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"In a Double Sense". Syntactic Ambiguity and the Pragmatics of Equivocation in Shakespearean Dramatic Dialogue

Abstract: My paper will focus on form and function in the pragmatics of Shakespearean dialogue in respect of syntax. It will discuss the interpretation of semantic roles in his dramatic dialogue, and particularly the way in which ambiguous constructions are situated in scenes in order to create a feeling of uncertainty and ambivalence, both in the specific dramatic context and in the poetics of the play as a whole. This profound sense of ambiguity – which lies at the heart of tragedies such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and histories such as *Henry V*, but is also present in a significant number of comedies – is constructed, as I argue and exemplify, not only through the dramatic ironies of plot and character, but crucially by the language and the slippage resulting from functional shifts of grammar and syntax. As has been observed by a number of commentators, the consequent persistent flouting of Gricean conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner is an intrinsic tool of the poetic dramatist's art and Shakespeare represents an outstanding example of this phenomenon. Likewise, the performative and declarative speech acts of dramatic dialogue can be seen to contribute to such flouting of conversational norms and maxims. The article will also discuss the relationship between linguistic ambiguity and character ambivalence with specific examples.

Keywords: *relevance, intention, intentional fallacy, dedicated module, ostensive-inferential*

1. Introduction: Syntax and Ambiguity

One of the most effective ways of investigating subtly codified and varied representations of the past is through an appraisal of language and style. In this respect, studies of Shakespearean language have tended typically to concentrate on paradigmatic characteristics of his creative use of language at the expense of syntagmatic elements. Thus, analysis of elements in the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries has focused mainly on lexical, morphological or phonological elements, while the linear order of words has been considerably less well researched. Jonathan Culpeper[1] has drawn attention to the often underrated significance of syntax in Shakespearean texts, and suggested that more research is required in this area. He also notes, like Stanley Hussey,[2] how syntactic nuances in the Shakespeare text help to establish characterisation. However, such discussion is often restricted to instances where syntactic features relate to cognitive organisation of speech, and downplays the complex but important relationship between form and function. Jonathan Hope is one of the few scholars who have devoted time and energy to detailed studies of syntactic features in Shakespeare's oeuvre. Here he makes the necessary link between aspects of syntax and thought and emotion in Shakespeare's depiction of character:

> In terms of classical rhetoric, Shakespeare's classical style can be seen to shift towards the psychological level, as his syntax seeks ways to appeal to our emotional experience of the world and represent the subjectivity of his characters in play in the moment-to-moment flow of speech and thought.[3]

[1] See Jonathan Culpeper, *Language and Characterisation: People in Plays and Other Texts* (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), 202.
[2] See Stanley S. Hussey, *The Literary Language of Shakespeare* (London and New York: Longman, 1982), 75.
[3] Jonathan Hope, *Shakespeare and Language: Reason, Eloquence and Artifice in the Renaissance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 169.

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Hope's quantitative and qualitative findings in relation to Shakespeare's grammatical and syntactic choices have benefited from stylometric research methods more common to stylistics. In *Shakespeare and Language* he devotes a chapter to an analysis of word order and syntactic construction in Shakespeare. Other commentators, including Blake[4] and Delabastita[5] have also laid stress on the functions of ambiguity in Shakespeare plays. In *Shakespeare's Language: An Introduction* N. F. Blake identified the functional shifts, or multifunctionality, in Shakespeare's grammatical usage that promote ambiguity and complexity in his dramatic language. "Word order", he argues, "can ... be used to achieve rhetorical arrangements in which the meaning may be difficult to disentangle, particularly for an audience in the theatre".[6]

As Blake points out, many such syntactic complexities arise from a combination of archaism and poetic license untypical of modern standard English, where grammar conventions are designed to disambiguate and clarify in accordance with Paul Grice's semantic cooperative principles,[7] in particular his maxim of manner. Blake discusses the ambiguity created by the looser organisation of the dramatic verse, as well as the uncertainty arising from the freer sense of phrasal attachment legitimated by early modern English, particularly of participles and relative clauses. He notes how modern poetic licence permits limited syntactic variations, but observes that "Shakespeare ... alters the word order much more drastically than this so that ambiguity can easily result".[8]

To what extent Shakespeare's uses of ambiguity correspond to William Empson's theory of seven types of poetic ambiguity is moot. For one thing, speculating on what the author had in mind when encoding ambiguity in his dramatic texts, would be idle; thus, the fourth, fifth and seventh types of Empson's taxonomy, relating to what the author has in mind when writing, cannot be usefully applied to Shakespeare's dramas. That said, his discussion of ambiguity in relation to meanings that co-exist harmoniously, to potential alternative meanings that are resolved into one, and to apparently unconnected meanings or meanings that are contradictory, can all be applied to the myriad examples to be found in Shakespeare's body of work. Perhaps emphasis should be placed less on the divisions in the author's mind, as Empson saw it, and more on the divisions in those of his characters and also of his readers and audiences. Empson's ground-breaking insights into the close relationship between figurative language in literature and various types of ambiguity – conceptual, semantic and grammatical – has informed and influenced literary-linguistic investigations of the topic.

Before discussing types and examples of ambiguity that may be encountered, it is important to differentiate between the early modern context of reception and that of modern-day readers and audiences. Archaic locutions and grammatical structures that are complex or ambiguous for a modern reader/listener might well have been perfectly clear to an early modern audience for whom Shakespearean grammar was either vernacular or only slightly archaic, often depending on whether the play was a comedy or a history. For today's readers disambiguation can be achieved through contemporary English paraphrasing that parses and restructures the original early modern wording. Still, in the context of today's Shakespearean performance, both performers and audiences need to establish a clear interpretation of each phrase in the original language, solving the potential confusions posed by archaism, ellipsis, and syntactic complexity.

[4] See N. F. Blake, *Shakespeare's Language: An Introduction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983).
[5] See Dirk Delabastita, *There's a Double Tongue: An Investigation into the Translation of Shakespeare's Wordplay with Special Reference to* Hamlet (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993).
[6] Hope, *Shakespeare and Language*, 121.
[7] See Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation", in Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan, eds., *Syntax and Semantics. 3: Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 41–58.
[8] Blake, *Shakespeare's Language*, 119.

Neuro-cognitive research[9] has demonstrated how the brain is capable of retaining alternative meanings of a complex sentence simultaneously, exploring possible parsings of phrases in the processing of linear information, before arriving at a conclusive interpretation of meaning, rightly or wrongly as the case may be. This applies particularly to semantic role uncertainties in the sentence, or other temporary ambiguities where the listener does not have the advantage of the reader's 'lookahead' strategy. In some cases, though, uncertainty remains, particularly where the text and scene pragmatics appear to promote ambiguity for dramatic and characterological reasons. In such cases, where temporary sentential ambiguity – whether unambiguous for early modern audiences or ambiguous for contemporary audiences – shades into dramatic ambivalence, it is more productive to explore this phenomenon via strategies of pragmatic analysis. Paul Grice's cooperative principles, specifically his four conversational maxims offer such an analytical tool.

2. Cooperative and 'Uncooperative' Principles of Dramatic Discourse

Notwithstanding, as my chapter will contend, and commentators such as Burton[10] and Herman[11] have previously noted, Gricean co-operative principles cannot be applied straightforwardly to dramatic dialogue in the same way they can to unscripted conversational analysis. Indeed, Burton maintains that, in the context of a scene and of a play as a cultural intervention, it is precisely this "deviance from linguistic norms"[12] that makes it rich in pragmatic meaning and worthy of close textual and subtextual analysis. It is clear that strict adherence to Grice's maxims for cooperative exchange would undermine the crucial dramatic elements of deferral, revelation, recognition, and dramatic irony that invest the text with its literary and philosophical value to a shared cultural heritage. In short, conscientious application of the cooperative principles would undermine the vital component of dramatic conflict.

Rather, we need to posit a parallel set of maxims that function as a dramatic alternative to Grice's cooperative principles, and in the process draw upon his notions of implicature and, most importantly, of violation or flouting of maxims. These would be in line with the argument advanced by Herman[13] that in dramatic discourse the cooperative maxims can be violated specifically in order to generate what Grice designated "implicatures".[14] Such a set of alternative principles would incorporate both the play's spoken text and its subtextual features, and would embrace written text, subtextual implicature and the non-verbal communication that would naturally complement these in a specific performance of the text. In this respect, of course, they would function in a similar way to the cooperative principles.

To review Grice's maxims briefly, they are:

> The maxim of quantity, where one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more.
>
> The maxim of quality, where one tries to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.
>
> The maxim of relation, where one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.

[9] See Thomas A. Farmer, Sarah A. Cargill and Michael. J. Spivey, "Gradiency and visual context in syntactic garden-paths", *Journal of Memory and Language*, 57.4 (2007), 570–95; Philip Davis, "The Shakespeared Brain", *The Reader*, 23.2 (2007), 39–43.

[10] See Deirdre Burton, *Dialogue and Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Approach to Modern Drama Dialogue and Naturally Occurring Conversation* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

[11] See Vimala Herman, *Dialogue as Interaction in Plays* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

[12] Burton, *Dialogue and Discourse*, 6.

[13] See Herman, *Dramatic Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[14] Grice, "Logic and Conversation", 54.

> The maxim of manner, when one tries to be as clear, as brief, and as orderly as one can in what one says, and where one avoids obscurity and ambiguity.

Thus, a contrary set of maxims reflecting violations of the above might, I suggest, look something like this:

> The maxim of superfluous quantity where one may deliberately obfuscate or dominate the exchanges (although this maxim probably shouldn't be applied to formal speeches and soliloquies which abound in Shakespeare's plays, at least without specific reason).
>
> The maxim of dubious quality, where one may deliberately deceive or mislead or speak disingenuously.
>
> The maxim of inapposite relation, where one may deliberately introduce extraneous or irrelevant material in order to increase the obfuscation alluded to in the first maxim.
>
> The maxim of uncooperative manner, where one may deliberately equivocate and/or employ obscurity and ambiguity for ulterior motive.

As is the case with the cooperative principles – which represent optimum conditions for communicative clarity that are frequently not achieved in real interactions – these 'uncooperative principles' would be situated at the extremity of a cline of possible interactions. In the same way that Grice argues that his maxims can overlap, these 'reverse maxims' would also combine with one another within a particular scene to convey nuances of meaning of both a textual and a subtextual nature. Equally important, what we might describe as 'the uncooperative principles' would be interspersed with more cooperative principles, as one might expect from an intellectually and poetically rich dramatic text such as a Shakespeare play, in which the characterisation of deceptive or unreliable characters is usually complex.

Such cooperative and non-cooperative elements in character interaction form part of a nexus of rhetorical strategies, together with constative and performative speech acts and the turn-taking features of dramatic dialogue. They thus contribute to character construction and attribution of motives at both text and performance levels. Lynne Magnusson, referring to "the continuous address that dramatic dialogue is making to the audience",[15] reminds us that the semantics of stage discourse are intrinsically double. The addresser and addressee are at one and the same time the onstage interlocutors and the dramatist and audience in this dual process of theatrical communication. The characteristics of such a rule-based system can also be extended to apply to other examples of ambiguity and to violations of cooperative principles. In more philosophical terms they intersect with Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas on language games. Wittgenstein's emphasis on the contextual factors at play in his language games theory and relativism of meaning[16] can be usefully related to dramatic dialogue. Cooperative principles (as well as the flouting of these principles) and speech act categories operate fundamentally as part of a rule-based system in relation to language functions, akin to the way that the rules of grammar and syntax determine form and meaning. Violations or bending of rules in dramatic dialogue, in instances of ambiguity or ambivalence, have the effect of enhancing the dramatic plot by deferring both the resolution of meaning and a harmonious (or otherwise definitive) conclusion.

However, ambiguity – deliberate or unwitting, encoded or construed – depends not only on these functional semantic aspects of language. At both the lexical and the syntactic level, it depends on the form of words chosen to work "in a double sense" at textual and performative levels. This quality of

[15] Lynne Magnusson, "Dialogue", in Sylvia Adamson et al., eds., *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language: A Guide* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2001) 130-143:140.
[16] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

doubleness is heightened by the familiar tension that exists in language between form and function, further complicated by the "looser" syntax (to recall Blake's term above) and more flexible usage of Renaissance English. So, in accordance with Hamlet's line: "There is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet*, II.2.233-4) we recognise that transient and provisional meanings are construed by each interlocutor in the pragmatic context of the particular scene, with all its attendant dramatic motivation and subtextual resonance. Qualities of frankness and/or speciousness are in constant interplay and false-hearted, ambivalent, or even positive characters may have good reason to dissemble or at least be economical with the truth in specific contexts, while speaking without guile in others. Hamlet is a prime example of this in his exchanges with his mother, depending on the private or the public nature of the exchange.

As my paper seeks to demonstrate and exemplify, the device of syntactic and grammatical ambiguity in Shakespeare's text is a more complex, but also highly effective, discourse tool for promoting dramatic uncertainty and deferral of meaning; in this way it operates in tandem with the deviations from normative cooperative principles and the oscillation between cooperative and 'uncooperative principles'. It is precisely in this structural ambiguity and carefully constructed indeterminacy that Shakespeare's dramatic ingenuity can be appreciated. In the following section I will discuss examples of locally ambiguous propositions that are disambiguated by the end of the phrase or sentence, as well as more globally ambiguous examples that cannot be so easily parsed and ultimately resist conclusive interpretation.

I will also show how sentential complexity arising from embedded clauses at various levels of subordination and strategies of thematisation or stylistic fronting contribute to the textual ambiguity and ultimately dramatic interaction of specific scenes. The blurring of semantic roles in a proposition, where agent and patient of the action may not be immediately apparent, also plays its part in creating an unsettling indeterminacy in the language that echoes dramatic indeterminacies of character interaction and plot detail. Other archaic syntactic features such as double or multiple negation and the liberal use of Verb-Subject (VS) or Object-Verb (OV) word-order inversions in declarative sentences likewise add to the impression of syntactic intricacy. This is particularly the case in Shakespeare's dramatic verse, where they may appear to be deployed partly for metrical reasons as much as semantic ones.

Another syntactic feature that is relevant to any discussion of ambiguity in the context of cooperative or uncooperative pragmatic strategies is the positioning of main clause and subordinate clauses. Conventionally the central proposition of the utterance is foregrounded by being placed in the main clause, and supporting information is provided in relative or adjunct clauses. However, fronting and highlighting subordinate clauses and increasing the level of subordination tends to reverse these polarities and 'background' the key information. Characters who foreground relative or adjunct clauses and front them in their dialogic turns are usually in violation of the Gricean maxim of manner.

As Ingham[17] has demonstrated with reference to political discourse in the English Civil War period, reversing the relationship between the main and subordinate clauses 'foregrounds the less significant information at the expense of the more significant; crucially, such structural manipulation on the part of the speaker are likely to plant presuppositions in the mind of the interlocutor, and influence and distort reception of the communication. In view of the predominantly political ethos of Shakespeare's corpus of histories and tragedies – not to mention the trickery and double-dealing that pervades the comedies – the arrangement and degree of subordination employed by speakers for the purpose of deception or manipulation is clearly a relevant pragmatic strategy in any investigation of structural ambiguity.

[17] See Richard Ingham, "The Syntax of Foregrounding and Backgrounding in English Civil War Political Discourse: A Text Analysis", in Annamária Fábián and Igor Trost, eds., *Sprachgebrauch in der Politik: Grammatische, lexikalische, pragmatische, kulturelle und dialektologische Perspektiven* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, Forthcoming 2018).

3. Examples of Syntactic Ambiguity and Confusion in Semantic Roles

A well-known example of syntactic ambiguity discussed by Delabastita,[18] following Gibbons,[19] occurs in *Romeo and Juliet* in a scene between Juliet and Lady Capulet in which the secretly married Juliet employs equivocating ambiguity to mislead her mother. It is necessary for her to dissemble her true feeling about Romeo and express both sorrow for her cousin Tybalt's death and hostility toward Romeo and the Montagues. Juliet's artful response is a model of equivocation:

> Indeed I never shall be satisfied
> With Romeo till I behold him – dead –
> Is my poor heart so for a kinsman vexed.
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, III.5.94-6)

These lines convey two plausible but antithetical constructions of meaning, depending on whether the adjective 'dead' is parsed together with what goes before it in the more regular Subject-Verb-Object + Modifier sequence, or with what comes after in the inverted sequence of Modifier-Verb-Subject. To her mother she appears to be wishing Romeo's death in revenge for his slaying of her cousin, but to herself she is expressing the fervent wish to see her husband of one night alive again. Although we may describe it as a type of 'garden path'[20] utterance, it is not consistent with the common garden path sentence that is ultimately disambiguated. While Lady Capulet hears what she wants to hear in Juliet's turn, the audience is complicit with the speaker in construing a second ulterior meaning. Thus, a powerful effect of dramatic irony is created that hinges on the subtextual doubleness of syntactic as well as lexical reference. In terms of characterisation and plot development, Juliet's tergiversation under duress contrasts sharply with the character's previous frank and more transparent speech acts, and foreshadows the fatal outcome of the artifice engineered by Friar Laurence. In terms of cooperative dialogic principles the utterance is a flagrant violation of the maxim of manner, and constitutes instead equivocation for ulterior motive.

There are similar examples of structural ambiguity in Shakespeare that, unlike the case with typical garden path sentences, resist persuasive disambiguation. In the following example proposed by Blake[21] ambiguity relates to the position of a simple phrase in the utterance, and to whether the listener interprets it anaphorically or cataphorically. Citing Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk's response to the King's sentence of banishment from the opening act of *Richard II*, Blake argues that the following couplet contains conflicting, but equally valid, propositional meanings:

> Farewell, my liege, now no way can I stray
> Save back to England all the world's my way.
> (*Richard II*, I.3.206-7)

He notes that everything depends on whether one construes the phrase "save back to England" as being attached to the preceding or the following phrase. The lack of a comma before "all the world's my way" in the early quartos makes this example a hermeneutic conundrum. In the context of the scene the weight of probability is that the actor is more likely to interpret the middle phrase as the character's

[18] See Delabastita, *Double Tongue*.
[19] Brian Gibbons, ed., *William Shakespeare's* Romeo and Juliet (London: Arden, 1980), 189.
[20] This linguistic concept refers to a sentence that is temporarily ambiguous in its opening segment, but is normally resolved in its concluding one. A noted example would be "The lorry parked outside the house left", which creates temporary semantic confusion by employing two apparent main verbs. The proficient reader or hearer disambiguates the sentence by parsing 'parked' as a past participle and 'left' as the main verb.
[21] Blake, *Shakespeare's Language*, 125.

reluctant acceptance of his impending life-long exile from his native land. However, the tendency to construe the qualifying phrase as attached to the preceding main clause – all the more marked in standard modern English – endows the line with an undertone of wistful uncertainty that is highly apt in the context of a play of shifting power, impetuous decision-making and rapid changes of fortune. In pragmatic terms the equivocating speech act, far from representing an uncooperative violation of dialogic maxims, or of Mowbray's oath of loyalty to his King, reveals a dogged loyalty to the ungrateful monarch on whose behalf he was challenged to the duel with Bolingbroke. Subsequent news of Mowbray's death in Venice brought by the Bishop of Carlisle in Act Four of the play (IV.1.99-100) resolves any doubts regarding the possibility of him straying back to England; ironically his former adversary who has defied the terms of his own exile and done exactly what Mowbray can no longer do, wishes to repeal the latter's exile and gain his support in order to confer greater legitimacy on his usurpation of power. The play's pattern of ambivalence and dramatic irony is produced precisely by the sum of these linguistic parts; thus we observe how apparent garden-path local ambiguity overlaps productively with carefully crafted poetic ambivalence.

> Myself the crying fellow did pursue,
> Lest by his clamour – as it so fell out –
> The town might fall in fright.
> (*Othello*, II.3.226)

This is an example of syntactic ambiguity from Act Two of *Othello* proposed by Hope.[22] Here two Noun Phrases stand before the Verb Group 'did pursue'; given that sentence Objects can be situated pre-verbally – not just in archaic English, but even in certain contexts of contemporary usage – the reader/listener has to decide which Noun phrase is Subject and which is Object. As Hope points out, the most likely interpretation in the context of the scene and the play's characterisation of Iago has 'myself' as Subject and 'the crying fellow' as Object, but this disrupts the more regular adjacency of Subject and Verb, and might plausibly be rejected in favour of the reverse interpretation in which 'the crying fellow' pursues the character speaking the line. The action of the scene, preceding 'honest' Iago's prevarication in his sly and long-winded explanation to Othello of the brawl, obviates any potential ambiguity or ambivalence, however. We have witnessed Iago's manipulation of his dupe, Roderigo, and know from what has gone before that Roderigo, after instigating the affray, slipped away on Iago's bidding when the drunken Cassio was challenged by Montano.

We also know from the context that Iago hasn't in truth pursued his accomplice in deceit, and has merely feigned pursuit while Montano's attention was engaged with the quarrelsome Cassio. Equally the alarm bell is rung at Iago's insistence. Audiences or readers of the play are necessarily privy to Iago's gulling of Othello since they both see and hear his double-dealing; the dramatic irony created by their 'complicity' with Iago is a key element in the play's intrigue, and increases Othello's increasing sense of isolation and self-delusion. So, while the lines might prompt temporary and local ambiguity for the reader or listener, there is no possibility of misconstruing the meaning and confusing the semantic roles of the agent (Iago) and patient (Roderigo). Globally speaking, both in the scene and the play as a whole, the confusion and misapprehensions are on Othello's part, not that of the audience; hence Iago's sentence is disambiguated by a combination of its verbal and its dramatic contexts. Again, as with the *Romeo and Juliet* example, there is a disingenuous cooperative principle on the part of the speaker, one that is deliberately undercut by his artful violations of the maxims of quality, relation and manner.

> I do love nothing in the world so well as you: is not that strange?
> (*Much Ado About Nothing*, IV.1.265-6)

[22] See Hope, *Shakespeare and Language*.

A residual sense of ambiguity is also created by this example from the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* where the elliptical phrase "so well as you" again raises an issue with semantic role assignment. Syntactically 'you' could function as either Subject or Object, and semantically as either agent or patient of the verb, although in context it needs to be interpreted as the latter. Benedick, in the tense and serious atmosphere that follows Claudio's false denunciation of Hero, finally declares his love for Beatrice directly to her face, but not without a hint of ambiguity created by the gapped adjunct phrase, "so well as you". In the context it would normally seem likelier to construe Benedick himself as the agent of a gapped phrase, implying "as much as I love you". Nevertheless, an alternative construal, to the effect, "as much as you love some unspecified person, or thing – but possibly "me" is equally valid semantically and syntactically. Beatrice's equivocal response is couched in hypothetical propositional structures and laced with negatives – including the titular "nothing": "It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you: but believe me not". This initial disavowal, inverting Benedick's cautious avowal, inevitably defers immediate disambiguation of the substance of their exchange.

Given that many of Benedick's and Beatrice's interactions hitherto have been predicated on deliberate equivocation, witticisms and double entendres, the possibility of ambiguity in this exchange is perfectly feasible. Moreover, neither character attempts anything approaching a recognisable cooperative principle in their more humorous exchanges in earlier scenes, and so the listener or reader is primed for double meanings and wordplay. In the more light-hearted context of the trick played on Benedick by his comrades-in-arms in Act 1, Scene 2, doubleness is inevitably perceived as part of a recurrent pattern in the comedy. Ironically, at this earlier point of the play when the suddenly lovestruck Benedick is called to come in to dinner by Beatrice – purportedly against her will – he concludes "there's a double meaning in that", simply because he is desperate to find ulterior meaning in Beatrice's plain and unambiguous statement. In the later more fraught scene in Act IV following Hero's collapse the roles are reversed; here Beatrice engages in a series of evasions right up until she resolves the indeterminacy by declaring her reciprocal feelings for Benedick and immediately demanding that he kill Claudio.

In the earlier part of the play any observance of Gricean cooperative principles in the witty and frequently caustic exchanges between Benedick and Beatrice would be wholly at odds with the dramatic context and comic tone. In this scene, however, as the future couple inch their way toward mutual understanding and common ground, cooperative principles and more felicitous speech acts are in evidence, but the positive mood is then dispelled by Benedick's initial refusal to cooperate. His capitulation and agreement to challenge his young friend end the scene on a more cooperative note, without further ambiguity and accompanied by more affirmative speech acts. This dramatic device of deferral of meaning (Derrida's *différance*) and sudden clarification is conducive to the misunderstandings and uncertainties that permeate Shakespeare's plays – especially his comedies. Wittgenstein's theory of 'language games', referenced in the introductory section, also helps shed light on the deferral of meaning that is intrinsic to Beatrice's and Benedick's "merry war" and "skirmish of wit" (*Much Ado*, I.1), since it is analogous to the rules of a game where moves are made. This applies less to the courting couple's wordplay *per se*; rather to the rules that govern their interaction, and so is more similar to the rules of engagement that determine war games, for example.

A further example of language games can be found in the verbal sparring of Richard Duke of Gloucester with Queen Elizabeth's party in Act 1, Scene 3 of *Richard III*, when Richard uses his verbal dexterity to outmanoeuvre his adversaries, and to complement the cunning he employs in seizing the crown. It exemplifies the phenomenon of negative concord which was conventionally used by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Although no longer correct in standard modern English of today, double or multiple negation in the language has a long history, and was not ruled 'ungrammatical' by

prescriptive grammarians until the mid-18th century. In this example cited by Abbott[23] the second negative in the first-line proposition appears to neutralise the first:

> You may deny that you were not the cause
> Of my Lord Hastings' late imprisonment.
> (*Richard III*, I.3.90-1)

In pragmatic terms the negative concord of the allegation that the Queen plotted to imprison both Clarence and Hastings reflects Richard's equivocation and posturing. This doubleness, as in his dissimulation with Clarence, typifies his behaviour during the first three acts of the play. Logically the double negation here implies that the Queen was innocent of the charge; however the ambiguity created by the double negative serves to obfuscate the substance of Richard's accusation. In a scene where speech acts such as swearing and prophesying are highly relevant to dramatic truth Richard's seemingly emphatic negative concord tends to undermine his own propositional meaning, even if Rivers' vigorous refutation that follows is interrupted by the irrepressible schemer. However, in other contexts we see multiple negation used emphatically and unambiguously:

> Besides, there is no king, be his cause never so spotless, if it come to the arbitrement of swords, can try it out with all unspotted soldiers.
> (*Henry V*, IV.1.164-6)

This scene in the English camp on the eve of the battle of Agincourt – the "touch-of-Harry-in-the-night" scene – involves an impromptu debate between common soldiers and the disguised King on the ethical responsibilities of the monarch. The example of potential syntactic confusion offered here is locally ambiguous on account of its multiple negation strategy, but its accumulation of negatives only remains ambiguous if the line is decontextualised. In the context of the scene itself any likely confusion caused by Henry's use of a triple negative is immediately resolved by the pragmatics of the exchange, and the triple negative construed as the rhetorical device that it clearly is. In other contexts where double or multiple negation is used in Shakespeare, such as the final act of *Richard II* – "What are thou? And how comest thou hither / Where no man never comes" (V.5.69-70) – the effect is emphatically negative. In theory the double negative could be construed counter-intuitively as a positive, i.e. "where some people sometimes come", but again the context of Richard's miserable incarceration in this scene makes the meaning amply clear. Double or multiple negation is therefore a potential source of temporary ambiguity for today's actors and audiences, while it was very unlikely to be so for their early modern counterparts.

The last, and in many ways most intriguing, example is taken from the opening act of *2 Henry VI*, a scene in which a group of characters – including the Duchess Eleanor, wife of the King's uncle Humphrey of Gloucester, – watch the conjuror Bolingbroke summon a spirit in Gloucester's garden. The spirit is treated as an oracle and questioned as to the fortunes of the King and his two principal supporters. It responds thus:

> The duke yet lives that Henry shall depose
> But him outlive and die a violent death.
> (*2 Henry VI*, I.4.30-1)

While the more likely interpretation is that the Duke will depose King Henry, it is also perfectly feasible on the face of it for the Duke to be deposed following his acts of rebellion against the crown.

[23] Edwin A. Abbott, *A Shakespearian Grammar* (1870), Third Edition (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2003), 295.

The etymology of the word from old French suggests a meaning equivalent to "remove from high office", thus not entirely discounting the possibility of the Duke's deposition by royal mandate.

In this instance a 'garden path' effect is created by the ambiguous interpretation of Henry as potentially either Subject or Object of the Verb 'depose' and also the corresponding functional ambiguity relating to the nominal head, 'the duke'. The ambiguity is also generated by the relative pronoun 'that', which here can either be construed as equivalent to 'who'. i.e. making the Duke subject, or equivalent to 'whom, making the Duke Object. If the Duke is taken to be the Subject of the action, on the grounds that deposition in Shakespeare is usually associated with kings, the ambiguity appears to be resolved by taking 'Henry' as a preposed Direct Object of the Verb phrase 'shall depose'. Nonetheless, the combination of the apparent nominal Subject, 'Henry' and the auxiliary Verb phrase 'shall depose' inclines the fast reader, and even more so, the listener, to take the 'garden path' option.

Besides, the subsequent line muddies the waters by introducing further ambiguity. The identity of the Duke remains unclear in the spirit's prophecy, a Shakespearean equivocation that is more familiar in the context of the witches' fortune-telling in *Macbeth*, of which more will be said in the following section of the paper. Resolving ambiguity here depends on taking the antecedent of the pronoun 'him' in the second line to be either the Duke or King Henry. In other words, who is predicted to outlive whom, and who is predicted to die 'a violent death'? Parsing the line after the adversative 'but' yields no absolute certainty, which is not normally the case with local garden-path structural ambiguity. Instead the sentence becomes more of a garden maze than a garden path, as one attempts to construe its meaning with assurance. Since this prophecy is predicated on the conventional ambiguity of the riddle device, here transmitted by a conjured, and therefore cryptic, source, it is unsurprising that the speech act is uncooperative, as opposed to cooperative, and as much is concealed as is revealed by the augury. Moreover, the exchange between Bolingbroke and the spirit cannot be considered in any respect conversational.

There is, of course, good dramatic reason for preserving ambiguous signification in the context of the scene and the play overall. History and the second and third parts of the *Henry VI* trilogy show that Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, deposes Henry, and that the usurper's violent death in battle does indeed precede Henry's own demise during his incarceration in the Tower. However, the younger son of the usurper, Richard, later Duke of Gloucester and Richard III, is portrayed by Shakespeare as brutally murdering Henry, and thus outliving him, only to die violently at Bosworth Field. Could the prophecy be interpreted as referring to him, therefore, since he helped his brother Edward to depose the King by disposing of the final obstacle before his brother's coronation (at least in Shakespeare's factually dubious representation of the event)?

Unlike the first example of structural ambiguity cited above, which is character-driven and an element of Iago's armoury of verbal deceit, this one derives its deliberate ambiguity from its riddle-like quality befitting the auguries of a conjured spirit. Bolingbroke, the conjuror, refers to the latter as a "false fiend" when these auguries prove slippery. When the 'séance' led by Bolingbroke and the witch, Margaret Jourdain, is interrupted by York and Buckingham and all participants arrested, York reads the transcribed oracles, and makes a pertinent remark: These oracles are hardly attain'd / And hardly understood (I.4.7-11). His judgment – dramatically ironic at this point of the play, because it will prove relevant to the utterer – serves to underline the link between locally ambiguous meaning that resists subsequent disambiguation and more global dramatic ambivalence evoked by plot and character construction. The prophecy retains its opaque and inscrutable nature, and its spirit of equivocation haunts the 'Wars of the Roses' plays. Such carefully constructed plot and character-related ambivalence is achieved and underpinned by linguistic subtleties and implicatures, for which syntactic ambiguity generated by its form-function tension is – as the above discussion shows – highly relevant.

4. Moral Ambivalence and Syntactic Complexity: Examples from Shakespeare Scenes

In the closing scene of *Macbeth* the protagonist's moment of comprehensive *anagnorisis* occurs in his fatal duel with Macduff, as he realises the full extent of the witches' duplicity, putting "the word of promise" in his ear, only to "break it to [his] hope". His recognition of having been their dupe is indicated in the reference to "juggling fiends ... / That palter with us in a double sense" (*Macbeth*, V.8.20). The phrase invokes the theme of doubleness that is not only present in the language of the witches' incantations and portents, but constitutes a recurrent motif in the play's language and characterisation. The moral equivocation of Macbeth himself, as he vacillates between thought and deed in the opening act, is echoed by the deceptive binaries of "foul and fair" weather but also of actions. This recurrent binary symbolism is echoed by other equivocating external portents, such as the raven and martlet, that haunt not only the castle but the play as a whole. Such signs and meanings, often half perceived or read only for surface signification, are woven into the dramatic texture of the play. Portents of success and failure are manifested partly by external physical phenomena but also, crucially, by language, which like visual imagery in the mind's eye can amount to little more than "a false creation proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain" (*Macbeth*, II.1.39-40). Extremes of passion, as Shakespeare also shows in the more romantic-comedic context of *Much Ado About Nothing* and the characters of Benedick and Beatrice, can induce the perception of double meaning and implicature, as well as skewed judgement on the part of the hearer. Similarly, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, a complex web of equivocation is at the heart of the plot, characters and theme of the play. Diana, in the final trial scene of the play, seems to speak in riddles and paradox, when she says of Bertram:

> Because he's guilty, and he is not guilty:
> He knows I am no maid, and he'll swear to't;
> I'll swear I am a maid, and he knows not.
> (*All's Well that Ends Well*, V.3.289-91)

As the resolution of the ambiguities, paradoxes and equivocations that pervade the plot and characterisation of this so-called 'problem' comedy illustrates, the genre calls for a festive celebratory outcome and a mood of forgiveness despite the pain and confusion that precedes it. In tragedies, however, this is not the case; here "nothing is but what is not" (*Macbeth*, I.3.145) and equivocation and paradox cannot be resolved by the kind of *deus ex machina* device employed at the end of *All's Well that Ends Well*. Paradox and inversions of the natural order baffle, mire and traduce the protagonists, bringing them nothing but confusion and despair. Ambivalence, as in the witches' prophecies or the supernatural oracle in *2 Henry VI* referenced above, can be discerned in the manifestations of nature, the actions of others and the language conventions of sociopolitical interaction in many Shakespeare plays, and is often seen to exercise a corrosive effect on the characters. As Terence Hawkes has noted in respect of *Macbeth*: "Murder is to politics what lechery is to love and equivocation is to language".[24]

Despite its abundant linguistic subtleties, Shakespeare's shortest play makes relatively little use of syntactic opaqueness or complexity in the dramatic dialogue of its characters. In terms of maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner there are constant evasions and violations arising from riddles and half-truths in the dramatic exchanges; these more central tergiversations are reflected in the more marginal exchanges of neutral or minor characters such the Porter, who delays Macduff with his rambling disquisition on equivocation and equivocators, or Ross who equivocates with Macduff by telling him his wife and children are "well" and "at peace when [he] left them". The latter's discourse strategy of being "a niggard of [his] speech", though seeming to comply with the Gricean maxims of

[24] Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals: Language and Drama in Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 153.

quantity, manner and relation, in dramatic context of the exchange flouts the maxim of quality. His responses may be metaphorically accurate, but they are literally false and evasive.

Minor characters can even contribute to political intriguing at the heart of the play through the ambiguity and semantic obfuscation created by deliberate syntactic complexity. Thus, at the opening of *Henry V* we are privy to the Machiavellian realpolitik of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely in their discussion in an ante-room prior to their meeting with the newly crowned young King. The motor for the perpetuation of the Hundred Years War and successful invasion of France turns out to be nothing more than a strategy safeguarding the Church's excessive wealth and influence. The two 'men of God' conspire to circumvent the likelihood that the new King will enact a law set in motion by his deceased father aimed to curb both their wealth and their influence. As was the case with the illegal Bush-Blair invasion of Iraq in recent times, Henry's campaign in France proves no more than a distraction and a sham, embarked on for ulterior motives and instigated in this case by the Church. In his opening scene Shakespeare shows how the unscrupulous clerics contrive to pull the wool over Henry's eyes; he then lets us witness how in the subsequent scene of their royal audience their 'weasel words', liberally sprinkled with pedantic historical references and couched in structural complexity and convolution, takes its effect on the young King. Not only does the Archbishop have "the sin upon my head, dread sovereign" (I.2.102) he has blood on his hands, particularly after the King poses a straightforward question to him in the naive expectation of a straightforward answer.

The linguistic strategy employed by the Archbishop and Bishop in I.2 is an object lesson on being economical with truth and extravagant with language. His ulterior motives are revealed to the pre-informed audience via his shameless flouting of the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner to the extent that the 'reverse maxims', as proposed above, operate in their stead. The language of his dialogue achieves this aim through a process of embedding meaning in levels of subordination that serve to obfuscate the key question of whether Henry has or hasn't a rightful claim on French territory. Two of the Archbishop's speeches, in particular, from Act 1, Scene 2, lines 178 to 240 and lines 329 to 366, illustrate this skillful dialogic technique and exemplify the effect of cumulative subordination. One key indicator of guile and specious reasoning is an accumulation of non-finite particle clauses and/or adjuncts placed before the main clause that supposedly contains the propositional meaning of the utterance. The foregrounding of such subordinate finite or non-finite clauses, in what is known in Hallidayan functional grammar as the theme part of the sentence, has the effect of planting the speaker's presuppositions in the mind of the hearer and making the latter segment, the rheme, appear a conclusive syllogism. It correspondingly backgrounds the key information of the main clause by passing quickly over possibly contentious arguments and assuming them as given information.

All of the Archbishop's speeches in this scene, and these two long speeches especially, employ this same tactic, luxuriating in redundancy, speciousness and linguistic complexity; the decisive part of the second speech from lines 333 to 359 is particularly prolix, consisting of only two sentences, each over-burdened with subordinate clauses and adjuncts. Here, following a main clause referring irrelevantly to honeybees, the prevaricating prelate piles clause upon clause in the first of the two interminable sentences. Having repeated this tactic in the second sentence, his concluding words "End in one purpose and be all well borne/ Without defeat" seem unequivocal – until on close analysis we realise they are governed by the noncommittal modal main verb, "may", secreted in the forest of preceding subordination. The inevitable result, as Shakespeare demonstrates in this highly ambivalent work, is that, rather than emulating Gertrude's curt request to the long-winded Polonius for "more matter and less art" (*Hamlet*, II.2.98), Henry allows himself to be seduced – though not too reluctantly perhaps – by the "sweet and honeyed sentences" (I.1.53) of the churchmen.

5. Conclusion

In my article I have sought to advance the claims of Blake, Culpeper, Hope, Delabastita and others that there is a significant and intricate relationship between semantics and syntax in Shakespearean play-texts. Unlike Henry's claim to France, there is strong textual support for the argument that the moral ambiguity of characters and the ambivalence inherent in both characters and dramatic situation are reflected in examples of grammatical-syntactic ambiguity and structural complexity in Shakespeare's multi-faceted poetic uses of language. The application of cooperative, or indeed uncooperative, principles to dramatic discourse (like that of other pragmatic features not dealt with in this article, such as politeness and face) can yield fresh and instructive insights when allied to functionality, functional shifts and syntactic complexity. However, further work needs to be done, comparing and contrasting syntactic ambiguity in verse passages with prose, as well as comedies with tragedies, and early plays with late ones, in order to arrive at a better understanding of Shakespeare's deployment of syntax as a core strategy of dramatic discourse. For example, establishing a database of cases of syntactic ambiguity in Shakespeare's dramatic verse and non-dramatic poetry would serve as a valuable resource for further investigation of the ambiguity and ambivalence that are central to his poetic sensibility.

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