
TEXT AND DISCOURSE

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THE THREE CASES OF THE DISCOURSE OF PARENTAL AUTHORITY IN "HAMLET" BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Summary. SUMMARY. This article is written within the scope of the 34th International Symposium "Languages and Signification", Albi, France, 8-11 July 2013 the theme of which is announced as "The Discourse of Power" (Discourse d'autorité et de l'autorité). The author, president of the symposium, demonstrates upon the three texts of a didactic character taken from the "Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark", the semiolinguistic parameters of the parental authoritative discourse, the major of them being the categories of will and masculinity, as well as epistemological characteristics of this tragedy and the dichotomy of obedience/disobedience. For the theoretical grounding the author attracts Umberto Eco's concept of presuppositions, J. Austin's Speech Act Theory (SAT) as well as scientific approaches to discourse by E. Benveniste, H.P. Grice and semioticians of the Paris School and other theories of cultural and sociological character.

KEY WORDS. Discourse of Authority, presupposition, tragedy of Honour, obedience, speech act, habitus.

If we accept the idea of Umberto Eco that "any text is nothing but a presupposition machine" [1], the least that could be said in this regard is that the preposition field in "The Tragedy of Prince Hamlet" by Shakespeare is utterly open. This play that is often and reasonably regarded as a *revenge* tragedy can be considered as an *obedience* tragedy and even a tragedy of obedience's consequences. And finally, "Hamlet" is a *tragedy of honour*: the latter (honour) can be regarded as a central ACTANT of the play. However, this ACTANT sentences his personages to death, as the obedience imposed upon them by the parental discourse (of Polonius and the spirit of Hamlet's father) turns, in fact, HONOUR into a murderer. The doubts of Hamlet, whom Shakespeare presented as a student of Wittenberg University (the university of Martin Luther and doctor Faustus), whether he ought to kill his uncle, the usurper, can be comprehended if we accept that deep in his heart Hamlet is torn by the conflict between the already archaic Knight Codex of an aristocratic feudal society rooted in the

overwhelming concept of honour, and the values of Renaissance humanism. As René Girard put it in his work « *Les feux de l'envie* » (Flames of Desire), Hamlet had an aporic choice : « *renoncer à la vengeance dans un monde qui la tient encore pour un devoir sacré, c'est s'exclure de la société et retourner au néant. Il n'y a pas d'issue pour Hamlet, et notre héros passe son temps à sauter d'une impasse à l'autre, incapable qu'il est de trancher entre deux options aussi insensées l'une que l'autre* » [2]. If Hamlet, doomed to choose between two *senseless options* hesitates, he is quite sane! He has no decent way out: he finds it impossible to live in grace and honour in a world where “*all the uses*” seem to him corrupted (“*weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable*” — Act 1, sc.2) and where he would be looked upon as a coward; he also finds it impossible to kill the murderer of his father, who has become the husband of his mother, whom he despises from now on. Yet, unwillingly, he becomes a murderer.

Analysis of the contents and commentaries, which often does not go beyond the bounds of imagery enumeration, does not allow us to clarify the presupposition of the tragedy. We shall examine a French translation of the play by François-Victor Hugo, revised by Sylvie Herbinet. We cite from this translation, taking into account that any translation is an interpretation. [3].

Considering the episodes prior to Scene 3, Act 1 we can single out three presupposition moments:

At the beginning of the play Horatio, friend to Hamlet, Marcellus, Bernardo and Francisco, the two officers and a soldier, who are sentinels, upon the terrace of the Royal castle see the apparition of the late king, whose throne, crown and bed after his death are attained by Claudius, his brother. Petrified, they consent to tell prince Hamlet of the apparition of his late father. We should note that neither Bernardo nor Marcellus, who were the first to see the ghost, nor Horatio who comes to relieve one of them as sentinel and doubts that they have seen the spirit of a late king, but later sees it himself, are insane or are pictured as personages of great imagination. They are presented as mere soldiers, people of common sense, who have just seen an apparition. Yet, they are not the only ones who have seen it. Actually, it was the audience who first saw the ghost's entrance upon the stage. This fact has a special importance as the question of madness arises in the tragedy. It is this question of madness that is a frequent subject of research as regards “The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”. If only Shakespeare could have used the approach of Georges de Scudéry from his play “*La comédie des comédiens*”(1634) [4], where part of the actors had to play the role of the pastoral spectators, who in turn had to play the role of other actors, it might be possible to suppose that both the comedians and spectators upon the stage are nothing but the result of the hallucination that emanates from the spectators who remain sitting in the parterre. In any case, it might be possible to put forward the hypothesis of collective hallucination, and with the same degree of conviction to reason on Prince Hamlet's madness. Undoubtedly, in Shakespearian tragedy it is possible to trace the same sort of device, i.e. theatre within theatre, but its structure differs to a great extent from that of Scudéry. In this regard, it should be taken into account that the three

sentinels are pictured as soldiers of common sense, and what they have told Hamlet about the ghost is a “discourse of truth”, and that the ghost exists at least within the space of the stage.

The scene that has the three didactic lessons has a special implication in this *play of obedience and revenge*, as the conduct rules of the then aristocratic society are asserted. Ophelia and Laertes, children to Polonius, Lord Chamberlain of King Claudius, in the heat of a discussion enter their father’s apartments. Laertes before his departure to France bids farewell to his sister and asks her to give him her news “*as the winds give benefit*” (p. 32). Further he instructs her how to behave with Hamlet: “*For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor, Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood...*” (p. 32) [5].

A second didactic lesson is given to Laertes by Polonius, his father. As if in accord with John Austin’s ideas in “*How to do Things with Words*” [6], these didactic lessons are immediately tested by their recipients; “the discourse of authority” is imposed upon them by the personage who has double authoritative power as a father and Lord Chancellor. The brother and the sister perform their actions at different semiotic levels within the limits of the modalities “must do” (*devoir faire*) and “must be” (*devoir être*). Both discourses can be regarded as performative utterances that correspond to these modalities. In the terms of French semiotics [7], it is possible to speak of a narrative programme and of a manipulator. It is obvious that these three didactic lessons rest upon common isotopies: *love, youth, desire, virtue, honour, ill fame, codex of aristocracy*, etc. The aristocratic point of view dominates in the instructions of Laertes and Polonius to Ophelia. In their instructions, the programmes corresponding to the then culture are verbalized and fixed, i.e., the medieval order, that rests upon faith in divine order. This divine order had shaped the foundation of feudal ideology, with a special function for chosen persons, who being in possession of power and being of noble origin, took it as their obligation with arms in their hands to promote peace and justice for everyone. As Georges Duby puts it: « *Ce pouvoir, cet honneur, comme on disait, devint héréditaire* [8]. » With the arrival of the Renaissance, this order suffered a great change. Hence it is possible to assert, in the “Tragedy of Hamlet” by William Shakespeare, the feudal past and the renaissance present collide, particularly when the thoughts and actions of Hamlet, the principal personage, are revealed.

The instructions of Laertes to Ophelia are an admonition against the amorous advances of Hamlet, that she does not reject. Ophelia retorts every argument of her brother, yet, she promises him to follow his instructions, provided he is frank with her:

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart.
But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep
and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles, [like] a puff’d and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,

And reaks not his own rede.

Laertes' instruction is an example of a power discourse, a familial power discourse in the society, where man, with the exception of several historical cases, dominates woman, and mostly in a family. Such an approach is still the case in several isolated southern rural regions of France, especially in Corsica, where brothers like all Mediterranean brothers take it as their obligation to protect their sisters, interfering in their private life. Moreover, Laertes is presented by Shakespeare as an advocate of the feudal customs and traditions. At the level of pragmatics, the legality of his discursive instruction is linked to the authority of the utterer, to the modality "to be the brother" of Ophelia.

We should note that the beginning of his instruction is characterized by such properties as "impersonality" and "psychological parallelism", i.e. the analogy between the forces of nature and human ambitions. It is Benveniste's category of "no person" [9] that has a referential effect, i.e. the analogy is built between the existing physical world and its extratemporal meaning.

For nature crescent does not grow alone
In thews and [bulk],
but as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal.

This discourse means that its author (Laertes) intended to "depersonalize" the phenomena described here, thus assigning an objective and indisputable character to his instruction. Laertes' rhetoric is not only the rhetoric of an elder brother, who instructs his sister, but the rhetoric of a person, who has "passed the dangers" of life and who shares the knowledge of these dangers. The introduction of deictic words and expressions (*Perhaps he loves you now*) immediately transfers this speech onto another level. In this regard it is possible to speak about not only the "discourse of authority" (**discours d'autorité**), but of "an authorized discourse" ("**discours autorisé**"), i.e. the discourse based upon trust. It is evident that the instruction of Laertes is a part of the discursive practices in the society he and Ophelia belong to. This discursive society is not only deeply rooted in Denmark's customs, but is shaped as an ensemble of behavior codes for the political elite, to which they, being the children of the Lord Chancellor, adhere. In other words, it is possible to spot the traces of power discourse in their utterances, quite in the spirit of "habitus theory" by Pierre Bourdieu: « *"Ce que j'appelle donc un habitus, c'est-à-dire une histoire incorporée, une histoire faite corps, inscrite dans le cerveau, mais aussi dans les plis du corps, les gestes, les manières de parler, dans l'accent, la prononciation, les tics, dans tout ce que nous sommes. [...] Lorsque les philosophes parlent du pouvoir, ils le cherchent quelque part, ils pensent toujours à l'Etat, à des lieux où le pouvoir est incarné, alors que le pouvoir est insaisissable, il est partout et nulle part, ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'il n'est pas plutôt en certains endroits qu'en d'autres — dans une structure, il y a des lieux centraux. Et donc, faire une généalogie [...] de la domination, c'est chercher*

le pouvoir à la fois dans les mécanismes sociaux qui produisent des structures et aussi dans la tête des individus. Nous sommes, à travers cet habitus, à travers cette histoire incorporée, toujours exposés à être complices des contraintes qui s'exercent sur nous, à collaborer à notre propre domination. » [10]

The reason to cite from Pierre Bourdieu is connected with the representation of Power (Authority) in the tragedy. Power is described in it at different levels, the same of Power (authority) is overwhelming for the discourse, especially for the discourse of the principle characters, both at the explicit and implicit levels of utterances and commentaries.

Implementing P. Grice's theory [11], it is possible to assume that Laertes' speech fully conforms to the demand for *successful communication*, in other words this speech is of common current interest, fitting completely the context of the discourse. It is uttered at the right moment that corresponds to the *purpose of utterance* (on the eve of Laertes' departure), and in the right place (in the apartments of Polonius). Common current interest and conformity to the context of utterance are regarded as foremost conditions for successful communication.

The opening words of the scene verify this conformity:

LAER.

My necessities are inbark'd. Farewell.
And, sister, as the winds give benefit
And convey [is] assistant, do not sleep,
But let me hear from you.

In his instruction, Laertes speaks predominantly of Hamlet (*For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor*). In this case, the markers of performative discourse are scarce, yet it is possible to single out a number of the imperatives that fully conform to the modality to make do=faire faire (*Think it no more...Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister, Be wary then, best safety lies in fear*).

Here Shakespeare presents a brother's authority over his sister as a Power a priori. We should note that the rising scale of Laertes' argumentation, both on the level of psychology and on the level of politics, reveals that he is well aware of the political obligations imposed on Hamlet by his birth as a hereditary prince:

Perhaps he loves you now,
And now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch
The virtue of his will, but you must fear,
His greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own,

Here the adverbial *Perhaps* is used. Thus Shakespeare makes Laertes correlate the desired and the true, and introduces the modality of doubt. Laertes tries to convince his sister that Hamlet's love for her is only a phantom of love. The modality of doubt is enhanced by the pun. (*The virtue of his will, ... his will is not his own*). It is evident that Shakespeare presents Laertes as a manipulator: he turns Hamlet into an object of

doubt, thus making Ophelia doubt Hamlet's sincerity. From a semiotic perspective, DOUBT is in fact a dominant of Hamlet's behavior, the key soliloquy "To be or not to be" being the best proof of this.

It is noteworthy that Shakespeare makes Laertes utter at the end of his discourse with his sister the phrase: "*but here my father comes*", which is rendered in French as "*Mais voici mon père*." This possessive "my" "*mon*" seems unusual in this context, the possessive "our" (*notre*) would seem more natural here, as Laertes speaks with his consanguine sister. It is evident that Laertes dominates over his sister as if she were not a heiress of his father. Considering this episode from the point of view of proposition theory, it is possible to regard it as a relation of the two ACTANTS: the relation FATHER-SON dominates over the relation FATHER-DAUGHTER, which is clearly expressed in the further instructions of Polonius.

With the arrival of Polonius, Laertes loses his dominant status and acquires a subordinate status, as the following discourse is a sheer manifestation of the authority of the "Pater familias". Polonius instructs his son in an authoritative way:

Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion'd thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar:
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,
*But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new-hatch'd, unfledg'd courage. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
Bear't that th' opposed may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice, ...*

*[William Shakespeare:
The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.
Shakespeare-Riverside, p. 1147].*

These are not only instructions to a son by a father who is responsible for the former's behaviour, but also an example of the political discourse of a political man.

Structurally, his monologue consists of 13 imperative sentences (*Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue./ Be thou familiar./ Grapple them/ But do not dull thy palm with entertainment/ Beware/ Give every man thy ear, etc.*). Imperative speech acts serve as a basic marker of a parental discourse of Authority. But in fact, in Polonius' instructions the discursive programme of a politician cunning in the art of the possible is offered.

A third discourse, the instructions of Polonius to Ophelia, is remarkable first and foremost for a sudden change in tonality. If Laertes, getting his blessing, is instructed how to be a cunning politician, Ophelia is instructed as a foolish daughter, who can fall into disgrace by accepting Hamlet's advances.

If we consider Ophelia's phrase: *So please you, something touching the Lord Hamlet* ("C'est, ne vous déplaise ! quelque chose au sujet du seigneur Hamlet."), we should note that it is a speech act (SP) of a polite irritation. Such SP on the part of an instructed person is characteristic of every didactic text or discourse, for instance in the fable "La cigale et la fourmi" by La Fontaine. This speech act reveals that for an educated person (Ophelia, in this case) the content and the tonality of an inevitable moral lesson is absolutely predictable. Polonius' arguments here are in fact similar to the arguments of Laertes who has already instructed, Ophelia but they are more offensive both in their form and tonality.

The original	F.-V. Hugo
<p>Marry, I will teach you: think yourself a baby That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay, Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly, Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase, [Wringing] it thus) you'll tender me a fool.</p>	<p>Eh bien! moi, je vais vous l'apprendre. Pensez que vous êtes une enfant d'avoir pris pour argent comptant des offres qui ne sont pas de bon aloi. Estimez-vous plus chère; ou bien, pour ne pas perdre le souffle de ma pauvre parole en périphrases, vous me rapporterez un petit nigaud."</p>

The English word *fool* is usually rendered in French as *idiot*, *imbecile*, *clown*, *rogue*, but Sylvie Herbinet, who revised Hugo's translation of "Hamlet", refers to the observation of Yves Bonnefoy who pointed out that in this context, the word *fool* is used in the meaning of "an infant" or of "a silly person", and it could be rendered, for instance into French as "*petit enfant*". In this case, the way Ophelia reacts to her father's offence is rather justified. For her, Hamlet is a person who "*hath importun'd me with love/In honorable fashion.... With almost all the holy vows of heaven.*" Polonius reduces the pathos of the expression "*the holy vows*" to the down-to-earth metaphoric expression "*springs to catch woodcocks*", and makes Ophelia obey him.

In any case, it is possible to observe in all these three instructions "explicit performatives" (J. Austin), i.e. speech acts marked by imperatives, characteristic of the parental discourse. Furthermore, the perlocutive impact of these instructions depends on the interlocutor's gender. If Laertes in his father's recommendations still has room for choice, Ophelia is robbed of the very possibility of choice. Her semiotic role is the role of an obedient daughter.

On the whole, these three instructions should be regarded as performative explicit discourse, parental authoritative discourse as well as masculine power discourse and political authority discourse rolled into one.

CONCLUSIONS

These three examples of Power Discourse (Discours d'Autorité) took the form of three instructive lessons, one of which is given to Laertes (the son) and others to Ophelia (the daughter and the sister). These lessons are remarkable for the phenomenon

known as “la doxa”, i.e., according to Roland Barthes they reveal the spirit of political authority, of the majority, and the “outrage of prejudice”. This is the system of political dominance that is metaphorically outlined as “*the sea of troubles*” in Hamlet’s famous soliloquy “to be or not to be”, and is the major reason for Hamlet’s disguise of insanity.

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