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Source: *Computers and the Humanities*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Mar., 1973), pp. 195-198

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30199556>

Accessed: 13/11/2014 14:57

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# Samuel Beckett's *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition

J. M. Coetzee

In 1969 Samuel Beckett published a short book, *Sans*; his English translation, *Lessness*, appeared the following year.<sup>1</sup> *Lessness* takes up a continuing story where Beckett's previous short fictions *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965) and *Ping* (1966) left off. In these works first two naked bodies, then only one, lie in a tomb-like, womb-like structure where the light waxes and wanes inexplicably and an unspecified event, "ping," occurs irregularly. In *Lessness* the structure has fallen into ruin, exposing the naked figure to the elements. The story line is pretty minimal, and so are the texts: *Imagination Dead Imagine* about 1,100 words, *Ping* about 1,000, *Lessness* about 1,500. *Imagination Dead Imagine* is conventional though elliptic in its syntax; *Ping* and *Lessness* mark a stylistic departure. The remarks that follow concern the structure of *Lessness* but may be taken over, with minor modifications, to *Ping*.

*Lessness* displays features not often encountered in connected discourse. The most notable is finiteness: whereas normal discourse draws upon a word-stock which in any theorizing must be treated as infinite, *Lessness* clearly signals that its word-stock is finite. The signal is this: whereas in normal discourse each extension of the length of the text adds, though more and more slowly, to the number of different lexical items called on (the phenomenon described in the so-called Zipf-Mandelbrot Law), *Lessness* calls on 166 lexical items in its first half and not a single new one in its second half; furthermore, it displays (flaunts?) a compositional procedure which would allow it to extend its length almost infinitely without drawing on new items. Words 770-1,538 of the text turn out to be nothing but words 1-769 in a new order. It is this fact which suggests a mathematical approach to the text, an approach not only via the mathematics of indeterminacy, namely probability theory, which we use to compare properties of an infinite set (a language) with those of a finite subset (a text in that language), but also via combinatorial mathematics. A mathematical approach of some kind is certainly invited by a work which, like the combinatorial poems of Emmett Williams, overlays natural syntax with its own syntax of combination, thereby pushing into the foreground its rule-governedness and presenting itself as linguistic game rather than linguistic expression.

Here, first of all, is a taste of *Lessness*. I quote paragraphs 1 and 22 entire.

Ruins true refuge long last towards which so many false time out of mind. All sides  
endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir. Grey face two pale blue little body  
heart beating only upright. Blacked out fallen open four walls over backwards true  
refuge issueless.

<sup>1</sup> *Lessness*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1970.

Slow black with ruin true refuge four walls over backwards no sound. Earth sky as one all sides endlessness little body only upright. One step more one alone in the sand no hold he will make it. Ash grey little body only upright heart beating face to endlessness. Light refuge sheer white blank planes all gone from mind. All sides endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir.

We notice two kinds of repetition: of entire sentences (e.g., sentence 2 of paragraph 1, sentence 6 of paragraph 22), and of phrases—"true refuge," "little body," etc. Repetition is the basic principle of construction in *Lessness*.

*Repetition of sentences.* *Lessness* consists of 120 sentences, the second 60 repeating the first 60 in a new order. Is there a rule behind this re-ordering or is it random? We can give a mathematical answer to the question if we reformulate it in this way: is there enough information in the order of the sentences (as distinct from their internal structure or meaning) to specify a determinate relation between the first ordering and the second? To measure the degree of relation we use the Spearman rank correlation coefficient. We use the value computed to test the hypothesis that there is no relation between the orderings, and discover that the hypothesis cannot be dismissed with any acceptable degree of certainty.<sup>2</sup> Thus we infer that either the second 60 sentences are an effectively random re-ordering of the first 60, or there is a relation between the orderings discoverable only at a semantic level or possibly at the level of the internal structures of the sentences.

*Repetition of phrases.* The unit of combination in *Lessness* is not the word but the phrase of one or more words. The rudimentary, nominalized syntax of the work allows these phrases to be used invariantly (i.e., without morphological or other change) and in almost any position in the sentence. To isolate the phrasal vocabulary, we proceed as follows. Let

$$w_1, w_2, \dots, w_{i-1}, w_i, \dots, w_j, w_{j+1}, \dots, w_n$$

stand for a sequence of  $n$  words constituting one sentence of a set of sentences  $S$ . Then we call the subsequence  $(w_i, \dots, w_j)$  a *phrase* of  $S$  if it (a) does not have the same left-hand neighbor  $w_{i-1}$  every time it occurs (unless  $i=1$ ) and (b) does not have the same right-hand neighbor  $w_{j+1}$  every time it occurs (unless  $j=n$ ). We now use an algorithm adapted from constituent analysis to segment the text and isolate the phrases. The algorithm has several alternative forms. (1) We can begin with the single word as first approximation to the phrase and proceed to test left- and right-hand neighbors, incorporating invariant neighbors into the phrase in a series of further approximations until the phrase attains its full size with variant neighbors. Thus, for example, *endless* occurs in two environments, *flatness endless little* and *flatness endless*—(sentence end); *flatness endless*, the second approximation, occurs in the environments —*flatness endless little* and *ruins flatness endless*—; therefore we isolate *flatness endless* as a phrase. (2) Alternatively, we can begin with the full sentence as our first approximation and, by a process of testing and discarding left- and right-most members, eventually contract the sequence to a phrase. However, neither (1) nor (2) is wholly satisfactory: (1) does not produce a minimal segmentation (i.e., a segmentation into the smallest possible number of phrases) because it does not take account of the fact that the same word can occur twice in a phrase (e.g., *old love new love*) or in different phrases (e.g., *all calm, calm eye*), while (2) is too time-consuming. A preferable form of the algorithm is therefore a modification of (1) in which we make an initial segmentation of the text by hand (and ear and eye) and use these segments as first approximations. The task is not difficult, since for the most part phrase boundaries coincide with rhythmic boundaries; this is the

<sup>2</sup> The value of the coefficient is 0.1043, with 58 degrees of freedom. This value is non-significant even at a 10 percent level of probability.

most “natural” feature of *Lessness*, one that does much to save it from aridity. Using the algorithm we then obtain an unambiguous segmentation of the text into 106 different phrases varying in length from 1 to 12 words and occurring, on an average, 5.7 times each. Since the segmentation of a long stretch of normal connected discourse rarely produces a phrase of more than one word, the reduction of *Lessness* to so small a number of phrases shows clearly that the phrase rather than the word is its basic unit.

Having achieved a segmentation, we can proceed to describe further relations and regularities among phrases and sentences at a formal level.

Rule I. *If  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  are any two phrases, there exists a phrase  $P_3$  such that  $P_1$  and  $P_3$  co-occur in some sentence  $S_i$  and  $P_2$  and  $P_3$  co-occur in some sentence  $S_j$ .*

From Rule I it follows that *Lessness* contains no closed subsets of phrases (i.e., sets of phrases such that if any one member occurs in a given sentence then all the other members occur there too), and hence no closed subsets of phrases with nothing in common with the rest of the text. Every phrase is at most only one jump from every other phrase, so that we can interpret Rule I as stating that *Lessness* is a single semantic unit without independent subunits.

Rule II. *Given any sentence  $S_1$ , there exist at most three other sentences  $S_2$ ,  $S_3$ , and  $S_4$  such that  $S_1$  is contained in the union of  $S_2$ ,  $S_3$ , and  $S_4$ .* (This rule does not hold for sentences with unique phrases or for sentence 52 and its twin.)

The union of  $S_2$ ,  $S_3$ , and  $S_4$  is the set of all phrases that belong to any of these sentences. Rule II states that (with the exceptions noted) any sentence can be reconstituted from the parts of at most three other sentences (in most cases only two are needed), that is, it restates in more precise terms the intuition we have, reading *Lessness*, that the sentences grow out of each other.

While there are no closed subsets of phrases (Rule I), a given phrase may be bonded more closely with certain phrases than with others. Thus we have the phenomenon of clustering: certain groups of phrases tend to recur within sentences, as in the following case (| is a phrase boundary marker: the marker after “as” in sentence 19 shows that the algorithm often shifts markers into syntactically unnatural positions to minimize the number of phrases):

- 19. Little body | same grey as | the earth | sky | ruins | only upright.
- 26. No sound | not a breath | same grey | all sides | earth | sky | body | ruins.
- 44. Flatness endless | little body | only upright | same grey | all sides | earth | sky | body | ruins.

Sentences 19 and 44 share 4 phrases (plus 2 close variants). Sentences 26 and 44 share 6 phrases. If we extend our scan outward, we find that sentences 19 and 42 share 3 phrases, sentences 42 and 18 share 2 phrases, sentences 18 and 8 share 3 phrases, and so forth. The implication is clear, and is in fact a consequence of Rule I: we can close the ring over the entire text by simply following any string of non-null intersections.

The third unit of structure is the paragraph. The following results, in summary, hold for the paragraph:

1. A chi-square test shows that there is no statistical reason for rejecting the hypothesis that phrases are distributed randomly over paragraphs.
2. Cases are very rare of a given paragraph not having at least one phrase in common with every other paragraph in the same half of the work (6 out of 132).
3. If we follow clusters of 2, 3, 4, . . . phrases across the 24 paragraphs, we find that they do not fall into any of such elementary patterns as, for example, 1010 . . . (occurrence in every second paragraph), 1001001 . . . (occurrence in every third paragraph), 11001100 . . . , etc. This is partly a consequence of Rule I, which says that no phrase clusters form closed subsets, partly a reflection of (1) above.

These results show that the paragraph is not a different *kind* of structural element from

the sentence, for example a hierarchically higher element: at the level of combinatorial rules (though not necessarily at the level of the semantic structure of the text as discourse) it is nothing but a sequence of sentences.

*Interpretation.* Beckett's most recent fictions, the *Residua*, of which *Lessness* is one, portray an existence whose conditions are stripped further and further down. The blank walls and white light of the earlier tomb/womb existence are "all gone from mind" and perhaps only after all "figments." What is left is "ruins true refuge," sky and sand extending endlessly and a still body. The alternating darkness and light, or "ping" and silence, of the previous existence are replaced by day and night, the only events to differentiate a world of stasis. But this pair as well, "figment dawn dispeller of figments and the other called dusk" (the last sentence of the book), is suspected of being not events *out there* but events belonging to a third level of imagining consciousness. The first level of this consciousness contains a past womb-existence, a set of figments. The second level contains the figments of the new fiction *Lessness* that the consciousness now inhabits: ruins, sand, body, etc. The third level contains only the pair dawn-dusk, each of which eventually cancels both the other and the figments for which the other is responsible. In view of Beckett's reliance on contrasted pairs as formal starting-points to other works (Molloy-Moran in *Molloy*, the mirror-pair Sam-Watt in *Watt*), I suspect we are not far wrong in reading the first half of *Lessness* as figments of day and the second half as figments of night, or vice versa. Each set is simply a re-arrangement of the other, neither being primary. In the end the two halves of the book reciprocally cancel each other, and we are left with a fiction of net zero on our hands, or rather with the obliterated traces of a consciousness elaborating and dismissing its own inventions.

It is here that our formal analysis comes to have some critical use. We have shown that there are no determinate principles of ordering among phrases, sentences, or paragraphs, yet that all are interdependent and connected. There is thus no principle of hierarchy or priority among the components of the work. The following then seem to be legitimate inferences. (1) There are millions of other possible re-orderings of these figments (fragments) of day/night and nothing to indicate that any one is more or less valid as fiction than the ordering published. (2) Since any fragment can combine with any other fragment, and since the 106 phrasal components are not only formal elements but also pretty irreducible elements of meaning, composition is a combinatorial game played with creations of what I have called the second level of the imagining consciousness—a level whose creations are finally dismissed as figments—and the upshot of the game is nothing more than what Sam, in *Watt*, called "a pillow of old words." (3) The residue of the fiction is then *not* the final disposition of the fragments but the motions of the consciousness that disposes them according to the rules we have traced, and no doubt to others we have failed to trace. The subject of *Lessness* is the plight of consciousness in a void, compelled to reflect on itself, capable of doing so only by splitting itself and recombining the fragments in wholes which are never greater than the sums of their parts. This endless enterprise of splitting and recombining is language, and it offers not the promise of the charm, the ever-awaited magical combination that will bring wealth or salvation, but the solace of the game, the killing of time.

*A note on programming.* After the initial segmentation of the text, and aside from the various statistical tests, all the procedures involved in the computer-assisted analysis of *Lessness* are based on scans of one kind of another of a 60 x 106 matrix of sentence numbers against phrase numbers. This matrix, the 1 x 60 table that tells us how the sentences are re-ordered in the second half of the work, and the 2 x 12 table that tells us where paragraph breaks occur, constitute the data of our analysis. The operation that consumes most machine time is the verification of Rule II, where we test that each sentence is contained in the union of at most three others. The FORTRAN programming is quite elementary. Total running time on a Univac 1106 is about 30 minutes.