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CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Emotion through Language Codification in Shakespearean Tragedies

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Abstract

This project attempts to analyse the emotional impact provoked by the interplay of language codification and decodification among the main characters from the Shakespearean tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. By unraveling some of the devices employed to attain such impact, we come across subtlety, insinuation, and silences juxtaposed to explicitness and declarative dialogues as the main strategies of both linguistic and psychological control, always affected by external and internal realities that enhance said emotional declension. In the three tragedies, as a result, the fields of language and dramatic action come together to entail atrocious events, thus language itself becoming a powerful actor that holds the key to the dramatic twists and emotional range.

Key words: connotative assertions, declarative sentences, insinuation, irony, language codification, language decodification, language manipulation, silences, subtlety.

Resumen

En este proyecto se intenta analizar el impacto emocional provocado por la interacción producida entre la codificación y decodificación del lenguaje en los personajes principales de las tragedias shakesperianas de *Hamlet*, *Othello* y *King Lear*. Desenmarañando algunos de los mecanismos empleados para conseguir tal impacto, nos encontramos con la sutileza, la ironía y los silencios en yuxtaposición con diálogos explícitos y declarativos como las principales estrategias de control lingüístico y psicológico, siempre bajo la influencia de circunstancias externas e internas que intensifican dicho declive emocional. Como resultado, en las tres tragedias los campos del lenguaje y la acción dramática convergen para acarrear eventos atroces, convirtiéndose así el lenguaje en un poderoso actor que posee la llave de los giros dramáticos y el alcance emocional.

Palabras clave: aserciones connotativas, frases declarativas, insinuación, ironía, codificación del lenguaje, decodificación del lenguaje, manipulación del lenguaje, silencios, sutileza.

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1. Introduction: language codification in *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*

The way in which language is coded and perceived is a powerful device of control, the intricacies of which were not only excellently explored by William Shakespeare, but also mastered and magnificently portrayed in his plays. Displaying a special interest in the depiction and treatment of psychological drama and relationships in conflict, the “Bard of Avon” bestowed his tragedies with intricate plots and, above all, with those complex linguistic devices that pervaded the communication among characters with confusion, charged with elements of conspiracy and tension. His most famous and splendid play, *Hamlet*, stands out among the field of tragedy, only defied by the outstanding dramas of *King Lear* and *Othello*. These works prove to be extraordinary examples of Shakespeare’s treatment of language and verse aimed at an exaltation of emotions and ultimately actions. Therefore, narrowing down the analysis to the aforementioned tragedies of *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, this project will attempt to underline and unravel the motives and devices behind the codification of language and consequent bidirectional decodification produced between the characters and the audience, in order to explain the disruptive impact on the mind of the protagonists, instigating corrupted behaviours resulting in atrocious events. In focusing on how Shakespeare makes excellent use of subtlety, silences and insinuation, and remarking on how the key characters interpreted the different utterances, we will discover the elements that hindered or, on the contrary, transmitted intended communication and its role within the extremes of emotion and sensibility.

2. Exploring the impact of language codification and decodification in the dramatic plot

Dominance through language is one of the most essential components in Shakespeare’s plays. How the author relied on the power of rhetoric to articulate discourse and effect the behaviour of his characters should be taken into paramount account when approaching his creation. Not only on his pages, but also on stage, language becomes crucial in order to impact a hungry

audience present to witness both the verbal intricacy and lively action in Shakespeare's plots. Therefore, as Juhani Rudanko suggests in *Pragmatic Approaches to Shakespeare*, it is important to "explore some of the linguistic or even grammatical means by which Shakespeare achieves his dramatic purposes" (2) in order to unveil the gist of the tragedy and grasp its emotional climax. Language codification gives way to manipulation of the mind and intellect in these tragedies, enhanced by the personalities of Lear, Hamlet and Othello, who enter a decadent frame of mind which succeeds in provoking a dramatic twist. Consequently, when it comes to overloading language with strokes of bitterness and despair in order to convey self-consumption as its most immediate impact, *Hamlet* has no equal. The dialogue between Hamlet and the ghost of his father can be pinned down as a stellar example in which language codification acquires strength and weight in the discourse:

GHOST. So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

.....

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

.....

. . . If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damned incest.

.....

HAMLET. . . . And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmix'd with baser matter. . . . (I, iv, 7, 25, 81-83, 102-104)

In exploring the way in which the message is articulated and codified, we may become aware of how and why it pervaded Hamlet's mind with the tainted desire of revenge due to his effective decodification. By means of using authoritarian imperatives, the repetition of the

word “revenge”, and strategic powerful phrases charged with meaning such as “unnatural murder” and “damned incest”, the ghost touches the key points of Hamlet’s brain and heart, confirming his worries and enhancing his woe. The ghost of Hamlet’s father is aiming at directly enunciating his message, in which hints of exhortation deprive his statements of subtlety and sibylline manipulation. In creating a sharp a comprehensive universe in his mind, Hamlet does not only decodify but also squeezes the intended meaning, seizing the dagger of revenge that will end up exerting an unlimited power upon his self, hence distorting his emotional bonds in the field of maternal, personal, and sentimental love. As a result, communication becomes successful and action takes shape, but a blinding obsession around vengeance is also triggered. It is worth pointing out, therefore, the linking natures pertaining to the dialogues of both Hamlet and the ghost of his father, and those of Iago and Othello.

The famous dialogue that symbolises the temptation of the sly Iago towards a naive Othello is an extraordinary instance of how a witty codification borrows from both subtlety and powerful suggestion to sow the element of the doubt:

OTHELLO. . . . As if there were some monster in his thought

Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something:

I heard thee say but now thou lik’st not that,

When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like?

.....

IAGO. . . . Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio;

Wear your eyes thus, not jealous nor secure.

I would not have your free and noble nature

Out of self-bounty be abus’d; look to’t.

I know our country disposition well:

In Venice they do let God see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown. (III, iii, 107-110, 198-204)

By means of being evasive in order to pique Othello's curiosity and move his feelings (Rudanko 26), Iago becomes the master of language manipulation and codification not only in this dialogue, but throughout the entire play. As Madeleine Doran claims in her book *Shakespeare's Dramatic Language*, "Iago's method of operation is to introduce doubt into Othello's confidence" (67-68). He initially achieves this through balancing both warning imperatives with flattery so that Othello's authority is not threatened and he takes his advice on the grounds of respect and love. By generalising infidelity in Venice, Iago makes Othello feel like an ignorant outsider that needs to be doubly careful so that his pride will not be mocked. Othello's decodification becomes consequently individualised (Cfr. López 108-111), and by wrongly believing in Iago's deceiving honesty he believes in the truth of his ancient's message. The protagonist turns into an agonising human being, an obsessed husband whose emotions will be from now on tinged with jealousy and insecurity, turning love into rubble and treason, which brings us to a similar parallelism traced with *King Lear*, the third tragedy target of our analysis.

Like in *Othello*, language codification plays a crucial role in order to attain pernicious goals and deceive the receiver in the process, which in this case is a king trapped between filial love and blindness towards reality. As doubt and treason are settled in Othello's mind, the way in which Cordelia's unadorned yet most honest and pure answer also sowed in Lear the first glimpses of filial treason due to his erroneous decodification:

CORDELIA. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave

My heart into my mouth: I love your Majesty

According to my bond; no more nor less.

.....

KING LEAR. . . . Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

Propinquity and property of blood,

And as a stranger to my heart and me

Hold thee from this for ever. . . . (I, i, 90-92, 112-115)

Deceived by his older daughters' tender yet hypocritical and intricate words that aimed at concealing their lack of sincerity, Lear decides to settle for this linguistic ornamentation when comparing answers and fails in decodifying Cordelia's naked and simple yet connotative statements. Lear's authoritarian personality is much more pleased by the emphasised declarative sentences (Doran 100) that hide the lie because they feed his prideful ego and meet his paternal expectations. He is blinded by arguable reciprocal familial love and his own heightened self-esteem. As a result, although here communication fails, and it entails tragic consequences for the noble heart of his youngest daughter, it triggers what afterwards would become the maddening truth for Lear that will throw him towards a downward spiral that defines the constructs of emotional pain. As Doran argues, "the conflict in Lear's mind, therefore, is not a debate leading to decision, but a resistance to discovery of unwelcome truth" (102), thus hindering positive decodification and increasing his search for a twist in the action that will bring his reality back. This proves how Shakespeare extraordinarily succeeds in suggesting from an early stage in the plot the impact of a carefully studied dramatic language that, be it due to a covert communication, be it a result of disorted decodification, conveys strokes of a huge psychological spectrum portrayed in the protagonists; the victims of indigestible truths.

3. Metaphorical suggestions, insinuation and appearances enhancing emotional declension

This brings us to our second point, as language codification through metaphors, subtlety and sincerity also happens to have a determinant role in paving the way towards the cathartic realisation of our key characters, as well as functioning as enhancing devices of their emotional declension. In *King Lear*, the Fool will attempt to warn Lear against his credulity and his generosity both through enigmatic statements and plain assertions, for his daughters are going to betray his integrity as a father and take advantage of his power as an old king:

FOOL. Mark it, Nuncle:

Have more than thou showest,

Speak less than thou knowest,

Lend less than thou owest,

Ride more than thou goest,

Learn more than thou trowest,

Set less than thou throwest; . . . (I, iv, 115-121)

Despite these warnings, Lear fails to understand the intricacies of this riddle, for again he is incapable of deciphering the important hidden message codified in terms of cunning suggestion. After that, the Fool plainly conveys how Lear will come to be reduced to nothing for being a fool himself, as implied in “. . . thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown / when thou gav’st thy golden one away” (I, iv, 159-160). This is supported by the falsity and irony underlying Goneril’s statements in “I would you would make use of that good wisdom, / Whereof I know you are fraught; and put away / These dispositions which of late transport you / From what you rightly are” (I, iv, 217-220), for she carefully codifies her sentences to seem dutiful at his father’s eyes whilst covertly attempting to completely deprive him of power and diminish his worth. Nevertheless, through such statements, a threatened Lear starts

regaining his truthful vision, thus becoming successful in decodifying what his daughters are trying to hide through language manipulation, as conveyed in his questions “Are you our daughter?” (I, iv, 216) and “Your name, fair gentlewoman?” (I, iv, 233). Therefore, dominance through a deceiving language begins its deflation, and the Fool’s declarative words codify reality to its utmost level. For Lear, this appalling discovery of mistreatment and betrayal not only implies an effective decodification of suggestive language and an increased susceptibility, but also sharp perception of events which enralls the king in a progressive mental deterioration and swirl of emotions, portrayed in the exalted speech of “. . . I have full cause of weeping, . . . but this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere I’ll weep. O Fool! I shall go mad” (II, iv, 282-284). The tangible sadness of these words supposes an incredible example of emotion, where once again linguistic devices such as the hyperbole of “a hundred thousand flaws” and the repetition of the word “weep” comprise a figurative physical pain that can only be attained by a stylistic mastery of the dramatic language.

Likewise, *Hamlet* offers an extraordinary example of the use of figurative and insinuating language underlining the suspicion of the prince of Denmark and his fixation upon fulfilling his revenge, but not before having attempted to expose King Claudius’s murder. By means of deliberate suggestions in *The Murder of Gonzago*, such as when the Player Queen claims “*O, confound the rest! / Such love must needs be treason in my breast. / In second husband let me be accurst! / None wed the second but who kill'd the first*” (III, ii, 173-176), his provoking questions like “Madam, how like you this play?” (III, ii, 225), and his cunning answer when King Claudius asked about the name of the play: “The Mouse-trap. Marry, how? Toppically. . . .” (III, ii, 232), Hamlet becomes the main artificer of insinuation. He aims at both subtly and directly conveying a message of realisation to his traitorous uncle as well as attempting to move the Queen’s feelings by bringing repentance to her heart, always driven by his tormenting desire of vengeance and extreme disappointment. Nevertheless, despite the

fact that language codification proves to be straight-forward through both harmful assertions and highly suggestive questions, his recipients still feel bewildered regarding his behaviour and blame his sorrow as the only source of such exasperating rhetoric speeches. Therefore, although “Shakespeare makes Hamlet always alert to pretense, to false sentiment, to exaggeration, and often makes him respond in kind” (Doran 43), the character’s language unmasks his inner agony in great measure. By channeling emotion in the form of exaggeration and anguished utterances, he heightens the complexity of his nature and hampers the accurate decodification of both his many innuendos and his most sincere feelings.

Parallel to this surrounding of appearances, insinuation and its interpretation, we can find similarities in *Othello* when it comes to the “Moor of Venice’s” judgment of both actions and language. In this case, Othello largely relies on appearances, on unfounded evidence and, above all, on the false enunciations of the pernicious ancient, for “the opacity of Iago’s language has led him to distort reality” (Doran 113); an opacity where the greedy and revengeful motives of the villain’s doing come to converge. As López Santos claims in his article “Iago’s Discourse: Deceiving Images and Erroneous Decodification”, “Iago’s main victory over Othello is of linguistic nature” (106), and in contrast to the misleading decodification and credulity of the main character that differs from the one in *Hamlet*, Iago successfully interprets his despair and borrows from Othello’s statements to accurately decipher his feelings:

OTHELLO. By the world,
 I think my wife be honest, and think she is not;
 I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.
 I'll have some proof. Her name, that was as fresh
 As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black

As mine own face. If there be cords or knives,

Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,

I'll not endure it. Would I were satisfied!

IAGO. I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion:

I do repent me that I put it to you.

You would be satisfied? (III, iii, 387-396)

As we can see in this passage, Iago still maintains an extraordinarily studied codification of his language. Due to Othello's codification of his emotional distress and contradictory feelings through juxtaposition, the reproaching adjectives he uses towards his complexion, and the employment of a succession of unpleasant elements, Iago recognises this overflowed emotion trapped in Othello's mind that enables him to perpetuate both his ill-intentioned plans and master the emotional impact of his language.

4. The role of silences juxtaposed to direct language connected to emotional climax

Along the lines of this emotional impact through excellence in the use of language devices and codification, measuring at all times what is told, it is worth remarking on the importance of silences in Iago and how it is yet another of his many strategies to control Othello's consciousness. He carefully remains silent when Othello's curiosity has been highly enlarged in order to gather all his attention around his statements and give away the impression of being respectfully prudent, supported by López Santos when he claims that "only when Othello lowers his guard, when he has interpreted and made Iago's silences his own, does the latter dare to be more explicit" (109). Therefore, once the message of temptation has been transmitted and Othello's trust is secured, Iago charges his speech with declarative and poisonous sentences based on deliberate lies that gradually instill Othello's mind with false perception:

OTHELLO. What hath he said?

IAGO. Faith, that he did - I know not what he did.

OTHELLO. What? what?

IAGO. Lie -

OTHELLO. With her?

IAGO. With her, on her; what you will.

OTHELLO. Lie with her - lie on her? We say lie on her, when they belie her. Lie with her. Zounds, that's fulsome. . . . (IV, i, 32-37)

Through utterances intertwined with falsehood, careful hesitation and measured words, Iago “wakens a destructive jealousy in Othello and successfully makes him the agent of his own ruin” (Doran 71), what submerges the protagonist in an unbearable ambiguity, affliction, and “lack of self-confidence” (López 107) that leads him to the groundless resolution of killing Desdemona. After truth is revealed through Emilia, language codification is bestowed with its utmost candidness and veracity that leaves no place for misinterpretation, posing an interesting counterpoint to the reiterated insinuation and lies that make up almost the whole of *Othello*'s discursive corpus. Ironically, accurate decodification becomes now the yoke of Othello's heart and detonates his emotional climax. Tragedy, as a result, condemns Othello's emotion to perpetual silence due to his late realisation of events, which will not be the case in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. Lear soon becomes aware of the lack of love from his “pelican daughters” (III, iv, 74) that only want to dismiss his demanding presence or mock him to highlight his now powerless position:

REGAN. Good sir, no more; these are unsightly tricks.

Return you to my sister.

.....

GONERIL. Hear me, my Lord.

What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,

To follow in a house where twice so many

Have a command to tend you?

REGAN. What need one? (II, iv, 153-154, 258-261)

Even if they codify their statements in concealment of their disdain and mitigated assertions, the impact on Lear's mind conveys truthful insight into such understated mockery and frivolity, against which he makes use of an explicit language based on threat to reflect his disgust, shame their behaviour and make amends for his impotence and resultant distorted emotion:

LEAR. . . . Art not ashamed to look upon this beard?

O Regan! will you take her by the hand?

.....

. . . No, you unnatural hags,

I will have such revenges on you both

That all the world shall - I will do such things,

What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be

The terrors of the earth. . . . (II, iv, 191-192, 276-280)

However, Lear's words will not impact his daughters' hearts and minds, and its meaning will be carried away by thunder and storms and be lost in the emotional turmoil of Lear's sentiment.

According to this lack of silence, the tragedy of *Hamlet* will also be linked to this emotional sincerity concerning the prince's disappointment in his mother. As a tormented son, Hamlet cannot help but feel deprived of a rightful and a truthful mother, failing at concealing his contempt, and in the revealing dialogue between him and the queen, her direct statements have a major impact on his emotion against which he cannot remain unbiased and sensible:

QUEEN GERTRUDE. Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

HAMLET. Mother, you have my father much offended.

QUEEN GERTRUDE. Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

HAMLET. Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

.....

[*Exit* GHOST.]

QUEEN GERTRUDE. This is the very coinage of your brain.

This bodiless creation ecstasy

Is very cunning in.

.....

HAMLET. . . . Mother, for love of grace,

Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,

That not your trespass but my madness speaks: . . . (III, iv, 9-12, 137-139, 144-146)

As we can see, Hamlet's bitterness overcomes his compassion, and his mother's ignorance portrayed in the use of "thy father" and "idle", as well as her firm belief in the madness of her son settles an unbearable despair in his emotion. As E. M. W. Tillyard states in his book *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, ". . . in talking to his mother he shows the full range of his character and relieves his long-suppressed feelings by speaking from his heart" (23), perfectly fitting this context and enabling us to see how, when Gertrude is completely open in her exclamations, discrediting her son's assertions and only addressing him as "mad", marks a turning point in Hamlet's discourse: he succeeds in dropping his cruel words and colouring his speech with filial love. Language codification is therefore bereft of subtlety and insinuation; it explicitly uncovers Hamlet's silenced concerns, although Gertrude's decodifying capacity will forever be hampered by her conviction upon her son's insanity.

5. Conclusion

Considering all the aspects underlined, we may now become aware of how Shakespeare, through an excellent use of dramatic language codified in the form of insinuation, subtlety, explicitness and assertion, succeeds in heightening the emotional impact portrayed in the tormented main characters of *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*. By making use of an extraordinary exploitation of witty language, word play, and devised vocabulary, he confers his tragedies with highly interesting character interplays whose communicative tensions create a discursive and literary unparalleled quality. Through understatement, provoking questions, and a wide range of rhetorical devices and figures of speech, such as repetition, hyperbole, suggestive metaphors and vivid vocabulary, he is able to magnificently portray both characters and discourse of great psychological complexity and dramatisation. We have, therefore, witnessed how in the plots the aforementioned tragedies, language codification, and its subsequent decodification of diverse nature, triggers emotional disorders by effecting Hamlet's, Othello's and Lear's perception, whose interpretations derive in the atrocious results of mistreatment, jealousy, and revenge. In these Shakespearean tragedies, consequently, words display its utmost power, unchaining "the shock of disillusion" (Doran 58) amidst the main tragic actors, doomed by language to perform the most tragic actions.

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