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Topic II: 'Rough Night'

In the Shakespearean Tragic Sense

This paper will discuss the connection between word meaning and the notion of 'use.' The English idiomatic expression 'rough night' refers to a difficult moment experienced by the speaker. The fact that this particular expression may also be used as a hyperbole in its modern usage makes it a vague one to interpret, as the context it is used in depends on whether or not the speaker is exaggerating, being sarcastic, or simply stating the type of event he has endured. The situational context is important in assessing what is appropriate language to describe the situation. Using William P. Alston perspective on 'Meaning and Use' will help dissect the phrase 'rough night' in several layers of semantic analyses. I will interpret 'rough night' as expressed in the simplest form used by Macbeth, the main character in William Shakespeare's tragic play, *Macbeth*. He uses the clause to assert to the listener the seriousness of the events that occurred the previous night. The meaning of the statement, as uttered by Macbeth, would be determined by its

propositional content functioning as an illocutionary force, which not only depend on the speaker's ability to speak the language that he does, but also depends on the listener's ability to understand the speaker's utterance.

According to Alston, the "meaning of a word must somehow be a function of the activity of language users, of what they do in their employments of the word" (Hornsby and Longworth 67). He proposes that the term 'linguistic act' should be restricted to illocutionary acts as illocutionary acts must be performed with the use of language. An illocutionary act is an utterance that consists of the delivery of the *propositional content* made in the speech and a specific illocutionary force, whereby the speaker either asserts, demands, suggests, promises, or makes a vow. The propositional content is the information being conveyed in the clause of an utterance. The adjectival clause 'rough night' conveys a metaphorical sense, where 'rough' is the proposition that describes a moment in time - the quality of which is a difficult one. In this context, the morpheme 'rough' does not necessarily mean texture of an object, rather, it conveys an abstract description of an event in time. This propositional content serves as an illocutionary act in its utterance, where the situation of context dictates what is appropriate language.

In Alston's view, when a person says 'rough night' it is to make the assumption that the hearer already knows the meaning of the expression. The speaker who had endured a difficult evening the previous night must possess sufficient knowledge about his own language in order to correctly express this reality to his listener. To put the phrase 'rough night' in the context of Shakespearean English, Macbeth is able to describe the difficult moments he had experienced the previous night without revealing the fact that he had bloodily murdered the Scottish king Duncan, to usurp the throne. In the following scene the morning after the dirty deed is done, Macbeth responds with "'Twas a rough night" to Lennox's statement about how others in the castle had endured an "unruly" evening and heard "strange screams of death" (Shakespeare 2.3.60-66). The meaning of the words in this case is a function of the forces (assertion and acknowledgment) being used as a response to the listener's previous statement. In Alston's notion of use, Macbeth performs the illocutionary act with the use of the statement 'rough night' to communicate to Lennox metaphorically a specific type of event (rough), thereby also acting on the notion of potential force in his linguistic act. That potential force is the idea that the listener may interpret the speaker's statement to be completely something other than what the latter means to convey. A metaphorical

expression may vary in meaning, depending on the listener's ability to understand metaphorical language. In this context, the listener does understand the speaker's meaning (as assertion) and continues the conversation in stating, "My young remembrance cannot parallel/A fellow to it," or in plain, non-metaphorical language, that he is too young to remember anything like the horrible events that occurred the night before (Shakespeare 2.3.67).

Opponents of the Alstonian point of view believe "a sentence potentially has the various forces that it does because of what it means" (Hornsby and Longworth 80). The expression 'rough night' may be interpreted by the listener with the potential forces of sarcasm or hyperbole, under a different context, and only so because both participants already possess the understanding of the expression's meaning. In Shakespeare's tragic play, Macbeth asserts the seriousness of the previous evening in describing it as 'rough,' thereby performing an illocutionary act in the Alstonian perspective. In this tragic scene, where only a few seconds pass when Macduff, another Scottish nobleman who has been sincerely loyal to Duncan finds the bloody scene of murder, it would be out of context to say 'rough night' in a sarcastic tone, ruining the tragic flow of the scene. In this example, Macbeth appropriately uses the

propositional content (rough night) as an illocutionary force (assertion) of the previous night's events, with Lennox fully understanding the simple meaning intention behind the utterance. The meaning of the statement as expressed by Macbeth is determined by his use of the sentence as an illocutionary act, while presupposing that the listener already knows what the expression means.

There is another layer to the semantic analyses of clause 'rough night': the existence of another potential force in the utterance, *denial*. Macbeth denies additional information, such as killing Duncan the previous night, in order to protect himself from prosecution. According to Alston, "a sentence means what it does because it potentially has the various forces that it does" (Hornsby and Longworth 80). Alstonian opponents disagree. Before uttering the phrase, the speaker already establishes in his mind what the meaning of 'rough night' is, and is able to project this certain meaning to his listener given the context of the situation. In the context of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the propositional content 'rough night' is used in the simple utterance "'Twas a rough night" as serving two functions of assertion and denial. One illocutionary force (assertion) is known to the listener, while the second one is not. I have already explained how Macbeth asserts the previous

night. Denial of additional information about the events that occurred the previous night, which only he and his wife, Lady Macbeth, are aware of, is an example of the potential force that results from meaning as already having been established in the mind of the speaker before he utters the sentence. Alstonian opponents would say that the illocutionary force of denial exists because of what the sentence means, which is known to the speaker in this scene, not the listener. Its existence as another potential force (relevant only to the speaker), is a case of one possible strong objection to the argument of meaning as determined by the propositional content serving as an illocutionary force. Both participants in the conversation must know the meaning of the utterance to understand the possible illocutionary force(s) being delivered in the utterance. A sentence does not mean what it does because of its potential forces, rather, it means what it does because its subject, in this case, the difficult events that occurred the previous night, is the source of explication for the propositional content of the utterance to function as an illocutionary force. The potential force of information omission (or denial) is only known to the speaker, in Macbeth's case, to protect his life and estate.

Macbeth utters the sentence 'rough night' to communicate to Lennox the type of experience he had endured the previous evening. According to Alston, word meaning depends on sentence-sized units used to perform an illocutionary act. Macbeth expressing 'rough night' to Lennox is the illocutionary act performed to communicate the propositional content Macbeth wants his listener to understand and acknowledge. The information is understood by the listener through uttering an acknowledgment in the following utterance (response). As illustrated in the context of Shakespearean tragedy, the meaning of an utterance propels any potential force resulting from that utterance.

Works Consulted

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