



## Verbal Combat Strategies in William Shakespeare's Othello: Othello versus Iago

**Najaf Ali Babazadeh**

*Department of Literature, Electronic Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.*

**Original Article:**

*Received 10 March, 2017 Accepted 25 July, 2017 Published 05 Sep. 2017*

### ABSTRACT

Jeremy Hawthorn in his book, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (1992), argues that Cultural Materialism is an "umbrella term" that allows itself the opulence to use a wide range of instruments and theories from many different disciplines and interdisciplinaries in the superstructure. This also allows us to justify the nature of both commonly acknowledged and abstruse socio-cultural episteme and discourse, one of the most prominent of which is the subject matter of power and power relations.

This study, which was originally part of a larger body of work on Cultural Materialism, attempts to draw upon a few different theories to scrutinize the confrontational relationship that exists between the two prominent characters of Shakespeare's (1953) *Othello* (namely Othello and Iago), as represented by the duel-like direct and indirect orations and actions of the two characters. The main purpose of the article is to show how Iago is able to control the words of Othello against him and thus succeed in manipulating other characters.

The critical and theoretical debates are drawn upon in this paper will include Austin's (1999) attitudes on language as action, Bourdieu's (1999) argument of dialogue as contest and Hutchby's (1999) findings on turn-taking strategies. This study will also utilize some theories of Michel Foucault such as discourse, language, power and power relations in order to have some influence in relation to individuals' ideas.

### Keyword:

Cultural Materialism,  
Language and Power,  
Oration, discourse, power  
relations

\* Corresponding author: [www.njbabazadeh81@gmail.com](mailto:www.njbabazadeh81@gmail.com)

Peer review under responsibility of **Iranian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research**

## Introduction

The term 'discourse' defines the context and behaviour in which words and views are exchanged. The importance of an idea largely relies on the context in which the idea is being argued and what other ideas it is being related to. This extended context is what Foucault means when he explains about "discourse." Discourse is like a medium or general domain of all statements and practices that can be used to refer to all utterances which have been made and have some effect and meaning. The reason that many people understand the word discourse to be of use is that Foucault insists that discourse is associated with power relations. In the *History of Sexuality*, Volume I, Foucault (1978) states that:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (p. 100-1)

As Foucault has said, "discourse is a vehicle for power" (Burns 1994). Power does not necessarily demonstrate itself in the shape of political dictatorship or violence, as it can be existed in all forms of daily life as well. However, even Foucault himself could not arrange all the constituents of what he described "discourse". Nevertheless, what is clear and what has been openly declared is that "the institutions in a society are important parts of the prevalent discourse in society" (Burns 1994). These institutions use the instruments at their disposal, including images, words, merchandise, money, art, music etc., to turn their discourse into social "common sense" (Fairclough 1989). Newspapers, magazines, television, radio stations, books etc. all need to utilise language to contact their discourse to their publicity. Therefore, it is clear that in order for the holders of power (or for discourse) to exercise power and have linguistic supremacy over the people, language is not to be forgotten. That is to say that there have undoubtedly been many cases of research or thought into the nature of language and attempts to show how language is formed into a tool for manipulation of power. There have been many written texts from the time of classics like Plato and Aristotle, through to Nietzsche (1998), who claims in *The Will to Power* that the members of society have to follow the laws of the flock and by doing so their pride shatters and language is utilised to unveil that loss of pride. There have also been well-known contemporaries like Fairclough (2003), who adds some spice to his analyses with his socialist and capitalist intentions. He argues that social practices, utterances and statements gradually sieve through into discourse and help formulate it. Similarly, discourse induces certain social beliefs and consequently leads to discursively formulated actions and experiences.

What makes the subject matter of language significant to this paper is that language is one of the most influential tools in this confrontational relationship between discourse

and society. It is clear to say that if someone studies the discourse of power, language will no doubt be the focus of attention. The holders of power are those who know how to control discourse, and when language is one of the instruments of a power feud, those who can manipulate it will be the winners. This is exactly what this article will concentrate on verbal combat strategies of words and actions in the form of poetic and rhetorical speeches where one part (Othello) attempts to use rich language to justify his position and attract the individuals' attention (in the Senate), namely his closed friends and the army, and the other part (Iago) strives meticulously and ambiguously to stir all the characters into a devious action.

## 2. Theory in Practice

One point must be made clear before further argument begins. Throughout this paper, one significant question may arise: why are some of the opinions declared by the author related to communication or dialogue while the topic seems to focus on language as a whole? Is this study claiming to analyse language or dialogue? Is language as like as dialogue? To prevent such misunderstandings, the researcher would like to draw on Bakhtin's concept of Dialogism. Kershner (2001: 22) declares that Bakhtin uses the term "heteroglossia" in order to refer to the fact that speech insofar as it is manifested in a specific condition is "always multiple and is always a mixture of languages". He also states that "language is always double voiced, embodying both the language of the speaker [...] and any immediate or anticipated addressee". Every practice or production is aimed at someone or some people particularly. It is a reaction to some other utterances and expects for a response. Thus, it might be resulted in any instance of language usage, a sentence produced in a certain context or even a speech (which in fact has been mentioned by Bakhtin) may be observed and interpreted not as just a long disjointed passage for its own sake, but as a dialogue. Thus, when a sentence is analysed on its own one may consider the context, the amalgam out of which the sentence arises - namely the thought of the speaker (which is a warehouse of previous memories, feelings, beliefs etc.) - and the addressee(s) or the anticipated addressee(s) of the sentence. Bourdieu (1999) believes that language is not merely a simple conversation but a contest. He argues that conversation is seldom carried out for mere communication and that speakers on both direct and indirect sides of the conversation are in pursuit of symbolic profit. He is not alone in thinking so. Austin (1999) points out that "...the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action - it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (p. 65). To Bourdieu (1999), utterances possess value. The value of the utterances of any one of the speakers in a dialogue counts on the relation of power established between the speakers. In a conversation, both sides try to increase the value of their utterances by concentrating on their linguistic competence. In the long run, however, the value of the words in this market of utterances is described by a complex combination of all the variables related to the speakers, the groups that speak, the competence of the speakers, the social structure and the shared background of the interlocutors. Bourdieu (1999) states a detail in his practices and statements that further shows how problematic it can be to

face the issues of language with an objective, "scientific" approach. He claims that maximisation of the symbolic prophet people gain in a conversation does not take place by calculation, but by expectation. By this he means that the listeners, such as the interlocutors themselves, will have an expectation of the effectiveness of the sentences produced in a certain context and in certain conditions. They will also have expectations about the impact that the sentences uttered may or may not have on the dialogic "opponent". What is expected of the speaker's potential linguistic and even meta-linguistic (to use Bakhtin's words) competence is a part of what determines whether someone's words will be considered acceptably trenchant by other members of this particular society (Bourdieu 1999). It is interesting to go more profound into the issue of power manipulation in language and follow what Hutchby's (1999) "Power in Discourse: The Case of Arguments on a British Talk Radio Show", puts the power strategies used by the speakers on some radio talk show under the microscope.

In such shows where the key goal of the caller is to begin and pursue a debate on a chosen topic, the presenter and the caller become entangled in a struggle for control over the direct and indirect conversation. In Hutchby's (1999) opinion, turn-taking in such cases is a significant power-handling strategy with which the speakers know the situation and hold power.

In his analyses of recorded tapes he found that, in a discussion, the one who begins the direct or indirect conversation or gives an idea is more susceptible to attack from the opposite side, whereas the person who waits for the other side to speak is usually more successful in turning the conversation in his/her own favour. This is because he/she will be sitting in the safety of his/her shelter of silence and will be able to contemplate how to oppose the facts or opinions being directly and indirectly stated by the opponent. However, even if the speaker makes the mistake of providing his/her opponent in dialogue with an Achilles heel, there are still ways to compensate and regain power in a dialogue. Even if a speaker initially loses his/her control by starting the debate, he/she may gain it back by inviting the opponent to give his/her opinion on the matter.

It is also interesting to mention that in the concluding pages of his paper, Hutchby (1999) insists relations between his study and the Foucauldian notion of power. He finds announcements of two of Foucault's most significant attitudes on power: first, that discursive power exists in all layers of social life, from the mundane to the highly elite politics, and second that wherever there is authoritative power, there is always some sort of resistance against that power that attempts to challenge it. It seems that nobody can get rid of power relations, as Michel Foucault himself states, "where there is power there is resistance" (*Power and Knowledge*, p. 109). This is what New Historicists call "subversion" and the Cultural Materialists refer to as "dissidence". Hutchby (1999) believes that his paper is evident enough that Foucault's views were proven to be true in his study. He shows with his article the two points that are the following. First, power does not have to be on a large scale. It does not have to be exercised on a national or global scale to be considered power proper, and it does not have to be imposed with force by a certain group in order for it to be influential. It can exist among everyday people in the most unimportant dimensions of everyday life. The

second position is that power has always resistance. It is indistinct and unclear where this resistance comes from, but the paradoxical or contradictory fact is that in order for power to exist and have meaning, resistance must also be present, as we know that power itself is omnipresent everywhere. In fact, not only does resistance often not weaken power, but it also strengthens the grip of power and justifies its presence (Burns 1994).

### 3. Verbal Combat strategies in *Othello*: Othello versus Iago

In an attempt to go through the play to look at its language, a combination of the theories described above will be applied for an analysis of a sample text. There is an important question that could come to the reader's mind: which part of the play should somebody select to examine, or why has this specific section of the play – the poetic speech of Othello – been chosen for a reading? Because of the nature of theories discussed in this paper and the fact that they are mainly based on the language can be a tool for power manipulation, there seems to be an example in this play that brings out the challenging and power-related quality of language. Othello is a very good speaker because he entertains Brabantio and his guests with stories of his travels around the world. He narrates wonderful and exotic tales of odd people with fantastic customs and unusual appearances. His stories attract the attention of Brabantio's beautiful daughter, Desdemona, who listens to his words with such enthusiasm and sympathy that he falls in love with her. We know that he is powerful, brave, respectable, responsible, gentle, romantic, and authoritative because the Senate respect to him more. He explains about the story of courting Desdemona that is rich and poetic, and his early scenes show his strong love and fidelity and devotion to her. Cassio's loyalty to him demonstrates that Othello is well-liked by soldiers because his disciplinary and skillful language has more impact on them.

In Shakespeare's (1953) *Othello*, there are some scenes in which Othello and Iago engage in a verbal battle to win the characters. Parts of their discursive skills were re-read in an attempt to expose the relations of power and to spot the manifestations of these power struggles in the language and linguistic strategies of the impressive speeches.

In the direct and indirect speeches of Othello and Iago, the characters both have a chance to express their attitudes. However, they have an equal chance of expressing themselves freely, for Iago is on a point of power and Othello seems to be put in a weaker and more vulnerable position because he is simple-minded, inexperienced and foreign.

Some questions: How is Iago able to persuade one and all that he is, as he is perpetually called, "honest Iago"? How is he playing the direct and indirect roles of duel toward Othello and the other characters? What kind of literary and rhetorical techniques does he utilise to control all characters? The accurate answer is hidden in Iago's skillful manipulation of rhetorical skills. Iago is a puppeteer of the psyche because he pulls the strings of those who should know better with a battery of verbal combat weapons. In his soliloquies and dialogues he demonstrates himself to the audience to be a master of connotative and metaphoric language, inflammatory sense, emotional appeals, well-placed silences, dubious hesitations, leading questions, meaningful repetition, and sly hints. "*I am not what I am*", Iago says to Rodrigo (Othello 1.1.65). Iago is certainly so

good at lying because he is able to convince even himself that he has the clear reasons to ruin Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio.

Iago's convincing rhetoric clearly reveals what a powerful dangerous tool language can be especially used eloquently, but unscrupulous, individual. In this article, the research explores the basis of Iago's persuasive power by analyzing his astonishing command of rhetoric and figurative language.

The first point, regardless of the words these characters speak, is the order of appearance. This paper explains in detail Iago's manipulation and control of Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia, Roderigo, and Othello. From beginning to end Iago moves all the characters of *Othello* as if they were chessmen. He uses their personal aspirations and passions to motivate them to whatever devious plan he tends to have in his mind.

Jealousy is a crazy thing, and it is also an important theme of the play. It can cause people to do unthinkable things. Most fights are over their jealousy of a person. In Shakespeare's plays there is always a fight over this of some kind. It is also written by Shakespeare, it is apparent in *Othello*. Two characters like Iago and Othello fight a silent battle except Othello has no clue about Iago's powerful despise and envy to him. It is clearly evident that Othello symbolizes a hero while Iago praises the role as a villain. Their inconsistent and incompatible characteristics are what separate the two from each other. Throughout the beginning Acts I and II of *Othello*, Othello and Iago differ greatly in their integrity and devotion towards others. Othello portrays himself as frank and sincere, while on the other hand Iago acts as the good guy but in the end undermines the people who trust him. Othello demonstrates to his self and others his honesty. For example, when Othello explains to the Duke about their nuptials between him and Desdemona he nobly says, "That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter, it is most true; true that I have married her" (I iii 93-34). Othello announces his trustworthiness because he does not try to keep the marriage a secret and tells the Duke up-front when he asks. In addition, he is frank and straightforward to others when Iago warns Othello about Brabantio finding out about the marriage and tells him to go inside and he says, "Not I, I must be found. My parts, my title, and my perfect soul Shall manifest me rightly. Is it they?" (I ii 35-37).

The general of the Venetian army is confident in himself that his service and stately fall will cause everything to calm down, he is also certain of his worthiness to Desdemona and that he deserves to have her and her love. Iago is pleased with his deceitful plans and sits back and savors the many seductive words and lies he has told. For example, Iago shows his despise in integrity by whispering to himself that, "I am not what I am" (*Othello* I i 65) and to Roderigo, "I follow him to serve my turn upon on him" (I i 45). Iago is acting like someone he is not to get the life he desires and is taking advantage of Othello just to proclaim his revenge for him and Othello does not know about it.

Furthermore, when they defeated the Turkes and decided to celebrate, Othello takes Desdemona up to their room, and Iago manages a plan for Roderigo to win back Desdemona by telling him, "Do you find some occasion to anger Cassio, either by speaking to loud or tainting his discipline, or from

what other course you may please, which the time shall more favorably minister" (II i 288-292). Iago is getting Roderigo to fight Cassio to dishonor him and is lying to Roderigo because he is telling him that this is how he can get Desdemona back but in reality Iago, by the use of his dubious language, is getting everyone who loves and trusts him only to turn them against each other for his own enjoyment. Integrity is shown through Othello because of his loyal actions and the way he knows difficult situations, but through Iago he depicts no compatibility to him or the others around him. While both of these characters may juxtapose in integrity they also greatly contrast in their devotion to the people in their life. Othello's relationship with Desdemona is so lovely and profound that he would do anything for her even though they had just recently wed. For instance, when Othello returns from being lost at sea he shows his profound loyalty toward Desdemona by saying his poetic and verbal language, "If it were not to die, 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear My soul hath her content so absolute that not another comfort like this Succeeds in unknown fate" (II i 205-209). If Othello were to die he would die happy because he does not think that he will ever be as happy again, he claims that she is the only woman for him.

Moreover, he also indicates his dedication to Desdemona when Brabantio tells Othello to keep an eye on her father and she might lie to Othello but in defense he says, "My life upon her faith" (I iii 335). Othello believes in Desdemona and is willing to bet his life on it and he would do anything for his wife just to show how much he loves her. Iago has malicious projects for getting revenge on Othello by committing his time in Roderigo so he can do his dirty work for him. For instance, Iago takes advantage of Roderigo's vulnerability over Desdemona getting married to Othello when Roderigo is in love with her by scheming up a plan for him to, "Put money in thy purse Follow thou the war; defeat thy favor with an usurped beard" (I iii 382-384). Iago's continued pursue of Roderigo's trust displays his dedication to Othello's downfall and Roderigo's madness allows Iago to trick him verbally into doing completely ridiculous favors and giving him more money for Desdemona. In addition, Iago hates Othello for various reasons and he says that, "in following him, I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge not I for love and duty but seeming so for my peculiar end" (II i 64-66).

We can argue that Iago manifests the fact that he despises the Moor although Othello has not committed anything against him knowingly and perseveringly pursues Othello to bring about his collapse in their dedication towards others but not for alike reasons. Throughout the beginning of the story, Iago and Othello develop distinct characteristics that show differences between them. Iago is always trying to hinder the moor, while Othello continues his verbal expression of honest virtues. Iago relishes his deceit, wit and manipulation of others, rather than to show he is a leader. These show a part of life that will never go away. There are multiple differences between Othello and Iago but they both share a comparison in knowledge, rhetoric and understanding.

Iago no doubt believes that his appearance prior to Othello's speech and manner would vaccinate the public ear and make

them deaf to his rival's words. However, what he does not know is the fact that in such a situation, where each speech is more a part of an interrelated, conversational, dialogical debate than a single, separate unit, as Hutchby (1999) states, there are techniques and rules at play that will eventually jeopardise his plans. As mentioned before, Hutchby (1999) believes that in a debate or an argument, the side that starts the act of speech and manipulation of words is the one more prone to attack and criticism. Therefore, Iago places himself at risk by approaching the public first. It is as if he places his cards on the table first. There is no turning back once he descends the pulpit; he has nothing else to offer except his equivocal and ambiguous words that he utilizes them in order to be a rival of Othello and wins both the higher position of power and Desdemona. Iago is free to dismantle what Othello built on the pulpit and builds his own case, which is exactly what Iago does for his devious purpose or benefit. In fact, the beauty and eloquence of Othello's speech rely on a very emotional fact. Iago's combat language has two famous and well-known cases of verbal weaponry (in the form of refrains) that he uses abundantly in his speech: one part of his speech or oration is the poetic refrain saying that Iago is an honourable or honest man, and the other is the repetition of the term "ambitious" because Iago is a lustful person for power and promotion of his position. What is fascinating is that he has taken both of these words from Othello's speech and his defect. Othello and others also use the words "honour and honest" several times in an attempt to increase the value of his words in this market of words (as Bourdieu said) by pointing to his honour and the reputation he has among the people. Othello is unaware that Iago will use these hypocritical, ambiguous and sly words against him. Othello has little to offer of himself; all he does is to react to what Iago says, manipulate his words and play with the crowd's emotions.

Othello, his last of these double-edged virtues is a powerful poetic imagination. His stories are rich and impressive. As he recites the story of his courtship in the Senate office, the Duke is so struck that he understands how his daughter was won by telling such verbal and skillful stories. He can weave magic with his tales and transform the truth into poetry. Therefore, his rich imagination has a handicap because it makes Othello vulnerable to Iago's verbal dubious stories of Desdemona's infidelities. Othello's imagination runs wild with Iago's invented details and evidences.

Othello is also a passionate emotional person because it makes him exciting. But he admits that he has a fiery temper. Iago capitalizes on Othello's excitability. Once Iago, by the use of his skillful combat language, has convinced the Moor that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio, and Othello moves to his deadly revenge quickly and single-mindedly. This is his personal infirmity.

What is Iago's motivation in destroying Othello's life? He is a fascinating, complex character that cannot be described easily. He is mysterious and baffling because he speaks completely something mystifying. Shakespeare is also fascinated by his verbal combat strategy, as he utilizes some equivocal techniques and mechanisms of power and language in order to manipulate Othello and the others.

This serves as a resistance tactic against Othello and the choice of his words. Iago tries to mock and undermine Othello's words and his position of a successful general. He repeats those words, making them the object of the

characters' attention and opening them up for possible public scorn. If one is even more precise, it is easy to see that the opening lines of both speakers have the same structure. The very fact that Iago uses the exact same (parallel) structure to open his speech could be an indication of his resistance against the power holder. He seems to be demonstrating that he can speak in the same way as Othello and yet emerge as the winner. Their beginning words are as follows.

The words seem very similar with slight changes in order. Othello's words may seem stronger because the word love might be seen as a stronger emotion compared with friendship, but the fact is that according to the notes of the play itself, the word "lover" is not the same as the romantic love between two people who have a strong emotion or passion towards each other. It may simply does not know how to behave toward women which merely goes to show how much more vain Othello has made himself seem compared to Iago. Othello chooses to speak to people's emotions first by calling the Senate friends, but Iago, being the more logical one, prefers to keep the emotion-conveying word like love and deals with his repressive ambition of power and position until the end of play. Some believe that Othello's mistake is related to his lack of logic that the other characters either have readiness or the understanding for his emotional explanations at this turbulent time. At that certain instant, the people were in need of emotional justifications for the next step they should take. With his sharp wit, Othello satisfies this need by addressing the people of the Senate as friends. He also gets them to sympathise with him throughout the speech. His speech turns into a ritual ceremony with the people circling around him, and he finally wins people's hearts. Iago, meanwhile, intended to win people's minds from the pulpit, keeping his distance from the common folk. There is also additional evidence that demonstrates that Iago was verbally trying to make contact with people's logic, while Othello also verbally attempted to connect with their emotions.

Another significant issue is the tone of the speakers. Othello tends to utilise imperative verbs that address the people directly and hold them responsible for the comprehension of the speech, while Iago tries to use the word "I" in his speech to create more of a soliloquy that does not hold anyone responsible. He tries to conceal the fact that he expects the people to react to his words.

Any ambiguities or obscurities used in the speeches of the two opposite characters would mean the rhetorical combat strategies but paradoxical.

It also seems that Iago anticipates what the people will be thinking of him and his words. By giving voice to the thoughts in people's minds, he eliminates any chance of a future disagreement with his words and ideas. He proves that he is an eloquent, intelligent speaker.

#### 4. Conclusion

This is merely a brief look at some verbal tactics and techniques and how they contribute to the war of words. One may conclude that the seemingly separate and at times monologue-like speeches of both Othello and Iago (indeed Iago more than Othello) are not only words uttered in an attempt to show inner emotions and real purposes, but are of a somewhat different nature. The verbal speeches seem to be directly attacks and counter-attacks indirectly, so to speak. They are palpable conversations that are devised



cunningly to control the logic (in the case of Iago) and the emotions (in the case of Othello) of the people who are only tools in both their political and disciplinary games.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare explores the relationship between words and events. Spoken thought, in the play, has all the power of action; speaking about an event will make that event become reality for those who hear - it will affect reality as if that event had taken place. Shakespeare demonstrates the power of words emotionally through Othello's monologues. Othello struggles with the reality that Iago creates poignantly for him. When Othello speaks, he reveals that he is unable to stop himself from carrying out acts that Iago's and his own words have prophesied and initiated. Iago's soliloquies and direct and indirect speeches further demonstrate that even the knowledge of the power of words cannot protect the characters from the consequences which the words demand. Speaking about an event is prophecy in *Othello*, but it is more than just an objective foretelling of the future. Words become the all powerful initiators of action, once spoken they cannot be counter-acted, and they alone determine the course of the future and destiny of all the characters in the play.

This brief analysis of the utterances of only two of the characters in the play demonstrates how revealing such an analysis could be if one were to apply this to the rest of the play. It is almost like a predictable evidence for the victory or failure of two central characters of the play that they are to have a verbal combat strategy for control of power and language. By taking into account the parameters related to the particular condition, one would be able to predict who might win the verbal contestation of the play. It is clear that Iago was successful in winning the minds of other characters from the beginning till the end because he used hypocritical words and wit to undermine Othello's words and position. Such analysis would allow one to explain and prove with tangible facts why one person is victorious and the other is defeated.

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