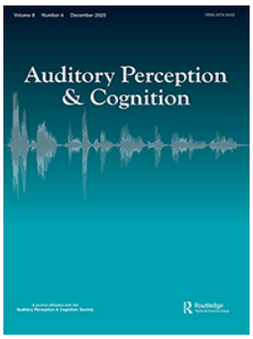

Auditory Perception & Cognition

ISSN: 2574-2442 (Print) 2574-2450 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpac20

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To cite this article: Michael Hannan (16 Feb 2026): Writing the Inner Voice: Kazuo Ishiguro, Irony, and Dialogic Inner Speech, Auditory Perception & Cognition, DOI: 10.1080/25742442.2026.2631351

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25742442.2026.2631351

AUDITORY PERCEPTION & COGNITION
https://doi.org/10.1080/25742442.2026.2631351

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Writing the Inner Voice: Kazuo Ishiguro, Irony, and Dialogic Inner Speech

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ABSTRACT

While the post-1990s cognitive "turn" in the humanities has produced many models for understanding literary texts, it has occurred amid the broader decline of literary formalism, which prioritizes a text's formal qualities. Consequently, technical questions of *how* literary narratives represent inner voices remain underexplored. My report addresses this through Kazuo Ishiguro's novels, which feature first-person narrators telling their stories as extended inner monologues. The central tension – the narrator recounting key recollections from his/her life, while also visibly avoiding that life's more painful episodes – opens these monologues to interpretation as examples of inner speech. Using Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day, I investigate the especial importance of dramatic irony in this tension, and how it signifies aspects of ironic process theory. I posit that dramatic irony and ironic process theory highlight a dialogic pair of voices operating in the narrator's mind, which I label the "expanded" and "condensed" voices. I argue that reading Ishiguro's novel from this perspective renders it a nuanced study in how humans experience dialogic inner speech. Such an interpretation advocates for further formalist approaches in cognitive literary studies while offering a blueprint for how scientific ideas around inner voices operate within literary frameworks.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 August 2025
Accepted 6 February 2026

KEYWORDS
Kazuo Ishiguro; irony; ironic process theory; dialogic inner speech; formalism

Introduction

The question of how literary forms portray inner speech is underexplored in cognitive poetics. The post-1990s "cognitive turn" in the humanities has shed light on the psychological and neuroscientific elements of literary texts. This turn, however, has occurred during a period in which formalism – a branch of theory which prioritizes form and structure "not as *a* but as *the* constitutive feature of the literary text" (Cohen, 2017) – has largely fallen out of critical favor. As a result, technical questions of *how* literary storytelling represents cognitive ideas – including inner speech – remain largely unanswered.

In addressing this, we might turn to Kazuo Ishiguro, the 2017 Nobel Laureate in Literature, whose emphasis on first-person narration in his work makes it a promising site for exploring how inner speech functions in literary texts. Most of Ishiguro's novels

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are built on a recurring premise: an elderly narrator telling their life story to some unnamed addressee, while visibly trying to avoid recounting that life's more painful episodes. Among Ishiguro's vehicles for this dynamic are a mother coming to terms with her daughter's suicide (*A Pale View of Hills*); an artist re-thinking his involvement in the Japanese war effort of the 1940s (*An Artist of the Floating World*); and a clone in an alternate, dystopian Britain – in which clones are bred as organ donors – struggling to establish the significance of her brutally short existence (*Never Let Me Go*). Typically, as each novel progresses, the narrator's stated (and often self-glorifying) account is increasingly undermined by various oddities and inconsistencies in their story, gradually making plain that some alternative, more tragic version of events is closer to the truth.

In cognitive terms, this dynamic presents as a conflict between two inner voices. The narration is one of these voices: the first-person "I" means Ishiguro's narrators' accounts always "[work] at least in part as internal dialogue" (Westerman, 2004, p. 159). The notion of dialog points toward a second, unspoken voice, embodied in the alternative, tragic version of events referred to only obliquely by the narrator, yet which intrudes on their narrative with increasing frequency as the story progresses.

Key to representing this duality, I posit, is Ishiguro's use of dramatic irony. Using *The Remains of the Day* – perhaps Ishiguro's best-known novel – as a case study, I close read several instances of Ishiguro's irony, drawing attention to how they parallel key elements of Daniel Wegner's ironic process theory of thought suppression, including the exceptional mental state, naked suppression, and unfocused self-distraction. I contend that reading Ishiguro's irony in conjunction with ironic process theory reveals a dialogic pair of inner voices operating in the narrator's mind, which, borrowing from the work of Charles Fernyhough (2004) in this area, I label the "expanded" and "condensed" inner voices. I argue that the dramatic irony/ironic process theory lens, by highlighting this dialogic inner voice in Ishiguro's work, offers a complex experiential depiction of how human beings "hear" inner speech. Such a depiction, I assert, in turn advocates for the intersection of psychology and formalism as a prism for illuminating the ways that literary and artistic works reflect the principles of cognitive science.

Literary Formalism and the Cognitive Turn

The cognitive turn in the humanities continues, as Alan Richardson (2006) says, "to bring literary studies into dialogue with the new sciences of mind and brain" through "critical engagement with the best contemporary work being produced in leading university departments of psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind." This interdisciplinary cross-pollination has, Richardson acknowledges, broken new ground in developing "models for understanding subjectivity, agency, consciousness, language, and psychosocial development" (p. 544). Included in such models are new frameworks of understanding inner speech in both literary studies and cognitive science, including Lisa Zunshine's Theory of Mind (Zunshine, 2006); Alan Palmer's twin concepts of intra- and intermental thinking (Palmer, 2010); and Fernyhough's Bakhtinian view of inner voices as a dialogic phenomenon (Fernyhough, 1996, 2004, 2016).

This cognitive turn has occurred amid a wider decline in formalist approaches to literary analysis. A broad critical church which rose to prominence in the Anglo-American academy during the mid-twentieth century, the different approaches to literary

formalism are united by an emphasis on "the specific, intrinsic characteristics of a literary work, which [requires] analysis 'in its own terms' before any other kind of discussion, and especially social or ideological analysis, [is] relevant or even possible" (Williams, 2015, p. 94). A formalist interpretation highlights a literary text's formal and structural qualities through close reading, arguably formalism's most significant contribution to literary studies, a method of critical scrutiny that contemporary literary critics continue to use to call "attention to such matters as grammar, syntax, vocabulary, rhetorical tropes, prosody (. . .), literary allusion and other forms of intertextuality" in literary works (Byron, 2021). Among these and similar devices, irony is often held in particularly high regard in formalist circles, given its ability to unite and interpret the many internal tensions of a literary work, or what Cleanth Brooks (Brooks, 1949/1962) calls "the pressures of a context" (p. 732).

While traditional formalism began to lose traction in university English departments in the 1970s, more recent revivals – like strategic formalism (Levine, 2006) and new formalism (Levinson, 2007; Thiele & Tredennick, 2013) – have sought to reconcile questions of form with contemporary concerns around historical and social context. Some cognitive humanists have contributed to this emerging tradition, with Karin Kukkonen (2013) and Alexandra Effe (2020) exploring how literary forms and structures might embody cognitive processes. Few scholars, however, have extended their focus specifically to ideas of inner speech.

Inner Voices and White Bears: Ishiguro, Dramatic Irony, and Ironic Process Theory

Ishiguro's writing represents fertile ground for addressing this gap. In an interview early in his career, he characterizes his artistic intent to "stick with the first person, and develop the whole business about following somebody's thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves" (Mason & Ishiguro, 1989, p. 347). *The Remains of the Day*, in fulfilling that intention, follows the inner monolog of Stevens, an aging butler at a 1950s English country house, as he drives across England to visit Miss Kenton, a former employee. As the journey progresses, Stevens' stream of consciousness becomes less about the present, and increasingly preoccupied with memories of his professional heyday in the 1920s and 1930s as butler to Lord Darlington, one of the most prominent aristocrats of the era. Many of Stevens' memories center on past glories and are intended to showcase his "greatness" – an obsession with which has shaped his life and career – as it existed at his professional peak. Yet these recollections frequently perform the opposite function, inadvertently revealing significant moral blind spots in Lord Darlington and a disturbing level of repression in Stevens himself. This, the novel's central tension, unfolds as a clash between the narrator's stream of consciousness and some silent, dissenting other voice. Or, as Ishiguro puts it, as an inner dialog between "one side of the person demanding a certain honesty, and the other side demanding some kind of preservation from the truth" (Kelman & Ishiguro, 2008, p. 45).

Ishiguro's language exemplifies the idea that inner speech, rather than being a single monolog, is instead "a dialogic interplay between alternate perspectives on reality" (Fernyhough, 2004, p. 55). Fernyhough's multi-level framework for the development of inner speech offers a lexicon for labeling the competing voices in Stevens' narrative. The

third of these four stages, expanded inner speech, is a form of inner speech that is "fully internalised and covert," but in which "the give-and-take of normal conversation is still manifested internally as the process of talking silently to oneself" (Fernyhough, 2004, p. 55). Such qualities parallel those of Stevens' narrative voice: internal, yet fully articulated, and mimicking the social and linguistic patterns of regular conversation. We might therefore call this his *expanded inner voice*. By contrast, the fourth stage – condensed inner speech – "retains few if any of the accoutrements of external language" (Fernyhough, 2004, p. 55), and "the phonological qualities of the internalized speech are attenuated" (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015, p. 933). Vygotsky's (1934/1987) phrase for this state – "thinking in pure meanings" (p. 280) – seems apt to describe a form of inner speech that, like the silent second voice in Stevens' narrative, transcends phonetics. Accordingly, we might refer to the second voice as Stevens' *condensed inner voice*.[1]

If this condensed inner voice is by definition silent and non-phonetic, how might we go about perceiving it? The answer lies in Ishiguro's distinctive use of irony. Many definitions of irony frame it as a form of double-coded rhetoric: Margaret A. Rose (1993) explains it as "a code containing at least two messages, one of which is the concealed message of the ironist to an 'initiated' audience, and the other the more readily perceived but 'ironically meant' message of the code" (p. 87). In literature, such double-coding often manifests as dramatic irony, or a "contrast between a narrator's view of the fictional world and the divergent state of affairs which the reader can grasp" (Nünning, 1997, p. 87). Dramatic irony is part of the structural backbone of *The Remains of the Day*, particularly in the aforementioned gap between the qualities of "greatness" Stevens attributes to his memories and the more unsettling behavior readers perceive. Yet connected to this gap is another, inherently psychological kind of irony, exemplified by Stevens' mind's tendency to return, continually and unwittingly, to precisely the thoughts he seemingly would most like to avoid. This pattern also happens to be the defining characteristic of ironic process theory, a type of thought suppression also known as the "White Bear theory." The name originates from a quote often attributed to Dostoyevsky (1863/1997): "Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute" (p. 49). This bears considerable resemblance to the condition plaguing Stevens throughout *The Remains of the Day*. He constantly chastises himself for "becoming preoccupied" with certain memories, telling himself it is "foolish" to become "unduly diverted" by events long in the past (Ishiguro, 1993, p. 67). Yet these memories – of his master's Nazi sympathies, his lost chance at love with Miss Kenton, reminders of his own mortality – constantly resurface nonetheless.

The Condensed Inner Voice in The Remains of the Day

Through Ishiguro's fusion of dramatic irony with aspects of ironic process theory, Stevens' narrative assumes a double-coding that allows his condensed inner voice to emerge in dialog with his expanded inner voice. One aspect of ironic process theory that plays a crucial role in this double-coding is the exceptional mental state, demonstrated most visibly in "Day Three – Morning," in which Stevens, in the midst of his motoring journey, passes through a village called Mursden. The name of the village reminds him of a silver polish manufacturer formerly based there; the silver polish triggers

a reminiscence on the "position of central importance [silver polishing] by and large maintains" in his profession (Ishiguro, 1993, p. 133). This leads, in turn, to a recollection of "numerous occasions when the silver at Darlington Hall had a pleasing effect upon observers" (p. 134) which then reminds Stevens of a time when the state of Darlington Hall's silver put Lord Darlington's guests "into a quite different frame of mind altogether" during a summit with the Nazi ambassador, Herr Ribbentrop (p. 135). Thus, the silver's quality, Stevens insists, "made a small, but significant contribution towards the easing of relations between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop that evening" (p. 136). The contribution validates, in Stevens' mind, the significance of his own small contribution toward greater world affairs. In this section, over approximately two and a half pages, Stevens' mind moves across five different subjects. So far, his expanded inner voice demonstrates the "rapidly changing stream of consciousness" that Daniel Wegner (1994), originator of ironic process theory, considers typical of most peoples' train of thought (p. 23). Such trains usually lead "from one thought to the next by virtue of associative links" (p. 51).

This changes drastically in the next two and a half pages, during which Stevens, prompted by the Ribbentrop memory, fixates upon a single topic: denying Lord Darlington's Nazi sympathies. One passage offers a particularly vehement example:

> It needs to be said too what salacious nonsense it is to claim that Lord Darlington was anti-Semitic (. . .) Such claims can only arise from complete ignorance of the sort of gentleman his lordship was. Lord Darlington came to abhor anti-Semitism; I heard him express his disgust on several separate occasions when confronted with anti-Semitic sentiments. And the allegation that his lordship never allowed Jewish people to enter the house or any Jewish staff to be employed is utterly unfounded. (Ishiguro, 1993, p. 137)

Part of a longer diatribe, this 79-word excerpt alone features five rebuttals/protests, and an array of emotionally loaded nouns, adjectives, verbs, and intensifiers, in service of defending Lord Darlington. As a pattern, this could be seen to extend to multiple conceptual frameworks associated with mind wandering, from several of the five frequent phenomena of Descriptive Experience Sampling (Heavey & Hurlburt, 2008; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006) to task-unrelated thought (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006, 2015) and mental time-travel (Schacter et al., 2007; Tulving, 2002). Most significant for this analysis, however, is the way these denials work as cues for irony: Stevens' over-defensiveness inadvertently signals his own doubts about his former master. Psychologically, the repetition of these cues also holds Stevens' mind in an exceptional mental state. For Wegner, the exceptional mental state is a frame of mind in which the ever-moving stream of consciousness halts upon "a single thought or 'fixed idea'" stuck in our conscious window (Wegner, 1994, p. 23) or "a trance of sorts that is clearly a departure from normal consciousness" (pp. 23–24). We might well interpret Stevens' fixation on Lord Darlington here as such a state.

Why is Stevens caught in an exceptional mental state? Wegner argues that these states arise because, even though "it may seem that the thought itself is what we don't want, actually it is the consequence of the thought we are concerned about, and the thought blocks our further thinking as a way of avoiding that consequence" (Wegner, 1994, p. 27). The consequence, here, being Stevens' guilt and shame over having given his service to someone with antisemitic tendencies. If we take the ironies in this excerpt to signify an

exceptional mental state, we can accordingly perceive two contradictory voices speaking at once: one trying to justify Stevens' former master's actions and another one gesturing toward Stevens' feelings of culpability in those actions.

This dialog comes into even clearer focus if we examine the passage through a further aspect of ironic process theory that Wegner calls "'naked' suppression" (p. 60). To nakedly suppress thoughts of a white bear, in Wegner's opinion, would involve thinking a thought like "I'd rather not think of a white bear." As a result, "the suppression metathought ('I'd rather not think of a white bear') is here, but the thought ('white bear') is here too. As long as we continue to hold the metathought in the conscious window, the thought will be there" (p. 56). From this perspective, Stevens' attempted exoneration of Lord Darlington is not only an exceptional mental state but also naked suppression. The thought "what salacious nonsense it is to claim that Lord Darlington was anti-Semitic" is here, but the thought "Lord Darlington was anti-Semitic" is here too (Ishiguro, 1993, p. 137). The thought "his lordship never allowed Jewish people to enter the house or any Jewish staff to be employed is utterly unfounded" is here, but "his lordship never allowed Jewish people to enter the house or any Jewish staff to be employed" is here too (p. 137). The resultant dramatic irony not only continues the dialog between voices revealed by the exceptional mental state but also shows that these voices can speak simultaneously, even within a single sentence.

The two voices continue to work in tandem even after Stevens attempts to change the subject. "But I drift," he says. "I was in fact discussing the silver, and how Lord Halifax had been suitably impressed on the evening of his meeting with Herr Ribbentrop at Darlington Hall" (p. 138). The following pages see something of a resumption of the free association of Stevens' thoughts: after briefly returning to the silver, his mind runs through four interrelated topics in as many pages, including his alleged satisfaction at having "had the privilege of practicing one's profession at the very fulcrum of great affairs" (p. 139); his confidence that he still has "many more years of service" ahead of him; his attendant concern about the "number of small errors" in his recent work (p. 139); an anecdote about recently giving Mr. Farraday (his current employer) the wrong fork by mistake (pp. 139–140); and his wish for Miss Kenton to return to Darlington Hall (pp. 140–141). This flow of thoughts in the expanded inner voice reflects Wegner's ideas about self-distraction as a solution for ridding ourselves of unwanted thoughts. After failed attempts at naked suppression, Wegner tells us, it is common for "I will not think of X" – or "I will not think of a white bear" – to turn into "I will think of Y" (Wegner, 1994, p. 60). Such an effort, Wegner claims, requires an active effort to think about one's own thinking (p. 53), something we see Stevens do when he acknowledges the "drift" of his thoughts and moves them onto different tracks (Ishiguro, 1993, p. 138).

Yet one of the dangers of self-distraction, Wegner warns, is *unfocused* self-distraction. This occurs when people "seek one distracter after another in the forlorn hope that something will finally grab their attention and wrest it away from the thought they abhor." And, "whenever one distracter fails for an instant, and the unwanted thought surfaces, the person typically *changes* to a new distracter" (Wegner, 1994, p. 65). Examining the flow of Stevens' thoughts from this perspective leads us to pay closer attention to his many elliptical references to "members of our profession who would have it that it ultimately makes no difference what sort of employer one serves" (Ishiguro, 1993, p. 138); self-chastisements that he, Stevens, "should not be looking back to the past

so much"; and determinations "to keep one's attention focused on the present" (p. 139). In the context of unfocused self-distraction, these references are easily interpreted as signifiers for dramatic irony: Stevens' attempts to dwell on other subjects' gesture to precisely the memories and emotions he is trying to avoid. Resultantly, irony again becomes a mechanism for revealing an underlying impulse – a condensed inner voice – lingering on questions of Lord Darlington's antisemitism even as the expanded inner voice tries to think about something else. In this instance, such efforts end with a further, cosmic irony, or a disparity between intention and outcome: Stevens' attempts to think about virtually anything else lead, once again, back to thoughts of Lord Darlington. "I should perhaps return a moment," begins "Day Three: Evening," "to the question of his Lordship's attitude to Jewish persons" (p. 145). So begins an unsettling account of Lord Darlington's dismissal of two Jewish maids.

Conclusion

It seems clear that the irony in *The Remains of the Day* – and, by extension, the rest of Ishiguro's oeuvre – has a wider cognitive significance. Ishiguro's consistent use of dramatic irony, and its entwinement with elements of ironic process theory like the exceptional mental state, naked suppression, and unfocused self-distraction, embeds a double-coded quality into Stevens' narrative. This double-coding turns Stevens' inner monolog into an inner dialog between two voices: an expanded inner voice recounting key recollections from his life, and a condensed inner voice demanding a reckoning with the more troubling elements of those recollections. The consequent dialogic portrait of inner speech makes a convincing case for formalism and cognitive science as a combined methodology for investigating how literary and narrative works reflect aspects of human psychology.

Further work will be needed to test the scope of this methodology. Future literary scholarship may shed further light on innovations other literary texts have made to formal devices (imagery, intertextuality, juxtaposition, etc.) in order to portray other mental states and processes connected to inner speech (such as schizophrenia). Cognitive scientists, meanwhile, are well placed to consider the implications of these literary portrayals, such as the idea raised by this report that expanded and condensed inner speech may occur concurrently (as in Stevens' narrative voice) as well as sequentially (as in Fernyhough's model). Additionally, writers and other creative practitioners interested in exploring psychological concepts in their work may be able to use the ideas proposed here as a blueprint for connecting the formal and structural elements of their writing with cognitive ideals. Humanistic, scientific, and creative perspectives will all be needed to shed further light on how literary writing represents the mysterious voices we hear in our heads.

Note

1. In arguing that these stages occur simultaneously within Stevens' narration, I diverge from Fernyhough, who primarily envisions these stages as occurring sequentially as inner speech develops from childhood to adulthood. Fernyhough (2004) does however suggest that "under demanding cognitive conditions, there can be a transition from Level 4 inner speech

(fully condensed) back to Level 3 inner speech (expanded)," and that "it is under these conditions that our normal inner speech is experienced as an expanded dialogue" (p. 56). We might therefore position Stevens – who, for most of the novel, is under the "demanding cognitive conditions" of reckoning with his wasted life – as somewhere between these two stages, with his inner speech expanded and condensed in equal part.

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