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—Iago’s ‘lying’ by implying—

Shigeo Kikuchi

ABSTRACT

The now classical concept of the Cooperative Principle introduced by Grice (1975) provides a very useful, theoretical tool to approach the language of Shakespeare’s Othello, which deserves careful linguistic scrutiny. In what follows I argue that in most cases Iago observes QUALITY maxims: namely, except in two scenes, he does not lie to Othello about Desdemona’s chastity. Instead, he uses what I call ‘Ghost Implicature’, a false implicature which is different from a normal conversational implicature created to make the discourse coherent. It is a false implicature that Iago creates with which the other erroneously fills the communication gap. Othello’s tragedy lies in his being too ‘cooperative’ a general who remained loyal to Grice’s Principle.

1. Introduction

Among the fascinating characters whom Shakespeare created, Iago in Othello undoubtedly ranks high on the list. But did Iago, who has long been thought a villainous liar, really tell lies? By analysing dialogues in the play, using Grice (1975)’s Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims, we can tell that Othello’s full understanding of the Cooperative Principle and the conversational implicatures, which result from the regulating process to avoid a violation of the maxims, caused his fatal fall. He fell before Iago’s manipulative and deceptive use of maxims. The verbal techniques which Iago used were, in most cases, not, as is generally believed, ‘lies’: they were what we may call villainous maxim violations
and the resulting ‘Ghost Implicature’: a false implicature that Iago artfully created to get Othello to assume that Iago has something to hide.¹

To mention a few critics who refer to Iago’s false statements as ‘lie’, they are Rymer (1970[1693]:123) (Iago...forging his lies), Hazlitt (1902[1817]:207) (a lie that kills), Bradley (1991[1904]: 393) (Iago doubtless was a liar) and Barton (1980:158) (the liar Iago). Ewbank (1991[1983]) includes Iago in his British Academy lecture entitled “Shakespeare’s Liars”. Some critics do not use this term. Nowottny (1952: 332-38), for example, prefers a ‘true/false’ dichotomy (He [i.e. Shakespeare] shows the process of false testimony....; the impossibility of discriminating between true and false; Othello, convinced that Iago’s tale is true; what Iago has said is false). She restricts her use of ‘lie’ to the cases of Cassio and the handkerchief (Iago’s lies about Cassio and the handkerchief). Other critics who do not use the word ‘lie’ is Coleridge (1951: 167) (Iago’s suggestions) and Neely (1994: 72) (Iago’s insinuations about her [i.e. Desdemona’s] sexuality). (italics above are all mine) All their uses of ‘lie’ above more or less accord with the definition by the OED²: lie sb.¹. An act or instance of lying; a false statement made with intent to deceive; a criminal falsehood; lie v.² 1. intr. To tell a lie or lies; to utter falsehood; to speak falsely. Their use of ‘lie’ or ‘liar’ is not unacceptable as a general term to refer to Iago’s suggestive and deceptive use of language that includes a downright lie as I discuss below. The purpose of my article is not to show their misuse of ‘lie’, but to give a clearer picture to Iago’s use of deceptive language from the Gricean perspective.

“Iago”, Hercule Poirot says in Agatha Christie’s Curtain, “is the perfect murderer”. What is the verbal technique that enabled Iago to be “untouched by suspicion”? How could he never have been convicted of crime?² Iago’s success lies with his accusation-evading ‘Ghost Implicature’. Contrary to the remarks by Webster (1942: 233), actress and producer, that “There are no ghosts in Othello...”, when viewed from the perspective of ‘Ghost Implicature’, it is clear that Othello was also motivated by the same stage
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idea as other Shakespeare’s ghost plays.

2. Grice’s Maxims and Iago’s Ghost Implicatures

If the speaker’s intention is not explicitly stated, the hearer will make an inference about the speaker’s intention, termed ‘implicature’ by Grice, in order to maintain the coherence of the discourse.

To give a brief outline of Grice’s Cooperative Principle, Grice says: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 1975: 45). Under normal circumstances, each conversation participant assumes that the other participant is cooperating by obeying certain conversational conventions, or maxims. The maxims are: QUANTITY (Don’t provide more or less information that is necessary for the current exchange); QUALITY (Tell the truth); RELATION (Be relevant); MANNER (Be clear).

In a normal conversation, one assumes that the other is cooperating to sustain the conversational activity by observing these maxims. Participants exchange contributions under the assumption that the other is observing the maxims. Even when the maxim of QUANTITY is flouted, for example, causing incoherence in the exchange, one assumes that the other’s remark is in some way or other informative. To preserve this assumption, one infers, say, the other’s refusal to give one specific information, what Grice calls a ‘conversational implicature’. In this way, to make the exchange coherent, one participant normally ‘assumes’ that the other is implying something. This normal assumption causes Othello’s fall.

2.1. Ghost Implicatures in Iago’s Exchanges with Othello

Before discussing Iago’s conversational exchanges with Othello, in the following section 2.1.1, I would like to concentrate upon Shakespeare’s dramatic skill in preparing the audience for Othello’s psychological shift
as he starts to accept the Ghost Implicature as reality.

2.1.1. As if for surety: How Othello Suspects

In Venice, after Roderigo departs, Iago's first soliloquy informs the audience of his first motive for wanting to trap Othello.

(1) IAGO: I hate the Moor
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office. I know not if't be true,
But I for mere suspicion in that kind
Will do as if for surety,¹

(all underlines mine)

(1.3.385-89)

After defeating the Turks, Othello and his entourage land on Cyprus, when Iago's second soliloquy informs the audience of the three reasons for his act against his general and the lieutenant. These utterances, however, are directed to the audience only to let them know that Othello will be brought down on the basis of fragile evidence:²

(2) IAGO: That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it.
That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit.

But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leaped into my seat,

For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too—

(2.1.284-85, 292-94, 305)

The above exchanges are traditionally taken as part of Iago's reasons for acting against Othello and Cassio. After listing all the motives Iago
I told him what I thought—lago’s ‘lying’ by implying—

mentions, namely, resentment at Cassio’s appointment, hatred of Othello, desire to get Cassio’s place, the suspicion of Cassio’s intrigue with Emilia, Iago’s love of Desdemona, Cassio’s being in love with Desdemona, ill-will to Cassio, and the suspicion of Othello’s intrigue with Emilia, Bradley finds in “Coleridge’s word ‘motive-hunting’” one plausible answer to the impression that Iago’s soliloquies produce, saying that “He is pondering his design, and unconsciously trying to justify it to himself” (Bradley (1991[1904]: 208-11)). Bradley, however, does not draw so clear a line between natural and drama discourse. In drama discourse, as Coulthard (1977: 171) pointed out, exchanges between the conversation participants on a stage tend to be more informative than necessary, because a drama participant has to keep the audience sufficiently informed. Without making their exchange more informative than necessary, knowledge shared only by the participants would never be conveyed to audience. The following extract, for example, is from Act 1.1 where Othello’s utterance is simply to inform the audience of who is entering the scene. Indeed, if he didn’t know, the utterance would be even more surprising. In drama dialogue, such overinformative utterances do not violate Grice’s maxim of QUANTITY:

(3) Enter CASSIO, with Officers and torches.

....

OTHELLO: The servants of the Duke? and my lieutenant?

The goodness of the night upon you, friends.

What is the news?

(1.2.34-36)

The passage in the first soliloquy (1) above and the three passages in the second soliloquy (2) are not intended to explain Iago’s motives for taking revenge upon Othello and Cassio. With (1) and (2), Shakespeare wanted his audience to have a priori knowledge about Othello’s
psychological dynamics, how Othello would feel when later faced with
the temptation scene which Iago creates. This is one of the functions of
a series of epistemic verbs (think, believe, suspect, fear). By showing
Iago’s present state of mind, Shakespeare informed the audience of
Othello’s future psychology.⁶

2.1.2. What dost thou say?: (1) Violations of Maxims of QUANTITY and
MANNER

Iago’s first vicious scheme starts with the following dialogue with
Othello. As we can tell from Othello’s still innocent question on ‘what
is said’ by Iago — and this question is later turned into ‘what is meant’,
with a more suspicious, probing tone⁷ — this is the first scene in which
Iago attempts to arouse suspicion in the mind of the valiant general:

(4)   IAGO:   Ha, I like not that.
   OTHHELLO: What dost thou say?
   IAGO: Nothing, my lord; or if — I know not what.
   OTHHELLO: Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?
   IAGO: Cassio, my lord? no, sure, I cannot think it
       That he would steal away so guilty-like
       Seeing you coming.

   OTHHELLO:   I do believe ’twas he.

(3.3.34-40)

Without proper implication, Iago’s comments, full of additional infor-
mation upon Cassio’s departing from Desdemona, violate a maxim. The
underlined parts of Iago’s replies to Othello’s “Was not that Cassio parted
from my wife?” is more informative than is required here. What Othello
sought was confirmation that the man was Cassio. Without any special
justification, Iago’s replies flout the maxim of QUANTITY. This maxim is
one which requires a conversation participant to offer an appropriate
amount of information, without being more informative or less informative than is required. At the first underlined part, his comments also violate the maxim of MANNER in that he does not give Othello a clear-cut explanation. These maxim violations can be explained, thus making the discourse coherent, by inferring a propositional implicature: ‘I have on my mind something concerning Cassio and Desdemona’. Without this kind of implication, the discourse between the two participants becomes incoherent. The loyal general, Othello, loyal again here to the Grice’s Cooperative Principle, cooperatively attempts to maintain the discourse as coherent as possible.

2.1.3. What dost thou think?: (2) Violations of Maxims of QUANTITY and MANNER

In the following discourse, Iago again flouts the two maxims of QUANTITY and MANNER, the latter of which requires us to avoid obscurity:

(5) OTHELLO: Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern’st thou aught in that?
   Is he not honest?
   IAGO: Honest, my lord?
   OTHELLO: Honest? Ay, honest.
   IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.
   OTHELLO: What dost thou think?
   IAGO: Think, my lord?

(3.3.102-108)

This is the scene in which, Iago is attempting to make Othello believe that there could be something unfaithful in the relations between Cassio and Desdemona. Iago just gives echoing replies to Othello, such as “Honest, my lord?” or “Think, my lord?” In a normal exchange, these repetitive replies convey less information than is necessary and are thus not informative enough, unlike (4), implying that the repeater is
withholding a negative reply to the speaker’s question. These repetitions could also be violations of the maxim of MANNER. To Othello’s Yes-No question, Iago does not give a straightforward reply using ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, thus signalling by his hesitation that he is holding back something negative.

2.1.4. What dost thou mean?: (3) Violation of Maxim of MANNER

Othello’s suspicion about his wife’s chastity — the suspicion which was kindled by Iago’s first suggestive remarks “Ha, I like not that” (3.3.34) in 2.1.2 above, a suspicion which was so slight that Othello asked Iago to repeat his words (“What dost thou say?”) — here takes a desperate tone. He seeks an answer in Iago’s implication, not in his words.

The following extracts are from the scene in which Othello asks Iago to tell him what he knows about the relationship between Desdemona and Cassio, to which Iago again gives an ambiguous reply. Iago’s reply violates the maxim of MANNER, which urges the speaker to speak clearly:

(6) IAGO:

I do beseech you,
Though I perchance am vicious in my guess
—As I confess it is my nature’s plague
To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy
Shapes faults that are not—that your wisdom
From one that so imperfectly conceits
Would take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble
Out of his scattering and unsure observance:
It were not for your quiet nor your good
Nor for my manhood, honesty and wisdom
To let you know my thoughts.

OTHELLO:

Zounds! What dost thou mean?
IAGO:

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
I told him what I thought—Iago’s ‘lying’ by implying—

Who steals my purse steals trash—’tis something—nothing.

’Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to thousands—But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.

OTHELLO: By heaven, I’ll know thy thoughts!

(3.3.148-64)

An ambiguous reply has an effect upon the listener of making him anxious to know what the speaker has in his mind. The underlined parts arouse Othello’s curiosity about what Othello assumes Iago holds back. Iago here still does not give a clear verbalization to his “scattering and unsure observance” or “thoughts”.

Here, also, the only way to avoid the violation of the MANNER maxim is to postulate an implication: ‘Your wife is unfaithful to you’.

2.1.5. But did you ever tell him she was false?: (4) Violation of Maxim of QUALITY

Iago clearly verbalizes the ‘reality’ he created in three scenes without Othello, (7), (8) and (11) below: first (7), in his first soliloquy in Venice; second (8), just after Iago’s advice to Cassio to ask Desdemona to intercede; third (11), after the completion of his scheme. And, with Othello, he also explicitly verbalizes his implicature in two intervening scenes, i.e., in (9) and (10), by which time Iago’s false implication or ‘Ghost Implicature’, has successfully worked to arouse Othello’s suspicion about Desdemona’s chastity.

Up to the scenes (9) and (10), as I explained in 2.1.1, 2.1.2 and 2.1.3, Iago pretends holding normal, coherent exchanges with Othello. As late as in (9) and (10), Iago violates the maxim of QUALITY in such an overt way that Othello does not notice that he is lying (the audience notices
the violation); in other words, Iago does not explicitly say to Othello something that is not true about Desdemona’s chastity: except in these two scenes (9) and (10).

(7) IAGO: After some time, to abuse Othello’s ear
That he is too familiar with his wife:

(8) IAGO: For whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear;
That she repeals him for her body’s lust.

(9) IAGO: You would be satisfied?

OTHELLO: Would? nay, I will!
IAGO: And may — but how? how satisfied, my lord?
Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
Behold her topped?

(10) IAGO: For I will make him [i.e. Cassio] tell the tale anew
Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when
He hath and is again to cope your wife.

(11) EMILIA: But did you ever tell him she was false?
IAGO: I did.

(1.3.394-95)

(2.3.348-52)

(3.3.396-99)

(4.1.85-87)

(5.2.174-75)
Except on these two occasions, (9) and (10), Iago never verbalizes to Othello the ‘reality’ which he created. He just implies it, though in (11) Shakespeare made him confess: “I did”; and though it is clear that Shakespeare puns on two ‘lies’ (deception and adultery). In all the temptation scenes except (9) and (10), Iago just “told him [i.e. Othello] what” he “thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true” (5.2.172-73). What brought Othello to his fall was Iago’s series of overt and “ostentatious” (Short (1996: 244)) violations of Grice’s maxims and the resulting Ghost Implicature that Desdemona was unfaithful. Only in scenes (9) and (10) does Iago, as it were, push Othello as the general teeterers at the edge of the cliff. But by this time, Othello has lost his sound sense of balance, being unable to judge between ‘Being’ and ‘Seeming’.

3. Conclusion

While previous research has focused on the language of drama participants viewed as real people, the above discussion has elaborated upon the analysis of character speech from the functional point of view by using Grice’s concept of the Cooperative Principle. The conversational analysis of Iago’s false cooperation and the resulting ‘Ghost Implicature’ illustrated above provides a clear explanation of how Iago drove Othello to his downfall not, for the most part, by saying, but by implying that Desdemona was not virtuous.

NOTES

1. After finishing this article, I found that my former sociolinguistics teacher W. Downes at the University of East Anglia used a similar term, ‘Ghost interpretations’, in Downes (1984: 326-27). His term is to explain the possible indeterminacy of utterance meaning in conversation. It is “a range of alternative conversations of which one (or more) is
selected by the intentionality of the speaker and the perception and replies of the hearer..." (He deletes this term from Downes (1998)) My "Ghost Implicature" is a definite and false implicature raised by the speaker to deceive the listener.

2. Hercule Poirot insists in *Curtain* that the handkerchief was not at all necessary to the completion of Iago’s plot: "For your great Shakespeare, my friend, had to deal with the dilemma that his own art had brought about. To unmask Iago, he had to resort to the clumsiest of devices — the handkerchief — a piece of work not at all in keeping with Iago’s general technique and a blunder of which one feels certain he would not have been guilty”. Iago’s major “general technique” without the handkerchief is his deceptive use of implicature.

3. Muir (1991[1958]: 257), quoting this passage, wrongly stresses the importance of soliloquies in his search for Iago’s true motive:
"But very naturally he does not tell the fool Roderigo that he has another and deeper motive, one that is revealed in his first soliloquy:"
As I discuss later, soliloquy in drama has a function of giving information to the audience. The passage from Iago’s first soliloquy has the function only of letting the audience know Othello’s psychology after temptation, how fragile are the grounds upon which Othello’s jealousy is based. This function is clearly seen in a series of epistemic verbs in (1) and (2) and other fragile proofs. Here, together with (2), Shakespeare seeks to impress the being-seeming crux on the audience’s mind, because later this distinction is highlighted.

4. We can find the first faint note of this growing theme in the Duke’s utterance, which has an obvious forward link to (1) and (2) and is later augmented in Othello’s inner state of mind:

**DUKE:** To vouch this is no proof,
Without more certain and more overt test
Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods
Of modern seeming do prefer against him.

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I told him what I thought—Iago's 'lying' by implying—

5. He further says that among these driving forces, the strongest is "Iago's longing to satisfy the sense of power", his "thwarted sense of superiority" (Bradley (1991[1904]: 213, 214)). As for 'the motive-hunting' phrase, Coleridge (1836: 260) says: "Iago's soliloquy — the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity — how awful it is!"

6. It is possible to eliminate at least these three of Iago's possible motives for deceiving Othello from Bradley's list.

7. Widdowson (1982: 43) and Coulthard (1977: 177) are both correct when they say that Iago gradually specified his accusations. Coulthard says: "Iago is able to...gradually become more specific in his accusations until he can warn: Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio" (3.3.200).

8. The scene Coulthard and Widdowson quoted in 7 above is still an implicative utterance, not a clear verbalization of what Iago implies.

9. Chen (1996) is an enlightening application of Grice's maxims to Reginald Rose's Twelve Angry Men. "Violation of the Quality maxim, for instance," he explains, "can be an indication that the speaker is humorous, interesting, sarcastic, colourful in speech, or a downright liar". The three jurors in the play violate this maxim to express their sarcasm. Iago, on the other hand, is "a downright liar" who utters "falsehood" (OED²) in his violation of the QUALITY maxim.

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(Osaka International University for Women)
[kikuchi@oiuw.oiu.ac.jp]
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