 1987)<sup>14</sup>

With no personal identity, the “characters” in her plays incarnate a kind of universal interlocutor who we can meet anywhere in any possible world. In order to explain the roles of the actors in a fiction, A. J. Greimas<sup>15</sup> (1966), inspired by the structural linguistics, studied Lithuanian folktales and proposed that the key structures were functions and characters: *Destinateur* (Sender), *Destinataire* (Receiver), *Objet* (Object), *Sujet* (Subject), *Adjuvant* (Supporter), *Opposant* (Opponent). His scheme, which is described as “actantial,” because it focuses on the actions of persons and the narrative functions, has been variously presented through diagram. The one contained in figure 1 comes from an analysis by Pavis (2002a: 3).

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<sup>14</sup> For more details, see Taylor (2000).

<sup>15</sup> Algirdas Julius Greimas was born 1917 in Tula, Russia and died 1992 in Paris. He was a Lithuanian linguist who contributed to the theory of semiotics and also researched Lithuan mythology. He originated the semiotic square. Cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algirdas\\_Julien\\_Greimas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algirdas_Julien_Greimas) (March 23, 2007).



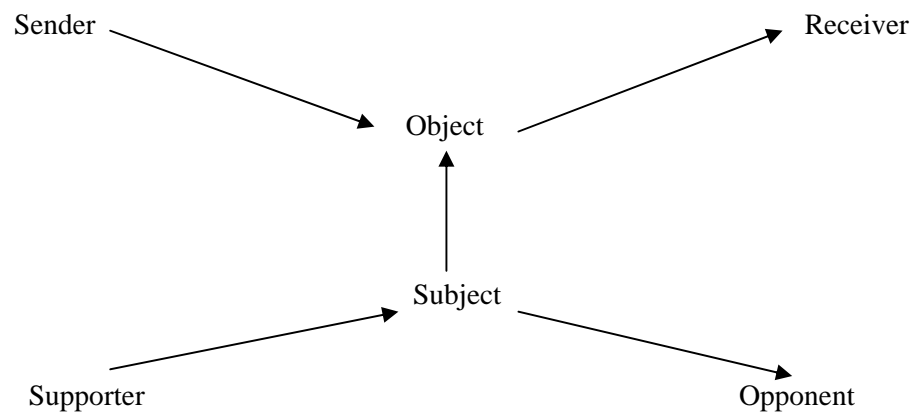


Figure 1: The actantial model of Greimas

Rykner (1988: 46) has established a new model to be used as a guide for analyzing the logodrama of Nathalie Sarraute. His model, shown in figure 2, is more appropriate and more interesting than the former model created by Greimas. As we have said, in Sarraute's plays, action, plot, and story are absolutely absent. Her "characters" are only speakers, speakers without an identity who seem appropriately to be called interlocutors, or, more precisely, "inter-actants" ones who do nothing but talking during an interaction. So, to analyze her plays following Greimas's actantial model is absurd.

According to Rykner, the protagonists of Sarraute should be divided in two poles: the carrier (*porteur*) and the hunter (*chasseur*) of tropisms. The carrier of tropisms is the "character" who feels these tiny indescribable vibrations. The hunter of tropisms questions the normal usage of discourse and tries to understand these inexpressible inner movements. The minor "characters" (*actants secondaires*) are also divided in two groups: the supporters (*adjuvants*) who defend the carrier of tropisms, and the opponents (*opposants*), who help the hunter of tropisms make this war of words on the carrier.

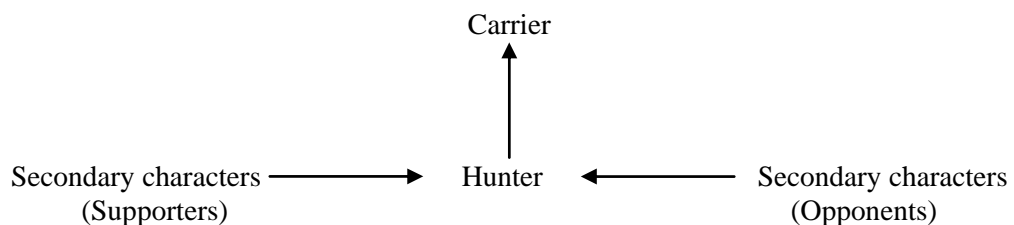


Figure 2: A new actantial model of Sarraute's logodrama, proposed by Rykner

This new model implies that Sarraute's logodrama is the hunting of tropisms. By applying this model, we can understand more easily the roles of all speakers in her plays. The actantial model of Rykner seems more justifiable than that of Greimas. I consider this diagram, suggested by Rykner, as the essential base. However, although Rykner's model is very interesting and creative, it seems to be based on a traditional concept of actions and characters. How can one understand the real theme of these "non-action" plays of Sarraute? I allow myself two remarks here. Firstly, this diagram still remains on the actantial level. Thus, the diagram does not adapt with dynamic interaction between the two poles of these interpersonages. Although the carrier does not speak or almost does not, "he" cannot *not* communicate. And "he" is still the principal interactant instigating the logodrama. Moreover, the dialectical exchanges between the two equals are essential. Without this interactive aspect, the transmissibility of tropisms cannot be clearly explained.

Secondly, on the supporter-opponent axis, the secondary interpersonages of Sarraute's theatre are also regarded as interactants, in a circle of friendly or family conversation. They can also facilitate and/or hinder the carrier. It appears necessary to add more dynamic and dialectical bonds between Sarraute's interpersonages. I propose a different model for her microscopic drama below.

Our new diagram underlines the trajectory of interaction, or, more precisely, *action parlée* 'speech act' (after Pavis 2002:11), between the various "characters." The hunter-carrier axis of tropisms is thus at the heart of the logodrama. And the supporter--opponent axis, comprising the secondary interpersonages, including the collective voices, is put on scene to enrich the polyphonic dialogue.

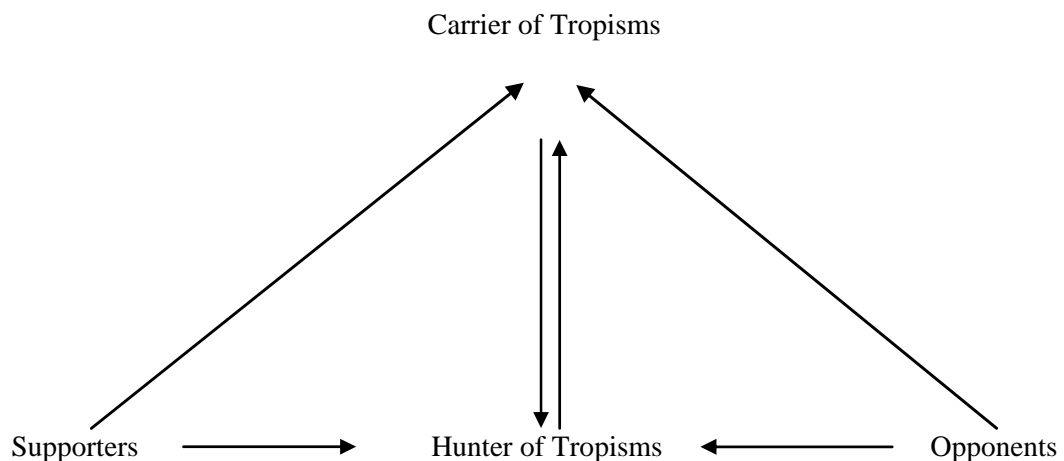


Figure 3: An interactantial model of Sarraute's plays

The hunter of tropisms is one who encourages, then impels, the carrier to speak. In general, the hunter wants everyone to understand, classify, categorize, fix, and name the inexpressible emotions that hide behind the small linguistic facts: silence, the too obvious lie, the irritating pronunciation or intonation, etc. But the tropism carrier cannot express everything nor explain it. Faced with an indefinable universe, "he" prefers to remain silent.

I draw two arrows from the secondary "characters" on the sides to the carrier of tropisms in order to emphasize that Sarraute's drama of logos is a kind of closed-in-itself conversation in a linguistic world that does not require the external world.

I also draw an arrow from the carrier to the hunter of tropisms in order to underline that there is an intersubjectivity or an interrelation between the interlocutors in this hunt for underground vibrations. In this new diagram, there is a bond between the secondary interpersonages and the carrier. So, on the supporter-opponent axis, it seems essential to add two arrows going up towards the carrier of tropisms to improve the circle of the closed conversation in this intimate microcosm. Consequently, the diagram forms a pyramid, which symbolically announces simultaneously both the interactive play of the interactants and the enigma of this myth of interiority.

On the hunter-carrier axis, one identifies two interactant protagonists. The carrier of tropisms grasps what is really going on in the inner world, but he does not know how to express. Thus, he engenders embarrassment, fear, anxiety, and agony in the other interpersonages. In contrast, the

hunter is hypersensitive because he can feel waves of invisible tropisms coming from the carrier but cannot stand this prelinguistic universe. He begins his impossible mission.

He seeks, detects, unearths, and names the underground vibration of the carrier and then of himself. The hunter also seems to gain something through his interaction with tropisms. That is because tropisms are contagious.

Then, the arrow which passes from the axis of the carrier towards the hunter seems necessary for us. Firstly, it is the carrier who transmits, with or without intention, tropisms to the hunter. The hunter tries to decipher the negligible tremors through the surface indices: dumbness, the obvious lie, ridiculous intonation, etc. But there is something that cannot be deciphered. This unknown or inexpressible universe threatens the hunter of tropisms. The two poles are catalyzed, and the two roles could be changed. I place the arrow there to emphasize this possibility and to indicate that a transmission of these imperceptible tropisms occurs. Lastly, this arrow symbolizes that there is, at the last, one other tropismic fable *before stage*.

Using this interactant diagram, we can understand and analyze the roles of all the interlocutors in Sarraute's logodrama more precisely. In theory, one could say that the logodrama lays particular emphasis on mechanisms of the polyphonic dialogue. And it is the sayings that determine the roles of these two groups of protagonists, or two groups of antagonists. The principal interactants represent in fact two differentiated tendencies.

The tabular presentation (Figure4) enables one to see that in the first five plays of Sarraute, there is no change of roles between the hunter and the carrier of tropisms. These plays share a common macrostructure. In each of them, the hunter of tropisms is very talkative, e.g. H. 1 of *The Silence*, while the carrier of tropism, like Jean-Pierre, says almost nothing.

All the Chatterers in each of her first five plays may thus be regarded as hunters of tropisms. On the other hand, all the silencers are carriers of tropisms.

Accordingly, the following “characters” may be identified as the protagonists:<sup>16</sup> Jean-Pierre in *The Silence*, F. in *Over There*, the Dubuit in *Isma*, and the son in *It’s Beautiful*.

Sarraute’s plays	Principal interactants		Secondary interactants
	Carrier of tropisms	Hunter of tropisms	
<b><i>LE SILENCE</i> (The Silence)</b>	Jean-Pierre	H. 1	F. 1, F. 2, F. 3, F. 4, H. 2, Background noise, VOICES, VARIOUS VOICES
<b><i>LE MENSONGE</i> (The Falsehood)</b>	Simone (Madeleine)	Pierre	JACQUES, JEANNE, JULIETTE, LUCIE, ROBERT, VINCENT, YVONNE, CHORUS, VARIOUS VOICES, VOICES
<b><i>ISMA</i></b>	(les Dubuit)	Elle et lui	F. 1, F. 2, F. 3, H. 1, H. 2, H. 3, Background noise, VOICES
<b><i>C’EST BEAU</i> (It’s Beautiful)</b>	le fils	Elle et lui	VOICES, VOICES OF M. DURANTON, VOICES OF MME DURANTON, VOICES OF THE DURANTON AND OF OTHERS, VARIOUS VOICES
<b><i>ELLE EST LA</i> (Over There)</b>	F.	H. 2	F., H. 1, H. 3
<b><i>POUR UN OUI OU POUR UN NON</i> (Just for Nothing)</b>	H. 2/H.1	H. 1/ H. 2	F., H. 3, EUX

Figure 4: Roles of the interactants in the six plays of Sarraute

<sup>16</sup> See the organization of Sarraute’s dialogue in Tirasait (2004: 158, 159, 161, 162, and 164.)

In *The Falsehood*, Simone, who plays the role of the liar, is the cause of all the madness in the play. The liar thus plays the role of the carrier of tropisms. I also place Madeleine's name in brackets to indicate that she is missing on stage but is regarded as the carrier of tropisms because her overly obvious lie evokes but negligible tremors among other characters. From the very first lines of this play, Pierre, the hunter, feels constrained and threatened. The other characters are also irritated (Sarraute 1996: 1403).

In the same way, in *Isma*, the Dubuit are never present on stage. But their pronunciation, in *Isma*, irritates Lui and Elle enormously. They, then, play the role of the carrier of tropisms. As for the secondary interactants, the other characters and the voices are there to enrich the polyphony in Sarraute's dialogue. Thus, I place them in the same secondary position as Rykner, without specifying their role as either supporter or opponent. Often, the secondary interactants help the hunter simplify, classify, and name the unknown vibrations. Sometimes, they help both the hunter and the carrier reach the commonplaces for compromising.

However, in her last play, *Just for Nothing* (1993), the two poles seem interchangeable. And the organization of the interpersonages is differentiated. At the beginning of the play, H. 1 goes to see H. 2 in order to ask why H. 2 tries to distance "himself" from H. 1. So one may say that H. 1 starts in the role of the hunter of tropisms. But by the end, "he" has become the carrier. On the other hand H. 2, the carrier, who is afraid of fixed form; and hates stereotypes, no longer knows how to express the negligible emotion and also uses the commonplace. "He" finally becomes the hunter of tropisms

H. 2: [. . .] Yes, for me, you see. . . the life is there . . . But what do you want?

H. 1: "the life is . . . simple and quiet there . . ." "the life is . . . simple and quiet there . . ." It is from Verlaine, isn't it?

H. 2: Yes, it is from Verlaine . . . But why?

H. 1: From Verlaine. It is that.

H. 2: I did not think of Verlaine ... I only said: the life is there, that's all [. . .]

H. 1: Good. Let's admit. You had not thought of it, but you will recognize that with the small wall, the roof, and the sky over the roof . . . one was there into full . . . (Sarraute 1996: 1509-1510).

Although H. 2 insists that he does not quote the words of Verlaine, H. 1 can benefit from this occasion to criticize "his" friend by showing that H. 2 must use stereotypes just as others do. In this way, H. 2 loses his position as poet and achieves the role of hunter by classifying and naming things.

H. 1: Eh well, I know. Everyone knows it. On one side, the camp where I am, where people fight, where they give all their forces . . . they create the life around them . . . not that which you contemplate by the window, but the "true one", that

which all live. And in  
addition . . . eh well . . .

H. 2: Eh well?

H. 1: Eh well . . .

H. 2: Eh well?

H. 1: No . . .

H. 2: Yes. I will say it for you . . .  
Eh well, on the other side  
there are the “failures”.  
(Sarraute 1996: 1512)

H. 2, who refuses conformism, is finally attracted by a common label to identify people who live outside of the fixed standards. And this banal word once again gives occasion for H. 1 to attack H. 2. Thus, one could say that in the last play, the two roles alternate.

One can also see that Sarraute’s plays present a new style of chorus, a kind of polyphony.<sup>17</sup> I note that the interest of the polyphonic organization of different voices in her logodrama does not, as in the conventional or ancient Greek drama, serve the purpose of telling the story or acting as a kind of prologue or epilogue. Often in her plays, these mysterious voices talk with the “characters.”

It seems that the polyphony in Sarraute is one of her means of avoiding a kind of monologue and underlining the interaction of discourse. For her, there is always interpersonal interaction during tropismic communication.<sup>18</sup> Generally, polyphony of

this type is regarded as the whole of counterparts which escape from the logical projection of the action and which can be structured in a melodic way, such as a chorus or the song of several voices. At the level of the characters, it corresponds to a community which is not carried any more by the stake of individual confrontation. In *It’s Beautiful*, for example, we find that there is a mixture between the anonymous voices and the named voices. The anonymous voices are there to give the public opinion or a comment on a subject. When the father does not understand the behavior of his son, for example, the voice announces that everyone, at his age, act like him.

LUI: [. . .] he does not like it . . . ,  
He is interested in the comic  
strips. . . in the television . . .

VOICE: Ah what do you want? It  
is of his time . . . it is normal, he is  
like everyone . . .  
(Sarraute 1996: 1461)

Contrary to the anonymous voices, the named voices, like the speech of our close relations, present a less impassive prospect, and the council seems more sympathetic.

VOICE OF THE DURANTON:  
Ah my poor friend, you are there  
. . . To ask for assistance . . . to go  
to consult healers, the bonesetters  
. . . to put questions to Aunt  
Melanie . . .  
(Sarraute 1996: 1464)

The voices of these invisible characters are not regarded as the spokespersons of the

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<sup>17</sup> For more details, see Tirasait (2004: 40-44).

<sup>18</sup> See explication of polyphonic roles in  
Tirasait (2004: 30-42).

author of tropism. Because they mainly announce the ideas of the community. The voices and the background noise of *The Silence*, for example, criticize the characters. But the comments given by these voices are sometimes debatable, because one does not see clearly if these voices are criticizing H. 1, who describes the beautiful landscape poetically, or Jean-Pierre, the silencer, who listens to the description without anything to say (Sarraute 1996: 1384).

From time to time, these anonymous voices answer the questions of the characters and speak with them. One does not know who these voices are nor where they come from. Normally, they come from beyond the stage. One hears the voices without ever seeing the speakers. Thus, they take the form of a mysterious intervention.

H.1: [. . .] Oh, forgiveness . . . You heard?

Various voices: -No-No, nothing .  
.. -Heard what?

H.1: A whistle . . . There was a  
whistle . . . I heard . . .  
(Sarraute 1996: 1388)

It seems these voices play the part of collective characters who give the general opinion of the community. This small fragment of the dialogue shows that H. 1 is the only one who hears Jean-Pierre's whistle or the only one who believes that he whistled. The other characters and the voices do not hear anything. It should also be noted that it is the dramatic author who distributes the turns of word among the characters, to organize the whole of the dialogue. From this point of view, one clearly finds the taste for the polyphony of Sarraute, the taste for the mixture, the

plurality, the hybridization, and the dynamic assembly of the multiple voices.

Generally, in Sarraute's writing, the discourse of the characters is circular, and ambiguous. In deconstructing the exchanges between her interpersonages, the ambiguity becomes the true interest of her logodrama. In *The Silence*, for example, instead of composing and configuring directly the image of her protagonist Jean-Pierre in the list of characters, Sarraute presents contradictory qualities through the sayings of others. So, we cannot be sure if Jean-Pierre, who remains silent during the friendly conversation, is good or bad. The secondary interpersonages seek possible causes and give labels to better explain the behavior of the silencer: the carrier of tropisms. But his image is truly contradictory.<sup>19</sup>

Generally, the characters of Sarraute are not only constructed but "deconstructed" during the dialogue. Sarraute never provided textual clues about any of the characters' personalities. All of this confirms that, for her, identity is always indefinable. Moreover, the real roles of her characters are as speakers. So their sayings are more important than their physical appearances and actions on stage.

In each of her plays, the mechanism of tropism often starts before the "characters" appear on stage. In *The Silence*, the opening scene jumps *in medias res*, with the encouragement of F.1 (Sarraute 1996: 1403). "She" wishes that H. 1 would continue to describe the beautiful landscape using common terms. Thus

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<sup>19</sup> See this game of polyphonic discourse in her play and the image of God/Satan in *Tirasait* (2004: 133).

before the stage action, tropism is already there. One can imagine that, while H. 1 is talking about what “he” admires during “his” journey, Jean-Pierre, the carrier of tropisms, who is one of his listeners, feels a tiny uneasiness. When he hears H.1 try to tell of the beautiful landscape, or, more clearly, of his aesthetic experience, which seems to him unrepeatable, he can feel the negligible inner tremor. The silencer does not seek to catalogue nor to name. He prefers to keep silent, to pass the underground movement, and to let the storyteller speak. His silence is almost imperceptible because the others listen attentively to H.1 and discuss things with “him.” But, on stage, H.1 cannot continue “his” story any more. “He” feels something hiding behind Jean-Pierre’s mute facade. “He” along with the others points out that Jean-Pierre is not saying any words. So, the investigation of tropisms starts abruptly. Nobody understands this silence or H. 1’s excessive reaction. And no one understands either how or why this small nothingness threatens H. 1.

In *The Falsehood*, one can feel the tropism of Madeleine who is never on stage. One does not know why she says the overly obvious lie which obstructs and irritates her friends. On stage, this tropismic fable, which always opens *in medias res*, begins with the search for this insignificant lie. It is Pierre who first detects Madeleine’s tiny lie. After ten pages, Simone begins her own lie. She says that during the war, she was in Seine-et-Oise (Sarraute 1996: 1409). But one of her friends tries to convince others that she was not there. So, a silly logodrama begins again.

In the same way, *Isma* starts “without tail, nor head,” with the complaint of Lui relating to research on word-labels for

better cataloguing and for naming what the Dubuit have done.

LUI : Denigration? De-ni-gra-tion.  
Yes, it is that: denigration.  
It was denigration, which we do there. You could have also said: scandal mongering. Or cancans. But you chose denigration. I understand... To tell the truth, I expected it. You also, you, isn’t this expected? We expected both it. Already since a moment . . .

(Sarraute 1996: 1423)

The phenomena of tropisms are perceptible on stage. It appears in the form of linguistic conflict between the two poles of the interpersonages. But before they appear on stage, there is the tropism of the Dubuit which is still irrelatable--that is, it cannot be told. The ridiculous termination in *Isma* is the symptom of their inner vibrations. One could imagine or feel the story of tropisms in the Dubuit. They are also hypersensitive. They feel some small discomfort when they hear terms ending in *-ism* that mark the ideologies or well-established theories of each century. One never knows the secret reasons that push them to pronounce them with the abnormal termination *-isma*.

In *It’s Beautiful*, the dialogue starts abruptly with Lui’s question about aesthetic judgment. But before he arrives on stage, one can imagine the tropism of the son. He prefers listening to music, admiring its beauty without criticism or value judgment. For him, the sounds of music are everything and sufficient to evoke aesthetic feelings. Because of this, he is threatened and plunged into



unrepeatable vibrations when his parents, wrongly translating his silence, think that he hates music and try to find common words to explain Beauty to him.

In *Over There*, the truth in F.'s head is never told on stage. This tropismic fable of the carrier remains aesthetically intractable. The play begins *in medias res* with the chattering of H. 2 with one of "his" friends. H. 2 feels unhappy when "he" sees that F. is in "her" office nearby. So, "she" can hear "his" statements. Moreover, H. 2 feels that "she" is against "him." "He" cannot continue "his" conversation and goes to talk with F. "He" tries to impel "her" to tell the truth about "her" ideas. In the scene, F.'s dumbness threatens H. 2, but H. 2's chattering distresses F.

In Sarraute's last play, *Just for Nothing*, the logodrama starts *in medias res*, as well. On stage, H. 1 seeks to understand the distance of H. 2; all seems explained. "He" tries to talk about "his" memory of a tiny discomfort when "he" hears H. 1's abnormal pronunciation "C'est biien . . . ça." This linguistic fact seems to "him" a pain-killer. Then, other insignificant ones are discussed throughout the plays. H. 1 reproaches H. 2 for using "les clichés," stereotypes, and commonplaces.<sup>20</sup> H. 2 can also find a reason for blaming H. 1 because H.1's quotation could signal ironic distance and scorn.

H. 1: But let us see, in the "poetic one," "poetry."

H. 2: My God! As of only one blow, all reappears . . . just with that, these quotation marks . . .

H. 1: Which quotation marks?

H. 2: Those which you always place around these words, when you pronounce them in front of me . . . "Poetry." "Poetic." This distance, this irony . . . this contempt . . .  
(Sarraute 1996: 1510)

On stage, there is a war of words between two buddies. The hunter of tropisms is someone who is wounded with a sharp edge while decoding, by deciphering the small facts of the speech which seem unimportant during such a friendly conversation. He seeks to be released. He raises questions, gives examples, and seeks an effective means to make the carrier of tropisms speak. However, the carrier remains quiet. Before the play on stage, the tropisms of H. 1 are still nondescript. H.1 asserts that he feels something, and he suffers a tiny agony because of H.2's distance. This tropismic vibration is hidden in his inner self. One could thus say that other tropismic fables which occur before the action on the stage are true tropisms in the logodrama of Sarraute. These imaginary fables, which still maintain abstraction and its inexpressible aspect, are not told on stage. True tropisms play in one's head, one's dreams, or one's imagination.

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<sup>20</sup> See also the analysis of roles of H. 1 and H. 2 in Tirasait (2004: 232-233).

## Conclusion

Nathalie Sarraute's logodrama presents us with a new mode of writing that liberates the traditional dramatic arts. Ever a pioneer,<sup>21</sup> Sarraute not only experimented with literary forms, styles, and substances but also touched upon problems wholly engaging the empirical "realistic" mode of perceptions. She explored the substrate of selfhood, the residue of a primordial state preceding any word.

The logodrama of Sarraute subsidizes the interaction and sets all the dramatic form in crises: the crisis of the plot, the crisis of the action, the crisis of the character, and the crisis of the dialogue. With neither plot nor action, it is through the effect of the speech that the dramatic action forms and establishes the conflict on stage. At the level of appearance, the characters are simply in touch with the others in mind of a friendly and family conversation. But at the level of tropisms, something annoying, threatening, and frightening begins to occur, either because certain words were pronounced or because they remain in silence.

Furthermore, the human intersubjectivity underlying in her works remains a controversy of our time. On this basis, Sarraute is considered not only a playwright; she is called a poet, an essayist, a critic, and a true philosopher (Piatier 1983: 24). She is revered as a philosopher of language who questions the ability of language to record the inner experience of an ever-elusive self. Against the current of the times, when

modern psychoanalysis and the sciences share in the interpretation and transformation of relations between man and the world, Sarraute refused the authoritative speech of the specialists. Thus, Sarraute's interpersonages are relatively identifiable in the field of tropisms: the carrier or the hunter of tropisms, without returning to the socio-cultural reference of the time. The interior and prelinguistic tremors in the writing of tropisms are thus possible in all languages and cultures.

With regard to her reflexions on the bond between speech and the inexpressible, many critics compare the writings of Sarraute with that of great thinkers, and to clarify her writings, they often quote the thought of Husserl (Rykner 2000:138-139) and Bergson (Rykner 2002:30) or the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty about the use of common language (Boué 1997: 165-167; and Gosselin-Noat 2000: 149-150). One can say that, in the logodrama of Sarraute, the polyphonic dialogue questions all generally accepted ideas and well-established values and that the interior and imperceptible vibrations which become the live substance of the literary works are, indeed, at the center of the controversies of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. In fact, her drama of logos reminds us of Kant's proposition: keeping silent before the "Noumena," and of Wittgenstein's famous comment on the indescribable in his *Tractatus* (1969): "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence." Or vice versa, these historical controversies in philosophy make us realize the importance of Sarraute's microscopic drama. Therefore, it is preferable to study her works more deeply in the philosophical dimension in order to decipher her writing of mysterious tropisms.

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<sup>21</sup> *Tropismes*, started in 1932, was first published in 1939.

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