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Exercise #7: *Othello*

Original Passage: (see attached PDF for sound representation)

OTHELLO

Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war;
And O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.

IAGO

Is't possible, my lord?

OTHELLO

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!
Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof; (3.3.353-62)

Commentary:

I chose to create a visual representation of the sound of this passage. My goal was to visually represent the relative sound intensities of each phoneme and, by extension, each composite word, to explore Smith's claim that, to some extent, "volume control is written into scripts for the stage" (226). I'm interested in the tension between such an idealized phonemical analysis and the overall delivery choices that go into an actor's performance. In my representation, each box stands for a phoneme, with the colors representing their different intensities (in decibels). The system shown in the key is adapted from Smith's Figure 8.5 (226), taken from Dennis Fry. I somewhat arbitrarily divided the decibel levels into ranges for the sake of manageability and clarity, with a color division between consonants (blue) and vowels (orange); this allows us to easily distinguish between consonants and vowels at a glance and to quickly compare the intensities within each category, at the expense of visually over-exaggerating the difference in decibel levels between consonants and vowels. Vowel boxes were doubled in length when marked as lengthened by a "ː" symbol.

A few notes more on my methodology, and some problems I ran into: I relied on the OED for the phonetic transcription, using standard British pronunciation. There was a discrepancy between the OED/IPA's system and Smith/Fry's, which I couldn't always reconcile, particularly for the vowels. (For example, the OED rendered "O" as əʊ, Smith as [o:]; I defaulted to Smith's ranking here, rather than rendering the diphthong as separate phonemes like I did elsewhere.) The result is a rough approximation that certainly has some inaccuracies, and

this method obviously doesn't take into consideration historical linguistic changes and regional accents, but the representation is hopefully still useful as an experiment in synesthesia and a visual codification of physiological sound similarities at the boundaries of the descriptive powers of literary devices like alliteration and assonance.

The chart helped me notice some sonic connections that I didn't make on a first pass reading. "All" and "war" are comprised of comparable, inverted intensities, a pattern which is also embedded in "glorious," "throats," "Othello's," and "lord." We can see the plurality of words that are bookended by low-volume consonants ("steed," "trump," "spirit," "fife," "pride," "pomp," "gone"), versus those bookended by higher volume or variable consonants ("farewell," "royal," "mortal"), or those words that stand out by beginning or ending with a vowel ("quality," "engine," "ocular"). Voiceless consonants—those lowest in volume—occur in four places: "whose," "throats," "Othello's," and "whore." These all stand as interesting examples of sonic groupings across lines that one might not consciously make otherwise.

Overall, I would characterize the sound of the passage as a bell curve, as the least intense phonemic combinations occur at the beginning and end of the passage. The first two lines I analyzed lack the intense /o/ sounds that pepper the rest of the lines, using many /ɪ/ and /ʌ/ vowels instead. The /o/ sounds reach their apex arguably in "whore"—a keyword in the play that comes to describe each female character. "Whore" is doubly emphasized by echoing the sounds of Iago's "lord" in the previous line and offsetting the high volume vowel with the low volume fricative /h/. While this sound is echoed in the last line's "sure," we see a succession of weaker sounds than we get in the passage's concentrated middle: "be," "it," "give," "the," "proof."

This exercise has left me with a couple of questions that I'm still thinking through. Do the sound families that comprise a line's sonic texture call for (require?) a certain kind of delivery? How do phonemes generate an affective register? How much is contextual/relational, and how much is inherent? Can we get beyond affective mimesis in phonemic interpretation?