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Wordplay and World-Play: The Minima Visibilia in The Construction of Linguistic Sciences

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SUBMISSION TRACK

Received: Januari 12, 2019

Final Revision: May 17, 2019

Available Online: May 23, 2019

KEYWORD

Discourse analysis, linguistics, phonetics, play, Shakespeare.

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A B S T R A C T

This paper aims to illustrate, by using a single sentence as the focus of the study, the inseparability of wordplay and worldplay. It intends to illustrate how playing with a sentence like *Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently* can help us understand the very complex and fascinating phenomena of language, endless play. At first glance, the sentence may appear to be giving a piece of information on the English Elizabethan dramatist. However, this same sentence can also be used to illustrate the countless possible interpretations of any discourse. In addition, the sentence can be used to illustrate how linguistic sciences such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, stylistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, comparative linguistics and discourse analysis separate some properties as representative of the entire science while suppressing all the others as insignificant in order to control the playfulness of language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently. Endless are the ways in which such a sentence could be approached. Although at first glance the sentence may appear to be stable, in reality the opposite is the case. The sentence is as playful and dynamic as the writer it describes and the medium, language, in which it is expressed. Furthermore, this sentence is inseparable from play at the cosmic level. For instance, the sentence can be used as a statement on Shakespeare's ability to play, in his plays, with words and language in order to entertain and instruct. It can be amended to refer to any writer who has a comparable power as in

Wordplay was a game Christopher Marlowe played competently; the sentence can be used to refer to an age where play with language was an important characteristic as in *Wordplay was a game the Victorians played competently.* In addition, this sentence can be used to illustrate how linguistic sciences such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, stylistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, comparative linguistics, and discourse analysis are constructed by separating some properties as representative of the entire science while suppressing all the others as insignificant to control the playfulness of language.

Linguists, unfortunately, have tended to disregard the role ideology plays in our understanding of such playfulness within linguistic sciences (Garido, 2016; Thurlow, 2017). Hardly can we find a study, for instance, that applies ideological insights to the study of phonetics, morphology or syntax. This study may be regarded as a tread in an unvisited territory casting light on how custom has forced us into seeing linguistic studies, phonetics in particular, as stable sciences with clear boundaries. In reality, these boundaries are human constructs that can be expanded or narrowed by our needs.

II. METHODS

This paper utilizes primarily a single sentence to unearth the complexity of all human utterance. The methods researchers use in analyzing their linguistic data create the illusion that language is stable and that the boundaries between different fields and levels of knowledge are natural and clear-cut. By focusing on the analysis of a single sentence and approaching it from different linguistic and literary levels, the paper aims to reveal the artificiality of the boundaries between one field of knowledge and another.

The reduction of data used in this study to almost a basically single sentence, despite its limitations which render the analysis of scientific subjects to a skeletal overview, offers the reader an enlightening and informative bird's eye view of a very complex phenomenon were a single utterance such as "wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently" can be subjected to ideological, historical, linguistic, aesthetic, and non-aesthetic investigation.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the approach of the paper to its data, mainly the sentence discussed in the paper, the study, as the subsequent discussion illustrates, found that any human utterance can be interpreted historically, ideologically, stylistically, linguistically, physically, etc. and yield fruitful results. This is because

objects in the world, human utterance included, do not have a single essence but many, and therefore no single discourse can offer a comprehensive interpretation of it.

Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently. We can study the basic components of this sentence at many levels, its sounds, the internal structure of its words, and the way the words pattern in the sentence, and its meaning. Linguistically, the sound level is the subject of phonetics; the word level is the subject of morphology, while the sentence level is the subject of syntax, while meaning is the subject of semantics. All these levels work simultaneously to give the sentence its meaning and, as the study will illustrate, these levels are nothing but human constructs; they attempt to hold the continual slide and the playfulness of language to achieve particular ends.

This sentence, like any other sentence, is produced by modulating-playing with-the air flowing from our bodies at certain points of contact by certain degrees with or without the vibration of the vocal cords. Phonetics studies this process of modulation by describing how each single sound segment, phoneme, in the sentence is produced. At the individual phonemic level, phonetics describes the place in which the sound is produced, how it is produced, and whether the sound is voiced or voiceless.

As these sounds combine, they form meaningful units; the scientific study of these units, morphemes, and words, is called morphology. For example *wordplay* consists of two free morphemes *word* and *play* which are joined together to make up a single compound word while the word *competently* consists of one free morpheme *competent*, and one bound morpheme or suffix *ly*. By combining individual sounds to form words and morphemes, we do not depart totally from the world of phonetics to the world of morphology because morphemes and words are nothing but sound segments larger than phoneme. As individual sounds combine, they

make up larger sound segments consisting of syllables. In a sequence of syllables, one syllable generally receives extra force and is more prominent than the others. The amount of force used in producing this syllable is described as stress. Phonetics describes these segments and their stress patterns. Finally, once these segments form a sentence, phonetics describes the intonation of the sentence.

This skeletal description of phonetics attempts to illustrate how playful language can be even in the construction of sciences. A critical examination of phonetics would reveal that we are not merely separating the phonetic level from the other linguistic levels, such as the morphological and the syntactic, which work to give this sentence its meaning; it would also reveal that we are separating one sound level from other sound levels. Phonetics can be regarded as a specific instance of the more general field of physics, of which the general study of sounds is one instance. Therefore, phonetics overlaps intertextually not only with linguistic sciences such as syntax and morphology but also with physics as the latter tends to study sound in general.

The overlap between phonetics, the lowest level of language study, and non-linguistic sciences can be illustrated by isolating a phoneme, the smallest distinctive sound unit in language study, from our sentence. By restricting our examination of the sentence to the sound *p*, for instance, we would be able to see that even the smallest unit in language study is not as stable as we normally believe. Language sciences are not immune to language play. The sound *p* in the sentence may have different aspects for different scientists. The physicist regards it as a vibration of particles, the physiologist as a movement of the body organs, a neuroscientist as an impulse on the cochlear nerve, while the phonetician combines the three sciences in approaching the sound. The physicist, the physiologist, the neuroscientist, and the phonetician may emphasize partial

aspects of the sound *p*. They may borrow from each other different aspects of the sound according to their needs. Thus, the essential aspects of the sound and its value may vary from one field of study to another, the boundaries between these fields, on the other hand, are never fixed.

The sound *p* does not have a single essence, a single aspect. It has so many essences depending on the angle from which it is approached. In the history of language, in socio-linguistics, in psycholinguistics, in contrastive linguistics, stylistics, postcolonial studies, education etc. it can be approached differently by different scholars according to their needs and according to how they were trained to see it. No matter how hard they try, none of them can ever see all the aspects of the sound. All they can do is to isolate particular aspects of it and act accordingly. As Cunningham observes:

... however hard we try, we can only see, can only take in, a small number of phenomena at a time – *minima visibilia*. Moreover, we do, naturally, have to act upon, to make do, with the minima which are all we can perceive at one go. We have to settle precisely for the smallness of our maps, our small models....(Cunningham, 2002, 135)

Phonetics is only one way of visiting the sounds of language, exactly as it is only one specific way of visiting sound in general. All the aspects of linguistic sounds approached by phonetics in the manner already described can be approached in a different manner and for different purposes by a different discipline like literature. For a poet, the sound *p* acquires aesthetic value if repeated within a line of poetry to create alliteration or if repeated at the end of lines to create a rhyme.

To illustrate further, we will take one instance of linguistic sound study, stress, and see how it is approached in phonetics and in literature. It has already been indicated that as a group of sounds combines to form larger sound segments, they constitute syllables and that

one syllable generally receives a greater amount of force. Phonetics tends merely to describe which syllable in a word takes this amount of force or stress. In *Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently*, phonetics would merely describe the syllables on which stress falls, the first syllable in *wordplay* for instance, without paying attention to the way these stresses may combine to create an aesthetic effect.

Poetry tends to study stress by foregrounding its aesthetic aspects. The importance of stresses in poetry lies in the rhythm they create. As a group of stresses recurs at fixed intervals, they create a meter. For instance, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare, 1172) is a sort of wordplay that Shakespeare played competently by creating rhythm out of a group of stresses. In poetry, the number and pattern of stresses determine what kind of meter is used in composing this line. Since the line consists of a sequence of unstressed syllables followed by stressed ones it is called iambic meter, a common meter in English because the pattern created by such stresses resembles the ordinary speech of English.

The analysis of stress and stress pattern, both in linguistics and poetry, is far more complex than the one offered in this paper. However, I believe that it is sufficient to show how a science such as phonetics and poetry analysis do not stand independently with clear boundaries as they both overlap with other fields of language study.

The intertextual nature and overlap between fields of knowledge can become even more complex if we introduce syntax, the science that studies the patterning of words into sentences like *Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently*. A syntactic study of the sentence would tell us which are the possible structures and arrangements of the sentence and which are not. We have already pointed out how we can play with the sentence to produce sentences like:

Wordplay was a game Marlowe played competently.

Wordplay was a game the Victorians played competently.

The process of play can continue and produce examples like:

Wordplay is a game skilled dramatists play competently.

Wordplay is a game great poets play competently.

Wordplay is a game shrewd politicians play seriously.

A syntactic analysis of the examples would show that although we can play with the sentence and replace some of its parts, the process of replacement is not arbitrary, but a rule-governed one. The word *Shakespeare* occupies the position generally occupied by a noun phrase and consequently it can be replaced by any word or group of words which can occupy that position such as *Marlowe, the Victorians, dramatists, great poets, and shrewd politicians*. No matter how long a noun phrase could be, it can occupy the position occupied by a single word occupying that same position. Therefore one can say:

Wordplay was a game the linguistically adept late Elizabethan dramatists, such as Shakespeare, living in the late sixteenth century played competently.

where *the linguistically adept late Elizabethan dramatists, such as Shakespeare, living in the late sixteenth century* can replace a single word like *Shakespeare*.

The sentence can also be taken as a generative example of all the possible syntactic structures which English can produce. Therefore we can say:

Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently.

A game Shakespeare played competently was wordplay.

Shakespeare played the game of wordplay competently.

Shakespeare competently played the game of wordplay.

A competently played game was Shakespeare's wordplay.

The examples given here can generate any sentence with similar syntactic structure and the process of replacing the word *Shakespeare* with different and larger noun phrases can apply to any word in the sentence as long as it belongs to the same category occupied by the word one intends to replace.

By choosing a particular sound pattern, word structure, or sentence structure in the production of the sentences above we enter the domain of stylistics, the study of style—a distinctive way of using language for the sake of particular intentions and effects. Therefore, phonetics, morphology, semantics, and syntax overlap with the study of literature, and other linguistic forms such as journalism, sermons, political speeches, telephone conversations which tend to use particular styles at any linguistic level. In literature, stylistics studies which particular sound, word, or sentence patterns a literary artist, or a discursive discipline, prefers. Stress, for instance, can be studied in literature, or religious sermons, once it is approached as a distinctive style. Therefore, stress can be studied within different subjects such as phonetics, literature, and stylistics.

The study of distinctive sound pattern, word structure, or sentence structure is not the monopoly of stylistics. The sentence *Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently* can be produced and pronounced in a variety of distinctive ways depending on the social group uttering that sentence. The science which studies the way a sentence like

this is uttered by foregrounding the social aspect is called socio-linguistics. From the perspective of this study, socio-linguistics is a form of stylistics that pinpoints the geographical, social or cultural aspects of the way a sentence like ours is produced. For instance, the sentence can be pronounced in a variety of ways by different groups of people belonging to different speech communities. It can be pronounced by using the British accent, American accent, Boston accent, Indian accent or Arab accent where these accents are nothing but distinctive styles adopted by particular groups of speech communities making the dividing line between stylistics and socio-linguistics unclear (Gunnarsson 2017. Shih, 2018).

Now we turn to the subject that sheds light on the implicit ideological undercurrents of all fields of knowledge, including the linguistic ones we have discussed, discourse analysis. As it has already been indicated, linguistic studies are in reality interdependent. Such interdependence demands an interdisciplinary investigation such as that offered by discourse analysis. Drawing upon a variety of disciplines, such as linguistics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, cognitive science, and social psychology, discourse analysis breaks the artificial boundaries between disciplines and casts some light on the inseparability of knowledge and wordplay.

For instance, the separation of the different linguistic disciplines is not the result of natural characteristics inherent in these sciences. Like all other fields of study and disciplines, phonetics, morphology-syntax, and semantics are nothing but instrumental human structures and not entities in the natural world. There is no one-to-one correspondence between syntax, phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, stylistics, sociolinguistics and the forms of the language they describe. These disciplines are merely regulated forms of speaking about topics delimiting the sayable and the unsayable. Simply speaking, they are nothing but forms

of discourse regulated through other forms of discourse.

People tend to approach sciences, including linguistics, as objective, truthful, and given; our readings of these forms of knowledge tend to be mainly uncritical. Even when someone casts a critical glance at these scientific practices, he has to obey the implicit rules which delimit how a practice is to be spoken about. Truth cannot be expressed in whatever way we want. As Foucault observes:

It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be in the true, however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive "police" which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke (Foucault, 1972, 224).

In other words, we cannot talk about a sentence like *Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently*, nor approach it in whatever way we like. At any historical moment, there is a tendency for cultures to map certain procedures and structures for thinking. Particular kinds of statements and forms of classification are regarded as knowledge and self-evident ways of thinking about subjects while others are not (Macdonnell, 1986, 87).

Being a class within the educational system, linguistic studies such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, and sociolinguistics can be regarded as games played in order to halt the continual slide of meaning and the playfulness of language. They are games played

to bring language-play to an end. This game is played by the utilization of discourse through a ritualization of speech, a qualification and fixing of the roles for speaking subjects, the constitution of a doctrinal group, however diffuse, distribution and an appropriation of discourse with its powers and pieces of knowledge (Foucault 1981, 64).

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed how playful linguistic studies are by showing how playful a sentence like *Wordplay was a game Shakespeare played competently* can be. The multiple possible interpretations of the sentence were restricted to demonstrate that the boundaries between linguistic discipline such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, stylistics and literature are not straitjacketing and that by removing or adding one aspect to the way we study a linguistic characteristic we move from one domain of linguistic study to the other. The paper has illustrated how the sound *p* or the stress pattern, can be studied under phonetics. By adding the aesthetic feature to the study, we move to the domain of literature, or stylistics. By adding the social aspect, we enter the domain of sociolinguistics. Finally, by producing a meta-discourse on these fields of study, we enter the domain of discourse analysis, an interdisciplinary science that tries to show that knowledge and mind play are inseparable. This meta-discourse produced by discourse analysis, as I believe, would prove to be nothing but an ideological game played against the imperfect human perception.

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