

Words, Actions and Truth: Philosophy of Language in Shakespeare's Plays

N.S. Gundur

Associate Professor, Department of Studies and Research in English, Tumkur University
Email : seegundur@gmail.com

In life people are guided by words, not by deeds. It's not so much that they love the possibility of doing or not doing something as it is the possibility of speaking with words, agreed on among themselves. (Quoted from *Kholstomer: The Story of a Horse* by Leo Tolstoy)

A certain kind of critical enquiry into Shakespeare's plays, from Johnsonian criticism to the recent David Crystal's linguistic criticism, hails the way Shakespeare handles language in his plays as his unique artistic achievement. However, in the celebration of Shakespeare's linguistic-artistic triumph what has generally been overlooked is his deeper insights about the role of language plays in human affairs. While making a sharp distinction between Shakespeare's use of language and Shakespeare's understanding of human language, the present paper focuses on the latter; it tries to argue that one can reconstruct Shakespeare's philosophy of language through the reading of some of his plays— *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, among others. Although these plays can be read at various levels, one cannot miss the element of 'verbal tragedy' in these plays, especially in *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. In this sense, these plays are meant for their protagonists coming to terms with their

understanding of human speech-acts. At the very obvious level, Lear does not know how to receive the speech-act of Cordelia, Macbeth lacks, what Speech-Act theorists call, 'pragmatic competence', and the problem of Hamlet (Oh my God! Oedipus complex in *Hamlet* is too big a thing to be understood) is the problem of how to 'read' the words of the ghost. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock fails to comprehend the mischief language plays in legal affairs. However, this paper confines itself to the analysis of *King Lear*.

John Searle in his *Making the Social World* (2009) demonstrates that how our social reality is constituted by linguistic consciousness. Language is not only a means of communication but also it is an agent of creating social reality. According to Searle, we are 'speech-act' performing beings. What is significant in his argument is that we are rational beings because we possess the linguistic consciousness. What is the role of this linguistic consciousness? This is not merely an ability to perform speech-acts but it is also an ability to make rational assessment of speech-acts. According to him these speech-acts play an important role in our life. They can be hurtful to other people also. So we have as much right to regulate these speech-acts as other physical acts. What has it to do with

our rationality? Our rationality involves how to judge these speech-acts in certain ways.

As identified in the 'Philosophy of Ordinary Language Use' or Pragmatics, speech-acts function at three levels. The first level is known as 'Locutionary Act', which involve sentence-level linguistic utterances. The second level is called as Illocutionary Act, which perform certain acts like promising, proposing, expressing, encouraging, predicting, etc. The third level is Perlocutionary Act in which there are intentional acts in the sense that they try to make a certain impact on the receiver. They persuade, deceive, irritate and get the receiver to do something.

Overall what the Speech-Act theory explains is the way language use takes place in our life. But beyond this, the theory does not say anything about how human beings negotiate with speech- acts. It does not explain why and how we, sometimes, fail to assess speech-acts. First of all, we need to understand that we are not born readily to make sense of speech-acts in life. We gradually learn how to use them and how to receive them. This involves our cognitive capacity. Speech-acts are not as simple as we think, and they behave in an extremely strange way in certain circumstances. Always there is some risk involved in dealing with them. Sometimes they even cost the fall of a kingdom. In one way, most of our learning involves learning to judge speech-acts. I think this aspect of speech-acts gets articulated in some crucial moments in Shakespeare's plays. If the Speech-Act Theory demonstrates how ordinary

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language-use works, Shakespeare's plays artistically bring forth the tragedy associated with, what we generally take for granted, the failure of his protagonists to comprehend certain speech-acts. Let us examine *King Lear* from this perspective.

King Lear

It has already been observed although *King Lear* can be read at various levels; it is too obvious to miss the 'verbal tragedy' in it. If we read the play from this point of view, what we can easily identify is that Lear is obsessed with speech; all the time he says, 'speak'. He is a certain type of man who loves words (verbal assurance) more than actions. Such people constantly require some sort of linguistic consolation. They find comfort in it. He is the one who is accustomed to flattery; plain speech does not please him. Lear's problem lies in his firm belief that linguistic utterances correspond to truth. If Macbeth lacks judgment in distinguishing between referential proposition and rhetorical proposition, Lear lacks the ability to distinguish between plain speech and flattery. What Lear asks his daughters is not 'which of you doth love most', but asks, "Which of you shall we **say** doth love us most". Mark the word 'say' here and we will come to know the difference between 'saying' and 'loving'. When Goneril says, "I love you more than words' A love that makes breath poor and speech unable", she seems to know the power of words. The play resonates the basic problem of language in human life when Cordelia says, "What shall Cordelia do? Love and be silent, and my love more ponderous than tongue". Let us

contrast Goneril's assertion of action over speech and Cordelia's plain speech.

Although the former asserts the power of action over speech at sentence level, its deeper implications are altogether opposite. It is this understanding of human speech which is crucial for us in the play. Here, the play interfaces words and deeds. When Lear asks Cordelia, "What you 'say'", (again mark the word, 'say' because Lear is always obsessed with 'saying') for which she replies, "Nothing", and Lear says, "Nothing will come of nothing, Speak....." Lear is a king, and it is obvious that he is used to flattery. The difference between a good king and a bad king is that the former knows that he is being flattered although he does not resist the opportunity of listening to soothing words, but the latter is ignorant of this. However, Cordelia also does not know the power of speech. She should have described something grand in speech for her father. She fails to understand her father's speech-loving habit; instead, she tries to argue her case, plain speech.

Like Macbeth, coming to terms with his error in judgment, Lear too eventually realizes his problem with speech-acts. At the end of the play, he says:

"Ha Goneril, with a white beard, they flattered me like dog...When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found them, there I smelt them out. Go to, they are not men o' their **words**: they told me I was everything; it is a lie, I am not agu-proof.

Finally, the tragedy of Lear achieves its completeness with Lear coming to terms with this problem.

Thus, *King Lear* emphasizes the importance of linguistic consciousness. At the end of the play what Edger says, "Speak what you feel, not what you ought to say" seems to be the point of Shakespeare is trying to make. In this sense, the play can be read as a morality play on the value of linguistic consciousness.

If we read *Macbeth* from this perspective, we can easily locate a similar element of 'verbal tragedy' in it. Macbeth's tragedy involves as much his failure to assess the speech-acts of the three witches as his ambition. As a Christian, the problem of Hamlet is how to take the 'words' of the ghost. In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare weaves the plot of the tragic-comedy on the idea of linguistic manipulation. On the whole, what the philosophers of ordinary language cannot achieve in their theories Shakespeare achieves in his art— the linguistic predicament in which we trap ourselves when we are ambitious or prone to being deceived by flattery.

Reference

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