

## PRAGMATICS OF SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH NIGHT*

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Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* has been recognized as an embodiment of the uses of the most sophisticated concepts in pragmatics and the philosophy of language. Throughout the play, characters use the most complex methods of communication to express their thoughts and create their intended perlocutionary effects in others. In order to truly understand and appreciate the brilliance of the use of these complex linguistic devices, as well as learning about how their misuse could result in unsuccessful communicative acts, it is important to analyze the pragmatics of some of the passages from the *Twelfth Night*.

One of the most fundamental concepts of the philosophy of language which could be used to analyze many of the passages in *Twelfth Night* is the schema of speech acts.<sup>i</sup> An example of such passages appears in Act II of the play, when Maria and Andrew are speaking about Viola.

Act II, Scene 3. [A room in Olivia's house.]

140     *Maria.* Marry, sir, sometimes he is a kind of Puritan  
          *Andrew.* O, if I thought that, I'd beat him like a dog.  
          *Toby.* What, for being a Puritan? Thy exquisite  
                  Reason, dear knight.

This passage is an example of how a speech act could fail due to a difference between the contextual beliefs of the speaker (Maria) and those of the hearer (Andrew). In order to find the level in which the communicative act fails, it is important to analyze the schema of Maria's speech act.

Schema of speech act consists of four levels. The first level (L1) is the utterance produced by the speaker. In the passage above, Maria produces the utterance "Marry, sir,

sometimes he is a puritan.” The sound or the so-called “acoustic blast” which Maria produces falls in the first level of the schema.

The second level of the speech act (L2) involves the meaning of an utterance. Hence, for instance the meaning of Maria’s utterance is to be understood by way of the hearer understanding the meaning of every word in that utterance, and also the meaning that those words produce when put in that specific arrangement. Andrew, therefore, is to understand the meaning of each one of the words in Maria’s utterance, such as the word “puritan” which could be used ecclesiastically or to describe a censorious person, but also what that word means when used in a certain context.

The third level of the schema of speech acts (L3) involves what the speaker says by producing a certain utterance. In this level, the hearer moves from understanding the *idea* of a sentence to understanding speaker’s utterance in a specific context and reference. Hence, by producing the utterance “Marry, sir, sometimes he is a puritan,” she is not only introducing the idea of someone being a puritan, but she is also introducing this idea in a certain context to describe someone in specific (Viola) as a puritan.

The last level of a speech act describes what a person is doing of saying something. The description of this level greatly overlaps with John Searle’s notion of illocutionary acts.<sup>ii</sup> In this case, Maria is making an assertion by way of communicating a certain description about viola.

Kent Bach and Robert Harnish assert that in order for one to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate, one has to successfully progress through the four levels of the schema of the speaker’s speech act. However in the above scene, Maria’s communicative act fails due to Andrew’s lack of ability to successfully move from L1 to

L2. Andrew understands that Maria is producing an utterance. Therefore he passes L1. As he moves to L2, he also understands that Maria's utterance means something and that in order to understand that meaning, he needs to know what individual words mean. However, Andrew fails to pick out the contextually most relevant meaning of the word "puritan" due to his failure to take the context in which Maria is using that word into account. Even though puritan could be used in a religious sense, Maria's usage of the word "sometimes" in the sentence should lead Andrew to realize that the meaning of "puritan" which Maria is relying on in this sentence is one that could change at different times, and the only meaning of the word "puritan" that could temporally change is "a censorious person." In this conversation, Andrew shows that in cases when one word could have more than one meaning, he could prove incapable of using the context of the sentence to select the most relevant meaning of that word. Andrew fails to consider the meaning of the word "puritan" in light of the context of the sentence, which results in him not recognizing the idea that Maria is intending to communicate, which is Viola could sometimes be a censorious person. Therefore, Maria's communicative act derails between L1 and L2, which results in Andrew misunderstanding what Maria means.

Another important concept in the philosophy of language which Shakespeare has masterfully employed in *Twelfth Night* is that of indexicals. In order to recognize the importance of the usage of indexicals and the effects that the speaker could create by using indexicals properly, one must review a portion of a conversation that takes place between Duke and Viola in Act II. In this portion of the conversation, Viola is explaining to the Duke that despite men's more exaggerated ways of expressing their love, women's love could very well be as strong as men's.

Act II, Scene 4. [*The Duke's Palace*]

- 105 *Duke.* What dost thou know?  
*Viola.* Too well what love women to men may owe.  
In faith, they are as true of heart as we.  
My father had a daughter loved a man  
As it might be perhaps, were I a woman  
I should your lordship.
- 110 *Duke.* And what's her history?  
*Viola.* A blank my lord. She never told her love,  
But let concealment, like a worm i' th' bud,  
Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,  
And, with a green and yellow melancholy,  
115 She sat like Patience on a monument,  
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?  
We men may say more, swear more; but indeed  
Our shows are more than will; for still we prove  
Much in our vows but little in our love.
- 120 *Duke.* But died thy sister of her love, my boy?  
*Viola.* I am all the daughters of my father's house,  
And all the brothers too, and yet I know not.  
Sir, shall I to this lady?

Before explaining the way in which Viola uses indexicals to communicate certain things, some of the basic concepts behind the idea of indexicals must be explained.

There are two methods of picking out an object in language. One is by emphasizing the sense or concept of an object. For instance, Viola could pick out Orsino's beloved character by using her name, Olivia. Since the sense in a way defines the object under consideration, its existence is not temporal. This means that a sense could exist even if the object it is defining does not exist. A second way of picking out an object is by using a reference. One way of referring to objects is by using the demonstratives and indexicals. An indexical<sup>iii</sup> does not say anything about the object that is being picked out. The only purpose of an indexical is to take the hearer directly to an object without giving the sense of that object. As a result, indexicals are temporal in nature; their existence depends on the actual object as well as the context of a sentence. For example, if Viola refers to Olivia as "she," Viola would be using an indexical.

There are two important points to keep in mind about the indexicals. One is that

the speaker needs to find a way to make sure that the indexical she is using is going to lead the hearer to successfully pick out the object that the speaker has in mind. The second point is that since an indexical does not give any sense of an object and has no informative value, the hearer is left unclear of what the thought is and not knowing what aspect of the object the speaker has in mind.

In the conversation between Viola and Orsino, she is using indexicals to pick out various people. Viola's usage of indexicals is significant because she masterfully uses their ambiguity to implement the important task of expressing a wealth of information about her knowledge and emotions knowing that Orsino is not going to understand her real thoughts expressed by her utterances.

The first instance of Viola's such use of indexicals appears when the Duke asks her what she knows about women's love. She begins by stating, "In faith, they are as true of heart as we." The reference of the indexical "they" seems to clearly be referring to "women" mentioned in the previous sentence. However, it is not clear what the indexical "we" is referring to. She could be referring to herself and Duke, but she could also be referring to herself and a group of individuals similar to her, but not including Orsino in that group. Hence in order for Orsino to understand who "we" is referring to, he uses a device known as a mutual contextual belief.

In order to truly appreciate Viola's use of the ambiguity mentioned above, it is important to briefly review the role of Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCB's) in a sentence. An MCB describes the idea that when one produces an utterance, one does so in a certain context and while knowing that the hearer is going to interpret that utterance in the context in which the hearer thinks the speaker has produced that utterance. Similarly,

when one attempts to understand an utterance, one does so in a certain context and while knowing that the speaker has produced that utterance in the context in which the speaker has thought the hearer would try to interpret that utterance.

When Viola uses “we,” she understands about its certain degree of reference ambiguity, but also knows that Orsino is going to decide who “we” is referring to in the context in which he thinks Viola has produced that utterance. What is important to note is that when the speaker has more information about the topic of the sentence, one can use that knowledge to express some idea while knowing that the hearer’s lack of knowledge will lead him to understand it in a very different way. When Viola says “they are as true of heart as we,” she knows that the Duke is going to conclude that “we” is referring to him and Viola, and decide that what Viola and Orsino have in common is that they are both men. However Viola is making her utterance in a very different context. She knows that in reality she is a woman. Reading the sentence in that context, it becomes apparent that the idea she is communicating is similar to the one expressed with the sentence, “women are as true in heart as women.”

Similarly, Viola states, “My father had a daughter loved a man as it might be perhaps, were I a woman I should your lordship.” In this sentence, Viola is speaking about her father’s daughter. Since Orsino believes that Viola is a man, he interprets Viola’s utterance in that context and concludes that she must be speaking about a sister of hers. However, Viola is producing her utterance with the knowledge that she is in fact a woman and the only daughter in the family, and therefore is speaking about herself. One of the most important features of the indexicals is that it makes it unclear to understand what the thought is and moves away from the concept of a complete thought. What Viola

is able to do is to use the ambiguity of thought that is attached to indexicals to express so much of her knowledge about women's love and also her emotions for Orsino in her utterances without ever lying, but in a way that Orsino would take her utterances to mean very different things. By saying, "My father had a daughter loved a man as it might be perhaps, were I a woman I should your lordship," Viola sounds like she is drawing a similarity between a love her sister had for a man and a love Viola could have had for Orsino if Viola was a woman. However, based on the context that she is producing her utterance, what she really means is "My father had a daughter (Viola) loved a man (Orsino) as it might be perhaps, were I a woman (which *I am*) I should your lordship (which *I do*)." Viola manages to use the knowledge of her true identity to speak about her feelings for Orsino, but in a way that he would not be able to understand because of his very different and limited contextual beliefs.

Another concept which could be observed in the above conversation is John Searle's concept of indirect speech acts. Viola uses this concept when Orsino asks her if Viola's sister died of her love.

Act II, Scene 4. [*The Duke's Palace*]

121     *Duke.* But died thy sister of her love, my boy?  
          *Viola.* I am all the daughters of my father's house,  
                  And all the brothers too, and yet I know not.  
                  Sir, shall I to this lady?

Before analyzing Viola's use of indirect speech acts, it is important to briefly review Searle's notion of an indirect speech act.<sup>iv</sup>

The concept of indirect speech act is the way one distinguishes between speaker's meaning and sentence meaning. Searle explains that although there are many cases where the speaker's meaning corresponds to the meaning of the sentence, there are also cases of

indirect speech acts where the speaker communicates to the hearer more than what she is saying by way of relying on the hearer and her own mutually-shared linguistic and nonlinguistic background. Hence, based on this concept, the speaker can produce an utterance to communicate to the hearer an idea that is completely different from the literal meaning of that utterance. Searle explains that indirect speech acts are usually used in order to communicate in a polite manner. However Viola demonstrates how such acts could also be used to intentionally mislead the hearer without ever lying about anything.

Earlier in the conversation, Viola spoke about herself in a way that led Orsino to believe she was speaking about a sister she had. She did so by using the thought ambiguity of the indexicals. In this section, Orsino asks if Viola's sister (in whose existence Orsino has believed) died of her love. Now Viola attempts to find a way to continue to mislead Orsino. In her response, Viola wants to continue to hide her sex, and also lead Orsino to conclude that her sister is dead. What makes this task even more overwhelming is that Viola does not lie about any of the things regarding which she is misleading Orsino. She finds the best method of implementing this task in the concept of indirect speech acts. When Orsino asks Viola if her sister died of her love, Viola responds by saying, "I am all the daughters of my father's house, and all the brothers too." Based on the linguistic background that Viola and Orsino share, Viola knows that Orsino is going to assume that Viola is being cooperative in the conversation and therefore her utterance is intended to answer his question. Based on that assumption and based on the knowledge shared in their common linguistic community, Viola's indirect response is to be taken to mean that her sister has died.

Therefore Viola is successful in answering Orsino's question indirectly while

being aware that the context in which Orsino is interpreting the meaning of Viola's utterance will lead him to conclude something that is untrue in reality, but will satisfy his inquiry and would make sense to him.

Another example of an indirect speech act appears in Act III. In this exchange which takes place between Sir Toby and Viola, he is asking her to enter Olivia's house.

Act III, Scene 1. [*Olivia's garden*]

*Toby.* Taste your legs, sir; put them to motion  
80 *Viola.* My legs do better understand me, sir, than I  
understand what you mean by bidding me taste my  
legs.  
*Toby.* I mean, to go sir, to enter.

In this portion of the conversation, Sir Toby is producing the utterance "Taste your legs, sir; put them to motion." This utterance falls in the first level of the schema of speech acts. The second level involves the hearer (Viola) to understand the meaning of every word in Sir Toby's utterance as well as what meaning those words produce in the shared linguistic community when they are arranged together as they are in Sir Toby's utterance. However, the concept or idea which needs to form in Viola's mind before she could try to understand what Sir Toby means by that utterance never forms.

There is one major difference between this example of the usage of indirect speech act and the one Viola expressed in the previous example. In the previous instance, Viola performed an indirect speech act which was contextually shared in the linguistic community. Therefore Orsino understood the way Viola responded to his question. However, in this example, Sir Toby is performing an indirect speech act that is not commonly used in the linguistic community shared by Viola and himself. Hence, that results in Viola not understanding the speaker meaning.

One of the most critical differences between direct and indirect speech acts is the

necessity of mutually-shared linguistic contextual beliefs to understand indirect acts.

When one produces an indirect speech act, she means something more than the sentence meaning. But she could also mean something entirely different than the literal meaning of the sentence, such as Sir Toby's utterance, "Taste your legs." Because the gap between sentence meaning and speaker meaning could be large, one needs to perform indirect speech acts while taking into account whether individuals in the same linguistic community are going to understand the speaker's meaning from the utterance. This is the reason why some of the expressions in one language do not express any thoughts when translated word-to-word to another language; because many expressions are meant to express a meaning that is entirely different than the sentence meaning. Since Sir Toby is producing an utterance without taking into account the mutual linguistic contextual beliefs, Viola is unable to understand his meaning, which results in the failure of his communicative act.

All of the utterances analyzed here have something in common, which is in all of them, the speakers have performed some illocutionary acts by way of producing their utterances. In the first example, Maria produces the utterance, "Marry, sir, sometimes he is a puritan." By producing that utterance, she is performing an *assertive* illocutionary act,<sup>v</sup> or in other words, she is committing herself to the truth of the proposition that Viola is sometimes a puritan. Similarly, in the conversation between Viola and Orsino, she is producing utterances in order to perform assertive illocutionary acts, committing her to the truth of the information she is communicating to Orsino about women's love and also about her own emotions (which Orsino takes to be those of Viola's sister). Also, in the last passage, Sir Toby produces the utterance, "Taste your legs, sir; put them to motion."

By way of producing that utterance, he is performing a *directive* illocutionary act, or an attempt by the speaker (Sir Toby) to get the hearer (Viola) to do something (enter Olivia's house). However there are cases where the speaker is not performing any act by making her utterance, which shall briefly be discussed.

In Act V, Clown reads the letter that Malvolio has written about his condition while held captive.

Act V, Scene 1. [*Before Olivia's house.*]

*Clown.* Look then to be well edified, when the fool  
Delivers the madman. [*Reads in a loud voice*] "By  
the Lord, madam" –

*Olivia.* How now? Art thou mad?

295 *Clown.* No, madam, I do but read madness. And your  
Ladyship will have it as it ought to be, you must  
allow *vox*.

*Olivia.* Prithce read i' thy right wits.

300 *Clown.* So I do, madonna; but to read his right wits is  
to read thus. Therefore prehend, my princess, and  
give ear.

In this scene, the Clown starts reading Malvolio's letter in loud voice. He begins by reading, "By the Lord, madam." Olivia is aware that the clown is not producing that utterance to perform an illocutionary act because she is aware that he is merely reading Malvolio's statements. However, when the clown uses loud voice, Olivia thinks that he is actually mad. The reason for this assumption is that Olivia is only expecting the clown to express sentence meanings of Malvolio's statements. However, the Clown surprises Olivia by taking the job of expressing Malvolio's thoughts one step farther and tries to perform the act the way he believes Malvolio would have performed.

Such attempt by the clown prompts Olivia to ask if he is mad. The reason for asking this question is that she thinks the clown is actually performing an illocutionary act while reading Malvolio's statements. The clown responds by saying, "No, madam, I do but read madness." What the clown means is that he is only reading Malvolio's

statements they way it would have sounded like if Malvolio were to express them while performing his illocutionary act. This passage is a great example of an utterance that the speaker is not producing to perform an illocutionary act but rather to quote someone else, and also an example of how the production of such utterance could result in some confusion in the hearer while trying to figure out whether the speaker is or is not performing an illocutionary act.

As it has been demonstrated, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is a rich source of usages of various linguistic elements. The instances analyzed here are just a few examples of how well Shakespeare understood the way linguistic devices work, and how their misuse could result in the failure of communicative acts. Hence it is only by truly understanding the concepts of the philosophy of language and analyzing the passages according to those concepts that we are able to understand the speakers' meanings the way Shakespeare truly meant them to be understood.

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<sup>i</sup> K. Bach and R. M. Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, 3-18. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979. Copyright © 1979 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>ii</sup> J.R. Searle, "What Is a Speech Act?" In *Philosophy in America*, edited by M. Black, 221-239. Copyright © 1965 by Unwin Hyman.

<sup>iii</sup> Howard K. Wettstein, "How To Bridge the Gap Between Meaning and Reference," *Synthese* 58 (1984):63-84. Copyright © 1984 by D. Reidel Publishing Company.

<sup>iv</sup> John R. Searle. "Indirect Speech Acts." In *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3: *Speech Acts*, edited by O. Cole and J. L. Morgan, 59-82. New York: Academic Press, 1975. Copyright © 1975 by John Searle.

<sup>v</sup> John R. Searle. "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts." Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, U.K.