

The Power of Words: Iago as Reasoner

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ABSTRACT

Language has been an object of study and reflection since ancient times, yet the post-truth epoch compels us to revisit the language as our house of being. This paper attempts to reflect on the linguistic predicament by reading William Shakespeare's Othello and trying to understand how reason limits Othello's thinking and restrains him from engaging with Iago's utterances as speech acts. As we all engage with this world through words, linguistic competence and the ability to perform and assess utterances, reflected by the philosophers of ordinary language philosophy, are significant aspects of human life. Though Shakespeare's other plays, King Lear and Macbeth, also emphasize the significance of linguistic consciousness, understanding the verbal acts in Othello needs a different dimension. Othello's pragmatic competence is caught in Iago's reasoning and does not allow him to enter the locus of the speech act, leading to his decisive self-destructive acts. Using speech-act theory as a framework, this paper attempts to understand the rudiments that make this play a 'verbal tragedy'.

Keywords: speech acts, reasoning, context, linguistic competence, pragmatic competence.

Language, a complex human phenomenon, is a much-reflected phenomenon. Since Plato till date, philosophers have been trying to understand how words relate to reality, how language constructs social reality, the relationship between thoughts and words, meaning and intention, the role of language in human life, etc. Moreover, when it comes to literary studies, language as a constituent of the literary form takes more attention, and for academicians who indulge in Shakespeare studies, it is an amusing aspect.

Studies that have tried to understand the human sense of alienation, identity, jealousy, and sexual anxiety in *Othello* have also approached the play from racial, feministic, humanistic, psychoanalytic, and linguistic perspectives—critical minds have not even left the handkerchief. Even after all these studies and four hundred years of exploration, to the extent that makes us feel that no space is left for further study, *Othello*

still has something new to reveal for the minds that would like to explore it. The words are inexhaustive in producing new meanings.

Though *Othello* has been studied from a linguistic perspective to understand how “the complex language, the language with more than one possibility of interpretation creates the illusion of a complex consciousness or a multi-layered sense of reality” (Gohlke, 2010, p.157), how language masks the true intentions of the villain, Shakespeare's use of rhetoric, pun, etc., this paper focuses on utterances as speech acts—the act Iago performs through his words.

All utterances are speech acts, says Austin. According to J L Austin, all our utterances are performative acts. Austin's speech act theory expounds on how utterances as speech act function at three levels simultaneously: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a

perlocutionary act. The ‘Locutionary Act’ involves sentence-level linguistic meaning. The ‘Illocutionary Act’ is the act a speaker performs through his or her utterance, like promising, asserting, requesting, warning, expressing, etc. It is the design, intention, or purpose of the speaker. The ‘Perlocutionary Act’ creates a certain kind of impact on the receiver’s mind. It produces consequential effects on the listener’s feelings, thoughts, or actions (Austin, 1975, 100-101).

The ability to perform speech acts and assess them constitutes our linguistic competency; lack of this competency leads to several predicaments in human life. Indeed, it is evident that Othello ends as a tragedy because the protagonist believes the villain’s words. The paper attempts to understand, by analysing *Othello*, how reason conditions the way of receiving utterances as speech acts and substantiates the point that Othello’s failure to engage with the utterances of Iago as speech acts is due to the subjugation of his pragmatic competence under Iago’s reasoning— had he judged Iago’s utterances as speech acts, he would have avoided the tragic end.

Aristotle’s definition of human beings as rational animals — a clear distinction of humans from other animals — would not be possible without the ability of reason, which is based on language. Though reason, in general, explains why something has happened and connects different elements of thinking or thoughts to come to a conclusion, it is a kind of narrative with specific rules that constructs a story by using certain logical connections and making them very convincing to the receiver. It is a double-edged sword that needs to be dealt with care. It can give clarity and understanding, but at the same time, it can also be used to subjugate, manipulate

and exploit. “Reason is the prime, the only governing factor in our lives” (Hawkes, 2005, p.108). Let us see how Iago uses it to influence and subjugate Othello’s thoughts and restrict his judgement of words.

“Iago wittily speaks to, not just before, the audience, and he speaks a lot, uttering two hundred more lines than Othello—more than any other Shakespearean character except Hamlet and Richard III” (Cohen, 2016, p.2077). Why does he speak more? What wonders the audience or reader is the verbal dominance of the villain. The play is entirely under the control of Iago’s words. Nothing could unmask the villainous nature of Iago because his *self* is concealed with in words. From a specific time, his utterances work as performatives—by *saying* something, he is *doing* something.

After his first target, Cassio, Iago’s attempt to create suspicion about Desdemona is intensified. When Othello says, “I’ll see before I doubt: when I doubt, prove; / And, on the proof, there is no more but this: / Away at once with love or jealousy” (*Othello* [Quarto Text] 3.3. 187 – 189), Iago’s responsibility of producing evidence and proving Desdemona as an unfaithful wife surges with the given assignment. His commitment to the task increases:

I am glad of this, for now I shall have reason
 To show the love and duty that I bear you
 With franker spirit.....

 Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio
Wear your eyes thus: not jealous, nor secure.
 (3.3. 191 -196)

Though Othello is asked not to be biased in his judgment, he is restrained from thinking or observing things independently. Iago’s words overpower his thoughts. Reason makes the words

of Iago so powerful.

I know our country disposition well:
In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best
conscience
Is not to leave't undone but kept unknown.
Othello: **Dost thou say so?**

(3.3. 199 – 203)

At this point, it could be observed how Othello is influenced by Iago's words. What limits Othello from thinking beyond the linguistic level meaning, locutionary act, which does not allow him to think about the intended action and the effects it could produce, what speech act theorists call illocutionary and perlocutionary level, is the utterances are not just expressions rather, they are utterances firmly grounded on reasoning. In this instance, Othello gets convinced because its inference, though not explicit, is based on deductive reasoning — the general idea that reaches a specific conclusion. At a general level, Iago, taking Venetian women's nature of doing wrong things and keeping them unknown, tries to prove Desdemona's nature as she is part of the same folk. The premise that all Venetian women do wrong things and keep them unknown, Desdemona is a Venetian leads to the inference that she too does wrong things. In argumentation, deductive reasoning is relied on to achieve conclusions based on true premises. Though Iago's words appear as ordinary utterances, the reasoning encapsulated in words convinces and makes Othello believe what is given to him.

Though human engagement with words is boundless, certain words that arise in certain situations leave an indelible imprint on the mind. One such significant statement that penetrates deep into Othello's mind is the assertion made by Brabantio about his daughter that comes out

of shock when she confirms her love for Othello in the presence of the duke: "She has deceived her father, and may thee" (1.3. 290). When Iago reiterates this statement in an appropriate context, it poisons the mind of Othello. Moreover, inductive reasoning, moving from specific to general, persuades Othello. It immediately convinces Othello that what had happened in the past may also happen in the present, and he immediately positions himself in the place of Brabantio, who is deceived in their love affair.

Iago: She did deceive her father, marrying you;
And when she seemed to shake and fear your
looks,
She loved them most.

Othello: **And so she did.**

Iago: Why, go to, then!

**She that so young could give out such a
seeming**

To seal her father's eyes up, close as oak

(3.3. 204 – 208)

Iago's intention of creating suspicion in Othello's mind succeeds by parallelizing Cassio and Desdemona's relationship with the secret love that went on between Othello and Desdemona, which was unknown to her father. Moreover, the inductive reasoning "of drawing a conclusion from the specific to the general, reverberates even when Othello makes his causal assertion "... she must die, else she will betray more men" (5.2. 6).

In the light of reason, Iago ingeniously subverts even Desdemona's good qualities and positions them against her. He undermines everything to prove her deceitfulness. Though Desdemona loves Othello's inner spirit and it is her intuition that makes her blind towards race and other rational aspects that usually restrict a white woman to prefer a Moor, Iago projects the very

nature of Desdemona's accepting of Othello as something very abnormal and succeeds in making him believe that she cannot be trusted, as her thoughts are very unnatural; her nature is mutable, and thus she may revise her judgment of choice:

As to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends.
Faulg! One may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.
But pardon me, I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent. (3.3 227 - 236)

Therefore, Iago's logical connections give his words the power to influence Othello's thoughts without allowing him to think beyond the surface meaning. Othello's pragmatic competence is caught in Iago's *reasoning*. It never allows him to enter the locus of the *speech act*, to reflect on the act Iago intends to perform through his words, the illocutionary act, and the effect it brings on him, the perlocutionary act. And that leads to his self-destructive act.

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