

A Linguistic Analysis of Lady Macbeth's Monologue in Macbeth 1.5.35-52

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Abstract: *Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies that is characterized by the cruelty and brutality of the story, the ambition of the main characters and the representation of madness. Differently from other Shakespearean's dramas, the peculiarity of Macbeth is the representation of the rapid descent into madness that results from greed and power. Lady Macbeth plays a central role in the play because she is a manipulator, a powerful and ambitious woman, a believer of supernatural and evil forces and, finally, a murderer. Her influence on Macbeth is decisive in the act of killing King Duncan with the final purpose of becoming a queen herself. In this paper, the analysis of the Lady Macbeth's speech, Macbeth 1.5.35-52, was performed from a lexical and a semantic perspective to highlight the arrangement of the sentences, the use of verb tenses and language as well as the meaning of the utterances made by the speaker.*

Keywords: Lady Macbeth, Linguistic Analysis, Monologue, Shakespeare, Tragedy

Introduction

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies that is characterized by the cruelty and brutality of the story, the ambition of the main characters and the representation of madness. Differently from other Shakespearean's dramas, the peculiarity of *Macbeth* is the representation of the rapid descent into madness that results from greed and power. Lady Macbeth plays a central role in this moral and mental decay because she is a manipulator, a powerful and ambitious woman, a believer of supernatural and evil forces and, finally, a murderer. Her influence on Macbeth is decisive in the act of killing King Duncan with the final purpose of becoming a queen herself. In this paper, the analysis of Lady Macbeth's speech, *Macbeth 1.5.35-52* (Grenblatt, 1997), was performed from a lexical, syntactical and semantic perspective to highlight the arrangement of the sentences, the use of verb tenses and language as well as the meaning of the utterances made by the speaker (Quadri, 2021). This monologue is clearly an invocation of supernatural and evil forces and follows immediately the delivery of a letter in which Macbeth tells his wife about the prophecy of the witches.

Linguistic Analysis of the Monologue

For practical reasons, each sentence of the passage will be discussed in detail.

He brings great news.

This sentence is grammatically correct since it corresponds to the S-V-O rule, that is the typical word sequence Subject-Verb-Object of English language. According to the X-bar theory, the structure of this sentence is the following:

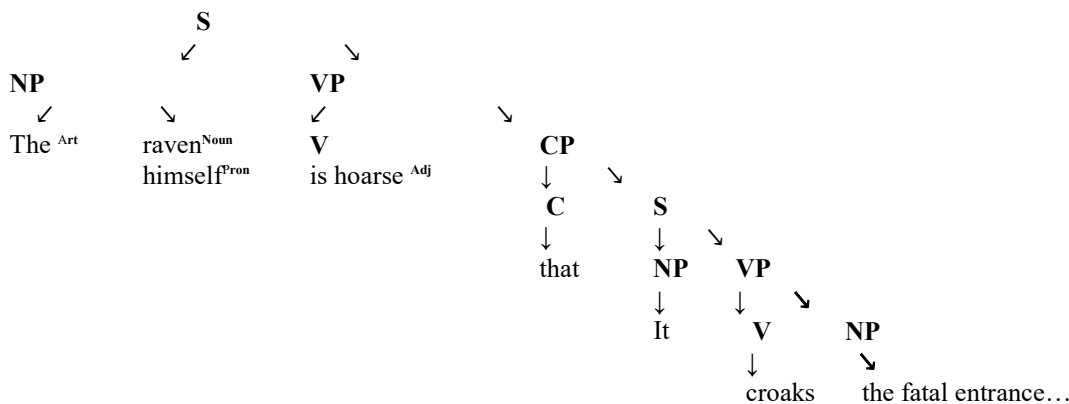
S	→	NP*		<i>He</i>		SUBJECT
	→		V	<i>brings</i>		VERB
		VP†	NP	<i>great^{Adj} news^{Noun}</i>		OBJECT

*NP = Noun préposition †VP = Verb préposition

The above sentence structure is very simple and can be also divided into Subject (*He*) + Predicate (*brings great news*). The subject is also called the *agent* which is defined as “the entity that performs the action” while “the entity that is affected by the action” is called *theme*, which in this case is represented by an inanimate object, the great news (Yule, 2010). If the sentence is taken alone, it is not possible to understand who the agent is but one may argue that it is a human being and a male person. The same can be said for the receiver of the great news, who is probably a person (the speaker) or a group of people who will experience the information delivered. According to the Speech Act Theory, this sentence is a declaration made by Lady Macbeth to herself since it is part of a monologue.

The raven himself is hoarse/That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan/Under my battlements.

This is a complex sentence in which the conjunction *that* introduces a complement phrase (CP). Therefore, the sentence is composed of two clauses, one independent (*The raven himself is hoarse*) while the other clause is dependant. A tree diagram is given in the following figure.



It is worth here to analyse the parts of speech of the entire sentence. There are lexical categories such as verbs (*is* and *croaks*), the nouns (*raven*, *entrance*, *Duncan* and *battlements*), the adjectives (*hoarse*, *fatal* and *my*), the prepositions (*under* and *of*) and non-lexical categories which are the determiner “*the*” and the conjunction “*that*”. The two clauses of this sentence express a complete and meaningful thought. There is entailment here since the fact that the raven (metaphor of bad luck) is coarse (an adjective which is a synonym of nasty, awful and rude) implies that Duncan will make his final appearance at the speaker’s fortress. As a matter of fact, this sentence appears as an intentional attack to a person who is not present in the scene but, despite its absence, this speech is an expression of impoliteness. In addition, this utterance can be considered as inherent impoliteness because its aim is to challenge the hearer’s face. The hearer might not be present during the speech but the analysis of the context allows concluding that Lady Macbeth is intentionally expressing her attack against the king for her personal interest.

Come you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/Of direst cruelty.

The conjunction *that* creates a complement phrase, but the sentence is more complex than the previous one because of the use of *and*, another conjunction. This means that more information is provided by the speaker and that the three clauses express evil intentions as in the previous sentence. The S-V-O rule is altered, and the sequence order is rather Verb-Subject-Object since the verb tense used is the imperative. Therefore, the verbs *come*, *unsex* and *fill* express the wishes of the speaker and the single clauses are linked together to convey the same request and intention. In fact, all clauses are invoking the help or assistance of the spirits. For what concerns the verb *unsex*, it derives from the word *sex*, a free lexical morpheme, with the addition of the prefix *un-*, a bound derivational morpheme, to create the opposite of the verb *sex*. Based on this derivation, the verb indicates the specific request of being deprived of female

bodily features and then to look more like a man. The use of the word top-full is unclear since it is likely used here to express the action of having the body filled up with cruelty. *Crown* may be considered as a metonym for king or queen, a symbol of power over a kingdom.

*Make thick my blood,/Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,/That no compunctious visitings
of nature/Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between/Th'effect and it.*

The use of the imperative tense continues in this sentence which is clearly a demand for assistance made to the spirits, a term used here to represent the evil or supernatural forces. Blood may be a metaphor of energy or power which would make sense here since the speaker longs to thicken her power that is to increase it. Stop up is a phrasal verb which, according to Collins online dictionary, means “to cover or fill a hole or gap in it”. The meaning of this verb is to block or impede the entrance of senses of guilt (*remorse*) to conscience, an event that the lady asks to avoid. In addition, the adjective *compunctious* is a synonym of regretful which in this case reinforces the avoidance of feelings of culpability. Moreover, this adjective was created by Shakespeare himself likely with the aim to enhance the asperity of the term remorse (Crystal, 2016). *That* is not a conjunction here but an adverb which use is to enhance the meaning of the previous clauses, that is to become stronger and more powerful without failures or mishap. Nature, as a noun, may be associated with calmness, quiet and harmony while fell is a synonym of evil and cruelty. It is likely here that this contrast between serenity and excitement, otherwise good and bad, reflects the interior struggle of the speaker’s conscience. Access, passage and visitings are nouns which relate to the action of moving towards someone or something. These verbs refer to an interaction between two elements or situations which is not desired by the speaker. This aspect is further enhanced by the use of the determiners no and nor which give a negative connotation to the sentence since they support the wish of the speaker that specific events shall not take place.

*Come to my woman’s breasts,/And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,/Wherever in
your sightless substances/You wait on nature’s mischief.*

This sentence is characterised by the presence of a distinct subject (you murd’ring ministers) differently from the previous discussion of the text. This specification clarifies the nature of the person or entity who is performing the action required by the speaker, that is to come, to take and to wait. Wherever is a conjunction which links the two clauses of this utterance, but it also works as an adverb because it emphasises the place where the action should be performed. With regards to sentence structure, only in the dependent clause the S-V-O rule is respected since the verb used is not in the imperative tense (you wait) and the subject appears clearly as having an active role. Milk and breasts are nouns associated with ideas of sweetness, motherhood and femininity which are in opposition to the associations that one might consider with gall that is bitterness, disgust and cruelty. The speaker creates once again a contrast between positive and negative aspects of women’s attitudes or personality as confirmed by the intent to exchange her female features with evil qualities- Hence, this request is similar to the one made in a previous part of her speech, when she says: “unsex me here...”. Minister can be considered as a synonym of governor or priest which, in this case, is likely officers or worshipers with evil intentions since they are asked to help the lady to commit a crime. Sightless is an adjective composed by the noun sight and the suffix-less which creates a negative form of sight, that is the lack of vision or rather an invisible condition of the entity to which the speaker is making her request. Mischief is a term formed by the noun chief, synonym of headman or director, and the prefix mis- which concerns to something bad or wrong. In this context, the mischief of nature refers to wicked and malevolent behaviour as if nature were a human being. As a matter of fact, terms such as personality, temperament and disposition can be considered as hyponyms of nature since there is a strong association between them. Moreover, the speaker is addressing to a supernatural element as if it were a true person with human qualities.

Come thick night,/And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,/That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,/Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark/To cry 'Hold, hold!'

Personification is the literary device just discussed in the previous section with reference to nature. In this sentence there are other examples of human qualities given to objects. For example, night is exhorted to make a movement towards the speaker and to hesitate, heaven is asked not to look and even to utter some words. It is possible to argue here that in the speaker's mind there is a hidden need to place herself and the supernatural world at the same level of behaviour, thinking and perception. In addition, the lady is speaking to someone or something that is able to hear and to understand her speech. In this last sentence there are many words that can be metaphorically associated with other things. Smoke is associated with a low visibility similarly to dunnest, heaven is a metaphor of conscience, blanket is linked to an idea of keeping something covered or hidden while peep is a synonym/hyponym of look and hold likely refers to the action of waiting or hesitating. The lack of vision is further underlined by the verbs to see and to peep expressed in a negative sentence created by the determiners not and nor. All these aspects may bring to the conclusion that the speaker wishes to keep her request concealed, vague and unclear since her conscience is apparently not free of guilty feelings. *Thee* is the archaic pronoun for the second person singular pronoun you but according to Collins dictionary, it is also used as the object of a verb. Anyway, it was typical of Middle and Early Modern English, as during Shakespeare's life, but not anymore in modern English except for biblical or religious texts.

Conclusion

To conclude, the entire passage can be discussed in terms of cohesion, a term that refers to the grammatical and lexical links that exist within a text. The identification of these connections can increase the understanding of the meaning of this passage. In the first place, the imperative form of verbs used is repeated throughout the text as to underline the request made by the speaker. Indeed, Lady Macbeth is making a sort of list of things she would like to obtain: come, unsex, fill, make, stop, shake, keep, take, pall. These are all action verbs which are dynamic and require the change of a condition. Basically, the change is from a condition of morality and purity towards the commitment of an evil deed. This is the wish of the speaker which is clearly and constantly repeated in the text. As a matter of fact, the verb come is repeated three times in this passage, an aspect that is likely related with the insistence of the speaker thus confirming her purpose. In this excerpt, internal cohesion is determined by the use of the words fatal, mortal, cruelty, fell, murd'ring, mischief, dunnest and dark which refer to death, evil and obscure, aspects that have been widely discussed in this analysis. In a similar way, sightless, night and smoke are other terms used which can be associated with ideas of concealment and vagueness. Finally, there are many words that refer to natural elements such as raven, blood, breasts, milk, gall, night, and smoke which create ties within the text in accordance with the fact that in this excerpt the speaker is interacting exclusively with supernatural forces.

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