

## ANTITHESIS – A LINGUISTIC APPROACH

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Like most figures of traditional rhetoric, 'antithesis' is a vague term but, unlike most of them, it is a figure still recognized by speakers of natural languages even if they do not know it by its traditional name. On the other hand, antithesis does not have the stature of such all-important figures as metaphor, and this may account for the fact of its being generally neglected by linguists. This paper attempts to give a linguistic characterization of antithesis, a task which I consider prerequisite to a future discussion of its stylistic functioning.

The following sentences from *Macbeth* will serve as data:

- (1) Lechery, Sir, it [=drink] provokes, and unprovokes:
- (2) it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance.
- (3) it makes him, and it mars him; (II.iii.29–32)
- (4) Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
- (5) Not so happy, yet much happier. (I.iii.65–6)
- (6) When the battle's lost and won. (I.i.4)
- (7) Fair is foul, and foul is fair: (I.i.11)
- (8) Present fears  
Are less than horrible imaginings. (I.iii.137–8)
- (9) Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear  
Things that do sound so fair? (I.iii.51–2)

Examples (1)–(9) have been expressly classified as antitheses by Kenneth Muir in his Introduction to the Arden edition of *Macbeth* (1962: xxxi, including note 1 on the same page). I have arranged them, according to my own intuition, on a scale of increasing complexity and resistance to antithetical interpretation. What holds these examples together is, of course, the presence in each of some form or another of semantic opposition or contrast. This statement may be treated as a preliminary conclusion on the data, but in fact it is rather a preconceived idea in anyone with an appropriate educational background.

How can a linguist handle such material? One way of viewing the linguist's task is to say that a linguist externalizes and makes explicit the inner knowledge of language *L* possessed by the speakers of that language. This knowledge normally operates on the subconscious level of our minds and manifests itself in our using language in normal circumstances and in our intuitions about language, which may be spontaneous or prompted by reflection. It is obvious that speakers' ability to distinguish antithetical from non-antithetical sentences cannot be equated with Chomsky's (1965, 1972) linguistic competence since the ability to recognize antithesis is educationally acquired and therefore more 'shallow' than linguistic competence understood as having roots in linguistic universals, which are determined, in all probability, by the structuring of the human brain, and so are inborn.

The problem of 'acquired' competence for recognizing antithesis belongs to a vast and, so far as I know, hitherto totally ignored problem of recognizing stylistic devices. This 'stylistic competence' (the term is used by Hendricks 1976: 180, but in a quite different sense) is fundamental to our understanding of the working of 'style'. It seems probable that at least some stylistic devices are capable of operating on a not quite so 'shallow' level of the mind. For instance, there can be little doubt that devices such as rhythm and rhyme are capable of being apprehended semi-consciously or even subconsciously, as evidenced in the (creative) use of both by very young children. How far such devices are psychologically or even biologically (rhythm) conditioned is for me only a matter of speculation and I leave to the experimental psycholinguistics to provide some kind of answer. But if the connection can be established for some aspects of stylistic devices, then the claim of these aspects to the status of some kind of universals becomes legitimate.

As for antithesis, a hypothetical claim can be made for its dependence on the dichotomizing property of the mind. We have already agreed that what keeps diverse instances of this figure together is their reliance on semantic oppositeness. Now it may be argued that "to think in oppositions" or "to categorize experience in terms of binary contrasts" (Lyons 1977:271) is a propensity of the human mind. In support of this claim we may invoke the objectively discoverable principle of binary opposition as underlying important areas of linguistic structure, including the lexicon. If this is so, then the origin of antithesis can be traced back to one of the universal tendencies characterizing the human mind. This in turn may serve as explanation why antithesis has survived when many other traditional figures have fallen into total oblivion. (I believe that similar hypotheses involving argumentation from a propensity of the human mind can be constructed for other 'living' figures, such as metaphor and onomatopoeia).

Let us now have a closer look at the data, and try to do two basic things:  
1. to account for the speaker/hearer's ability to distinguish antithesis and to

grade instances of this figure on a scale of 'antitheticalness', and 2. to account for the way antithetical sentences are understood, i.e. provide their semantic interpretation.

Since, in the last resort, antithesis is a linguistic form that is educationally acquired, it seems reasonable to start with the traditional definitions. According to Joseph (1966:137), who reconstructs the definitions of the Renaissance rhetoricians,

(DEF I) Antithesis sets contraries in opposition to give greater perspicuity by contrast.

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, antithesis is defined as

(DEF II) Contrast of ideas expressed by parallelism of strongly contrasted words.

As was to be expected, these definitions point to 'contraries', 'opposition', or 'contrast of ideas' as the essence of antithesis. Moreover, DEF II also mentions its secondary characteristics: 'parallelism of contrasted words', which I understand as placing the contrasted words in syntactically corresponding positions; and DEF I takes note of the stylistic function that antithesis performs in discourse. Consequently, our discussion will take up the following points concerning antithesis:

- I. Its constitutive characteristics: oppositeness of meaning;
- II. Secondary characteristics: parallelism of structure;
- III. Semantic interpretation.
- (IV. Stylistic interpretation, i.e. the functioning of antithesis in the text, will not be discussed.)

I. In order to define the constitutive characteristics of antithesis, the concept of semantic oppositeness, including the terms 'opposition', 'contrast' and 'contrary' must be made more precise. This should enable us to form a hypothesis on how oppositeness is recognized by speakers. (The ensuing discussion will be largely based on Lyons (1977: ch. 9) whose terminology and distinctions will be accepted with some simplification.) Of the terms mentioned, only 'contrary' is known as clearly defined (in traditional logic) and it needs 'contradictory' as complementation.

- (a) "A proposition *p* is the contradictory of another proposition *q*, if *p* and *q* cannot both be true or both false; e.g. "This is a male cat": "This is a female cat" (as well as such corresponding affirmative and negative propositions as "The coffee is cold": "The coffee is not cold"). A proposition *p* is the contrary of another proposition *q*, if *p* and *q* cannot both be true (though both may be false); e.g. "The coffee is hot": "The coffee is cold" (Lyons 1977:272).

These definitions refer to contrary and contradictory propositions. We shall apply them to sentences expressing such propositions, and then derivatively to the lexical items used in the predicative expressions of these sentences (cf. Lyons 1977:272), since we want to arrive at a clear concept of sense<sup>1</sup> opposition in lexical items. However, the formulation above is too broad for that purpose (cf. Lyons 1977:272, note 2) since it would allow as contraries such pairs as "This coffee here is hot" and "There is no coffee here", so I tried to make it more precise by adding the following constraint on *p* and *q*:

- (b) *p* and *q* are propositions that are identical except that where unit *x* occurs in *p*, a corresponding unit *y* occurs in *q*.

But this constraint is not sufficient either, since it would not prevent innumerable pairs such as 'red: blue', 'tree: dog' to be interpreted as contraries. (We shall reserve the term 'in contrast' to define the relation between lexical items in such pairs). To prevent this, I introduced another constraint on *p* and *q*:

- (c) *x* and *y* are dichotomously opposed to one another, e.g.

married : unmarried  
 married : not married  
 married : single  
 hot : cold  
 (warm : cold)  
 (warm : cool)

This seems satisfactory as far as the distinction between contrary and contradictory sentences is concerned, but the relation of dichotomous opposition between (senses of) lexical items remains unexplained, the examples in (c) indicating only that it is far from uniform. Therefore it seems advisable not to pursue the traditional distinctions any further, but rather to employ some modern concepts in the hope that they may prove more useful.

One such concept, introduced by Sapir (1944), is that of 'gradable' vs. 'ungradable' opposites (cf. Lyons 1977:272 ff.), which can control the way in which intuition is resorted to in semantic discussion. Grading (in lexical items employed as predicative expressions) involves comparison, so we can say.

- (10) the tea is colder/hotter than I thought  
 whereas

- (11) the cat is more male/female than I thought

<sup>1</sup> The 'sense' of a lexical item, i.e. roughly its basic cognitive meaning, must be distinguished from its 'connotative' (expressive, emotive) meaning, as well as from its 'denotation' ("relationship that holds between... [the] lexeme and persons, things, places, properties, processes and activities external to the language-system", Lyons 1977:207) and 'reference' (speaker refers to a certain individual or a class of individuals by means of the referring expression which will identify to the hearer the individual or class of individuals in question, cf. Lyons 1977:177-8).

is not normally said, and the adjectives involved are termed 'ungradable'. What further characterizes ungradable opposites (when they are employed as predicative expressions) is that they "divide the universe of discourse (i.e. the objects of which they are predicable) into two complementary subsets" (Lyons 1977:271), and so will be termed 'complementaries'. Consequently, 1. the predication of either one of the pair implies the predication of the negation of the other, and vice versa, 2. the predication of the negation of either implies the predication of the other, i.e. complementaries behave like contradictories. For instance,

- |                       |         |                       |
|-----------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| (12) the cat is male  | implies | the cat is not female |
| the cat is female     | implies | the cat is not male   |
| the cat is not male   | implies | the cat is female     |
| the cat is not female | implies | the cat is male.      |

Furthermore, the ungradable opposites are often morphologically related, e.g. 'married' vs. 'unmarried'/'not married', but they may also be morphologically unrelated, e.g. 'married' vs. 'single'. Gradable opposites, on the other hand, are usually morphologically unrelated, e.g. 'cold' vs. 'hot'. The term 'antonym', often used to cover all kinds of oppositeness, will be reserved here for such gradable opposites, which—we may note in passing—form numerically a much larger class than do ungradable complementaries. As with ungradables, the predication of one item of such antonymic pair implies the predication of the negation of the other:

- (13) the tea is cold implies the tea is not hot.

But, unlike with ungradables, the predication of the negation of one item of the antonymic pair does not necessarily imply the predication of the other:

- (14) the tea is not cold does not necessarily imply the tea is hot,

it may, for instance, be 'warm' or 'lukewarm', i.e. gradable opposites generally behave like contraries. But it is the gradable vs. ungradable distinction that is primary here, not the logical distinction between contraries and contradictories. "The fact that gradable antonyms can generally be taken as contraries, rather than contradictories, is a consequence of gradability, not its cause" (Lyons 1977:272).

All these 'antonymy vs. complementarity' criteria should not be understood in any absolute sense. One obvious kind of relativity is manifested in the fact that one and the same lexical item may be paired with both a morphologically related and morphologically unrelated unit, cf. 'married' vs. 'unmarried'/'not married', as well as 'married' vs. 'single'. Another is revealed in the creative or 'deviant' substitution of gradable interpretation for the normally ungradable understanding of a predicative expression, e.g. Orwell's 'more equal'

which is a logical absurdity. However, for the purposes of general classification it is convenient to ignore such unconventional uses. In effect two major classes of oppositeness are distinguished:

A) GRADABLES	vs.	UNGRADABLES
which in the majority of cases correspond to		
ANTONYMS	vs.	COMPLEMENTARIES
which, in turn, roughly correspond to		
CONTRARIES	vs.	CONTRADICTIONS.

Through this classification, which is not always as clear cut as may be wished, there runs the clear cut morphological classification of

B) MORPHOLOGICALLY UNRELATED	vs.	MORPHOLOGICALLY RELATED
pairs of lexical items expressing oppositeness of meaning. Again, these two classes largely correspond to antonyms and complementaries, respectively.		

Along with gradable and ungradable opposition, there also exist types of lexical opposition which cannot be naturally assigned to either of these major classes. These are: directional opposition ('up' vs. 'down')<sup>2</sup> and converseness ('buy' vs. 'sell'). Converseness is, first of all, a logical relation and its simplest version is the case of a two-place relation. Thus

- d. "If  $R$  is a two-place relation and  $R'$  is its converse, we can substitute  $R'$  for  $R$  and simultaneously transpose the terms in the relation to obtain equivalence:  $R(x, y) = R'(y, x)$ " Lyons (1977:280).

This can be applied to sentences expressing propositions. A pair of sentences with converses as lexical items will be equivalent (as far as basic cognitive meaning is concerned), provided that the transposition of noun phrases and other appropriate grammatical changes have been carried out. For instance,

- (15)  $X$  killed  $Y \equiv Y$  was killed by  $X$   
 $X$  precedes  $Y \equiv Y$  follows  $X$   
 $X$  bought  $Y$  from  $Z \equiv Z$  sold  $Y$  to  $XZ$   
 (if 'buy' and 'sell' are treated as three-place predicates).

In consequence, to the major classes of oppositeness listed above in A) and B), we add two minor classes, C) and D):

- C) CONVERSES,  
 D) DIRECTIONALLY OPPOSED EXPRESSIONS.

<sup>2</sup> Since there are no examples of directional opposition in our data (1)–(9), this type of opposition will not be discussed here. For information, see Lyons 1977: 9.2

We are now in a position to give a tentative answer to the question how it happens that speakers recognize oppositeness of meaning, which, in turn, underlies the constitutive characterization of antithesis. As regards morphologically related pairs, it is reasonable to assume that the cognitive meaning (=sense) of the two members of such a pair is identical except for the 'negative' element added to the second member (and carried by the 'negating' prefix *un-*, *im-*, etc. or the morpheme *not*). (Counterexamples are not difficult to find, e.g. the semantic opposite of 'must' is not 'must not', but I will disregard the issue). Consequently, when lexical items are viewed as sets of semantic features (components), we can say that such pairs share all primary semantic features but one. I believe that the same assumption is correct for morphologically unrelated antonyms, so that pairs of antonyms, similarly to pairs of complementaries, do not consist of lexical items that have nothing in common; on the contrary, the semantic content of such pairs of opposites is not far removed from that of a pair of synonyms (cf. R. Lakoff 1971:134).

If we accept the notion that speakers recognize synonyms as defined by exactly the same set of (primary?) semantic features, and that they recognize opposites as differing in only one primary feature (e.g. 'hot' and 'cold' are distinguished by  $\langle +\text{temperature} \rangle$  vs.  $\langle -\text{temperature} \rangle$ ), we are still faced with the problem of how speakers distinguish near synonyms like 'hot' and 'warm'. I have signalled this already by listing in (c) three related, dichotomously opposed pairs: 'hot' vs. 'cold', 'warm' vs. 'cold', and 'warm' vs. 'cool', of which the last two were put in parentheses to indicate the option the linguist has of either including them or not in the system. Katz (1972:159) explains the difference between 'hot' vs. 'cold' and 'warm' vs. 'cool' by distinguishing 'extreme contraries' from 'local contraries'. "Extreme contraries are cases where language admits no greater divergence, with respect to the property in question, than is expressed by the terms ... Local contraries are cases where opposition occurs between an extreme and some nonextreme, such as ... 'warm' and 'cold', or between two nonextremes, such as 'warm' and 'cool'." For obvious reasons, the extreme vs. nonextreme meaning oppositions can occur only in the class of gradable opposites. Accordingly, the feature by means of which speakers distinguish 'hot' from 'warm' (i.e. near synonyms) may be defined as  $\langle \pm \text{extreme} \rangle$ .

The last — and minor — class of oppositeness to be taken into consideration, i.e. converses, do not lend themselves naturally to polarization by means of the plus vs. minus value of a feature. As we have seen above, what characterizes a pair of converses is that they transpose arguments, as in (15), the sense of the sentence remaining unaltered. I believe it is reasonable to assume that speakers recognize converses (functioning as predicative expressions) by the 'opposite' arrangement of arguments such as Agentive, Benefactive, etc. This can be represented by means of symbolic notation as in (15), or more accurately by the formulas of case grammars.

II. In the preceding section we have defined the constitutive characteristics of antithesis by providing a framework of the semantic relation of oppositeness. Let us now return to examples (1–9). On inspecting the data we can see that only some of the antitheses selected for investigation reveal a clear-cut dichotomous oppositeness, either of complementary (*provokes: unprovokes*), antonymic (*lesser: greater; not so happy: much happier; fair: foul; makes: mars*, the latter to be interpreted as a nonextreme member of the pair), or converse (*lost: won*) type. In other antitheses the relevant lexical units are merely in contrast and would not have been readily recognized as 'opposed' (*provokes: takes away; fear (v.): fair (adj.)*), if it were not for some additional factors foregrounding them in the sentences in which they appear. In such cases it is the secondary characteristics, that is some additional regularities in the expression plane, taking the shape of parallelism of syntactic, morphological, and syllable structure, alliteration and pararhyme<sup>3</sup> that help toward an antonymic interpretation of a pair of lexical units that differ by more than one (or two in the case of nonextremes) essential feature. These additional regularities occur in various combinations, the greater the number of converging regularities, the clearer the antithetical effect. To illustrate, *makes* and *mars* activate in (3) all these additional regularities in the expression plane (notice that extreme opposition would call for something like 'makes' vs. 'destroys', which would ruin the pararhyme and the parallelistic pattern), while *provokes* and *takes away* in (2) share only a similar syntactic position and the 3rd person singular ending but, in the content plane, take semantically opposed objects, *desire* vs. *performance*. If *fear* and *fair* in (9), though employed as different lexical categories (parts of speech), are felt to be 'opposed', it is partly due to their pararhyming phonetic shape and to the peculiar 'end-of-the-line' and 'end-of-the-sentence' positions they respectively occupy.

But it is quite likely that such overt ties would not have been sufficient to bind *fear* and *fair* in antithetical opposition, if it were not for some covert semantic/pragmatic characteristics of the meaning carried by these words. These may be brought out in the shape of deductive chains, which reveal the underlying semantic connection, e.g.:

- (16) you fear fair things  
 people normally do not fear fair things  
 therefore, what you do is in opposition to what is normally done.

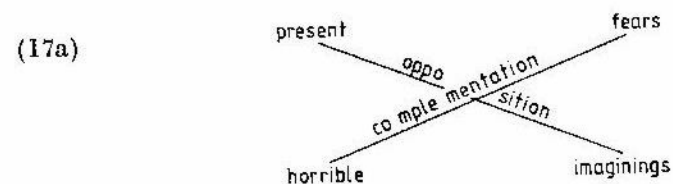
Such 'extended oppositeness' — as we may call it — is in fact a form of primary characteristics of antithesis that is expressed covertly in the content

<sup>3</sup> 'Pararhyme' is a term introduced by Leech (1969:89), who does not define it and explains what he has in mind by providing the following pairs of examples: *great/groat, send/sound*.

plane. An instance of antithesis that is based almost entirely on covert properties is found in *present fears: horrible imaginings* (8), where the overt correspondence (=secondary characteristics) is reduced to two nominal phrases (adj. + noun plural) in comparative construction, placed at the end of two consecutive verse lines. How *present fears* may be understood as bound by semantic oppositeness to *imaginings* will be seen from the following statements:

- (17) *present fears* refers to present time  
*imaginings* refers to future time (this is one of the definitions of 'imagine' in COD)  
 present time is semantically opposed to future time  
 therefore, *present fears* is semantically opposed to *imaginings*.

At the same time, *horrible* and *fears*, instead of forming an opposition, complement each other syntactically and semantically and could form a collocational conventional phrase 'horrible fears'. In this way opposition and complementation form a cross pattern in this antithesis:



To sum up, the general principle governing the secondary characteristics of antithesis consists in balancing the elements of semantic oppositeness and those of additional formal regularity: covert oppositeness of content requires some extra overt regularity in the expression plane to foreground the hidden antithetical character of a sentence. But the reverse of this principle does not hold, i.e. overtly expressed oppositeness of meaning may be accompanied by clear-cut correspondences in expression. In other words, antithetical sentences can be arranged on a scale having at one end those with clearly expressed oppositeness of meaning and overtly clear-cut (parallelistic) structure, and at the other — those which without some additional overt and/or covert regularities would not have been acknowledged as antithetical at all.

III. Antithesis proper (=high on the scale of 'antitheticalness') is normally constructed as a conjunction, one conjunct expressing the meaning that is in opposition to the meaning of the other conjunct. I shall now limit my considerations of the semantic interpretation of antithesis to such conjunctions which fulfill requirement (a) for contradiction set by traditional logic, as well as the additional constraints (b) and (c) set in section I of this paper. In such conjunctions, the topic that is common to both conjuncts is predicated by P in

one conjunct, and by its dichotomous opposite,  $\sim P$  (antonym, complementary, converse, etc.) in the other<sup>4</sup>. Such a situation obtains in (1) and is most easily observed in the underlying structure for (1), i.e. (1a), from which the elements which are not essential for our considerations have been eliminated:

(1a) drink<sub>1</sub> provokes lechery<sub>1</sub>, and drink<sub>1</sub> unprovokes lechery<sub>1</sub>.

The problem which arises concerns a meaningful semantic interpretation of natural language sentences which contain propositions that are contradictory from the point of view of traditional logic, i.e. cannot both be true (or both false, for that matter)<sup>5</sup>. The question to answer is precisely why (1)

(1) Lechery, Sir, it [=drink] provokes, and unprovokes

does not make an impression of contradiction. In order to answer this question we shall first comment on the meaning of (1) as revealed in its underlying structure (1a), and then we shall consider the surface form of (1) as occurring in Shakespeare's text.

With respect to the meaning of (1a), one line of reasoning may point to the generic character of the nouns involved, which is indicated by the zero article they take. Thus *drink* does not stand for any particular drink but for alcoholic drink in general (one of the standard dictionary definitions of 'drink'). Similarly, *lechery* does not stand for a specific act of lechery, but for the general concept. Consequently, the indices attached to nouns in the underlying structure (1a) become meaningless as indicators of coreferentiality because of the indeterminacy of meaning contained in such nouns, of which various secondary semantic features may become activated in individual acts of interpretation (cf. Lehrer 1970). In such an approach *drink* and *lechery* become *n*-way ambiguous. But however differently they may be disambiguated, it is quite unlikely that the disambiguation in conjunct one will differ from that in conjunct two, and if it is, respectively, identical, a contradictory interpretation will result. Therefore the indeterminacy of meaning contained in the corresponding nouns, instrumental and objective, does not constitute the decisive factor in the non-contradictory interpretation of (1).

<sup>4</sup> Notice that requirement (a) and the additional constraints (b) and (c) define a contradiction in terms of overtly (=explicitly) expressed semantic content, but the definition could be extended to covert contradiction in which the identity of topic and the incompatibility of predicates are revealed only by deduction. Cf. R. Lakoff 1971:123.

<sup>5</sup> The problem has been noticed by R. Lakoff (1971:123). She defines a contradictory conjunction as follows: "if the paired constituents that compose the common topic are identical, and all other pairs are similarly identical, overtly or by deduction, except for one; and this pair is such that, if one member is *A* and one *B*,  $A \dashv B$ , again explicitly or by deduction, the conjunction will be contradictory". And then she writes, "I feel that this definition is subject, no doubt, to numerous counterexamples, and seems to be too simple to account for so complicated a phenomenon". R. Lakoff 1971:123.

But another line of reasoning is open to us. When we consider sentences such as (18):

(18) John<sub>1</sub> provokes Mary<sub>1</sub>, and John<sub>1</sub> unprovokes Mary<sub>1</sub>

with nouns defined by unitary coreference to individual persons, it becomes obvious that it is the property of structuring of the conjunction together with the nature of the two predicates that is decisive. The conjunction in (1), (1a), and (18) is of asymmetric character. Such conjunctions (in contradistinction to symmetric ones) do not tolerate the reversal of conjuncts (cf. R. Lakoff 1971) without material change of meaning or semantic anomaly. (1b) may serve as an instance of the latter:

(1b) \*drink unprovokes lechery, and drink provokes lechery.

The anomaly of (1b) is the more pronounced as the very existence, and hence intelligibility, of *unprovokes*, a nonce derivation<sup>6</sup>, depends on the earlier *provokes*. According to R. Lakoff (1971:126), 'and' in such conjunctions is notionally equivalent to 'and then', 'after it', and expresses temporal-causal priority. In such interpretation, the meaning of (1a) is:

(1c) drink provokes lechery, and then drink unprovokes lechery

i.e. involves consecutive, not simultaneous, events or states. The comma separating the first conjunct from the second in the original sentence under discussion

(1) Lechery, Sir, it [=drink] provokes, and unprovokes

in the Arden edition — which claims to be "closer to that of the First Folio than any since the seventeenth century" (Muir (ed.) 1962: xiii) — is also in keeping with this interpretation.

It is also interesting to observe that in the surface sentence (1) the alleged contradiction is far less noticeable than it is in the underlying structure (1a). In order to account for this, we must remember that the surface has been reached after the application of various conjunction-reduction transformations and 'stylistic' movement transformations. In effect, such 'telescoped' structures as (1) give the reader/hearer more freedom of interpretation (through the operation of recovering the deleted material and enforcing SVO order) than do the fully stated propositions as in (1a). This mode of interpretation is no doubt connected with the propensity of the human mind towards impos-

<sup>6</sup> Joseph (1966:133, note 14) reports, after Hart (1934:253), that "words beginning with the prefix *un-* amount to nearly 4 percent of Shakespeare's vocabulary; about a fourth of these are 'new' to literature, of Shakespeare's own coinage. They help us to differentiate his plays from those of his predecessors and contemporaries".

ing some non-anomalous semantic interpretation on unconventional (telescoped, fragmented, etc.) linguistic material. In other words, the asymmetric, time-relational (and hence non-anomalous) interpretation is enforced on the truncated linguistic material of (1) as a matter of course.

I believe that asymmetry underlies most conjunctions of antithetical character, i.e. two conjuncts which are in opposition are in most cases irreversible. In consequence, the second conjunct cannot be properly understood without the first, as we have seen in the *provokes* : *unprovokes* pair, and as can be illustrated by any number of examples, particularly those of contradictory character, e.g.:

- (19) And nothing is, but what is not. (I.iii.142)  
 (20) Father'd he is, and yet he's fatherless. (IV.ii.27)

I have not yet investigated the matter in any empirical-statistical sense, so I offer the idea of prevalingly asymmetric character of antithesis as a hypothesis. Some support for this hypothesis can be found in the linguistic fact that — frequently — conjoined elements which are either in contrast (“play cat and mouse”) or in opposition (“now and then”, “here and there”, “the long and the short of it”) have a tendency to become immobilized or frozen, i.e. acquire the nature of an idiom. Cooper and Ross (1975) in an article bearing a telling title “World Order” maintain that the motivation for this cannot be viewed as a purely linguistic matter (including phonological considerations, for instance of the type “place two elements contain more syllables, longer nuclear vowels” (Cooper and Ross 1975:63)), but as a combination of the linguistic factors and our knowledge of the world. The ordering of conjuncts in the Porter’s speech in *Macbeth* corroborates this position. The purely grammatical factor of the necessary ordering *provokes* : *unprovokes* is mingled with the motivation from the real world: first a positive action is mentioned, creating something that did not exist before, and then it is followed by its negation or ‘undoing’.

However, the ordering of conjuncts in an antithesis becomes more obviously dependent on the context when circumstantial factors other than time are involved. In the Witches’ words addressed to Banquo

- (4) Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.  
 (5) Not so happy, yet much happier.

time lapse may be involved:

- (4a) Banquo is now lesser than Macbeth, and [=but] Banquo will be greater than Macbeth  
 (5a) Banquo is now not so happy as Macbeth, yet Banquo will be much happier than Macbeth

but it is the manner of being great and being happy that is here decisive in final interpretation. This may be paraphrased as follows:

- (4b) Banquo is lesser than Macbeth in some respect, and [=but] Banquo is greater than Macbeth in some other respect.  
 (5b) Banquo is not so happy as Macbeth in some respect, yet Banquo will be much happier than Macbeth in some other respect.

The information needed for the proper understanding of time and manner factors in (4) and (5) comes in the next line of Shakespeare’s text:

- (21) Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none (I.iii.67)

which also returns to the ‘positive : negative’ ordering of conjuncts. It cannot be doubted that other such circumstantial factors exist, e.g. place, differentiating conjunct one from conjunct two in such a way that though the topic is common (and coreferential) in both, the respective predicates do not refer to the same action, state, etc. so that a non-contradictory interpretation results.

But in our data we have contradictions, apparent or real, in sentences (6) and (7):

- (6) When the battle’s lost and won.  
 (7) Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

where the semantic interpretation cannot proceed in the manner proposed so far. This is because these sentences do in fact produce a strong effect of contradiction, and then the second of them is quite enigmatic. To account for these impressions we resort to the concept of violation of grammar in (6) and of violation of semantic structure in (7). In (6) *lose* and *win* are converses requiring two arguments which, as we know from section I, must be appropriately transposed when a sentence with a pair of such converses is made to express the same proposition. Thus,

- (6a) A loses the battle<sub>1</sub> = B wins the battle<sub>1</sub>.

The application of the passive and the conjunction reduction transformations yields (6b):

- (6b) The battle<sub>1</sub> is lost by A and (the battle<sub>1</sub> is) won by B

and is followed by the Agent deletion transformation, which is not allowed when two different Agents are involved. This violation of the grammar accounts for the puzzling effect of Shakespeare’s sentence, but the puzzle can be solved on reflection.

No such grammatical solution is available for (7). This time no amount of ingenuity will dispel the strong bewilderment we feel. This is because the

semantic rules have been violated. Not only a pair of antonyms P and  $\sim$ P has been equated, but it has been done twice:

(7a) (P is  $\sim$ P) and ( $\sim$ P is P).

Such equations can be true only of perfect synonyms, ( $a \equiv b$ ), but in (7) it has been made with reference to polar (extreme) antonyms. Consequently, the semantic interpretation has no literal reading and will have to be performed on some non-literal, figurative level of meaning, perhaps as a loose paraphrase of the kind:

(7b) "(7) is a statement about the reversal of values."

Needless to add, an interpretation of (7), however different in individual hearers/readers, can be given only in relation to an understanding of the entire text of the play, probably with the help of deductive chains as in (16) and (17). How this can be achieved goes far beyond the scope of this paper, and may be taken up by linguistic stylistics whose role it is to integrate linguistics, aesthetics, and the 'message' carried by a literary work.

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