

Passage (1.3.82-93):

Rude am I in my speech,  
 And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace;  
 For, since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,  
 Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used  
 Their dearest action in the tented field:  
 And little of this great world can I speak  
 More than pertains to feats of broil and battle;  
 And therefore little shall I grace my cause  
 In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,  
 I will a round, unvarnished tale deliver  
 Of my whole course of love: what drugs, what charms,  
 What conjuration, and what mighty magic—

I was struck by Othello's claim early in the play that he could speak only rudely in his own defense, finding this statement in fact rather gentle; for my exercise, then, I opted to map out the sound of this passage visually. Since the section is written in pentameter, I decided to try out a grid in which each square represented a syllable, in order to compare (specifically phoneme) patterns across lines and observe any developments over the course of the passage.

In fact, I ended up creating two versions of this grid: the first I used to chart vowel sounds visually in grayscale. I had in the back of my mind Reuven Tsur's argument in *Towards a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* that it was possible to apply the metaphor of "light" and "dark" to vowels and expect approximate understanding (i.e., long i is a very light sound, while long u is very dark). While I'm not necessarily confident in all of my rankings of vowel sounds along this spectrum—I suspect that fully exploiting this idea would require a fair amount of analysis of wavelengths, at the very least—I did find that the visual representation simplified the information enough to indicate some interesting patterns: the lines including "and ... little" appeared relatively 'light' in sound, the few 'dark' vowels seemed likely to appear in the fourth or fifth syllable of the line, the long i sound appeared mainly in Othello's references to himself (I, my), and lines most often ended in a vowel that was neither very light nor very dark (long e, notably). Of course, it is also worth noting that I based my judgments on my own Modern English; presumably the original vowel pronunciations would not map onto my instincts entirely.

I then attempted to tackle consonants in a more colorful grid, breaking each square of the grid into two and working with the rough categories of liquids, dentals, labials, velars, nasals, sibilants, aspirated consonants, and semivowels. Although classifying consonants initially struck me as an easier project (because more straightforward and less impressionistic) than rating vowels, this grid turned out to be much more challenging—in part, I'm sure, because some of the categories I wanted to work with overlapped, in part because two spaces per syllable was not always enough to accommodate consonants (in which case I made a judgment call on which consonant sounds were 'dominant'), and in part because consonant sounds and letters don't exist in a one-to-one relationship. The sheer number of categories made it difficult to track the relationships between them (i.e., 'c' vs. 'ch'), and left the resulting grid feeling a bit cluttered. That said, I still find some of the trends rather compelling, especially after mapping some of the colors back onto the original text.

With both of those grids completed, I attempted to superpose the consonant grid on the vowel grid, to see if any other interesting patterns appeared due to their combination. There were a few syllables with interesting similarities, although generally speaking, the two graphs together again offered too much information and the most obvious outliers tended to correspond, for example, to the repetition of a word (which probably would have been easier to identify without the grids).

One of the main drawbacks of the project in its current state that, while many interesting sound patterns (and with, I think, a generally euphonic trend) appeared in Othello's ironic claim to speak poorly, there is no control group: my scope has been too limited to reach a conclusion about how Othello's claim here compares to speech elsewhere in the play. The project could also be extended to account for meter, to attempt to chart tonality, etc.; however, I would expect again to be overwhelmed by information if any of these were added in currently.