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ENG 523
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Othello: The Sound of Language

4.1.185-205:

OTHELLO O, a thousand thousand times! And then of so gentle a condition—
IAGO Ay, too gentle.
OTHELLO Nay, that's certain—but yet the pity of it, Iago; O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!
IAGO If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent to offend, for if it touch not you, it comes near nobody.
OTHELLO I will chop her into messes—cuckold me?
IAGO O, 'tis foul in her.
OTHELLO With mine officer!
IAGO That's fouler.
OTHELLO Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago.
IAGO Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.
OTHELLO Good, good, the justice of it pleases, very good.
IAGO And for Cassio, let me be his undertaker: you shall hear more by midnight.
OTHELLO
Excellent good.

Othello's tantrum over Desdemona's handkerchief made a strong imagined impression on my aural sense – likewise, as I mentioned in my post for this week, Iago's extortion of Roderigo early in the play (“put money in thy purse”) and Emilia's apparent inability to register “thy husband” at the very end. But I couldn't really get beyond a sense of these passages as GIFs or corrupted tape recordings. And I took a slightly different, somewhat deeper interest in the exchange I chose to adapt between Othello and Iago in 4.1, which perhaps bears less directly on the operation of sound in the play, but which has compelling acoustic qualities nevertheless. The colloquy provides an excellent example of the insidious complementarity between the main characters insofar as it showcases Othello's volatile temper and susceptibility to Iago's provocations through other than mechanical repetition. This was the observation I tried to convey graphically in my “speech vector” diagram, which attempts to figure repetition as a retrogressive and a progressive device that helps force Othello's decision to murder Desdemona.

I wanted to explore echoes and resonances, then, across Othello's and Iago's crucial conversation, and my preference was for the line graph as a representation of change, movement, or progress over time, but I had considerable trouble coming up with appropriate axes. (Contour maps, flowcharts, and maze games were among my rejected alternatives in the meanwhile.) I ended up pooling all the words spoken over the course of my selected lines on the horizontal axis, allotting equal grid space to each. The metric on the x-axis is rather sequential than strictly

temporal, especially since any word might be pronounced faster or slower, dwelt on more or less, than surrounding terms; in a standard utterance on my graph – such as Iago’s “If you are so fond...” – words simply follow one another in linear fashion. Already, I had factored out vocal qualities like intonation or pitch, but it was important for me to capture the escalating impact of Iago’s wiles and the growing severity of Othello’s desperation. Not only does the dialogue move forward, then, it also moves up as the interlocutors recycle and appropriate one another’s phrases and speech accumulates.

I made two main interpretive decisions on this count. For one, I elevated each consecutive occasion of dialogue by one interval of grid space, a difficult call given the difference between an affirmative statement, such as several of Iago’s – which performs less work on its own than for the statement it follows – and a sufficiently new remark, such as Othello’s “I will chop her...” In other words, some comments more obviously reiterate foregoing speech, vertically, than simply add to it, horizontally; my graph split the difference on the basis of the generally rising tenor of the episode. My other move granted repetition what I took to be its dual function here: that of stalling the dialogue and the action, and even casting it back, while amplifying the tension of the scene. I hoped to illustrate how Iago listens for and recapitulates Othello’s sentiments in order to promote his own sinister interests, and how Othello effectively works himself up by appealing to Iago (“but yet the pity of it...”) or engaging in self-persuasion (“Good... Excellent good.”). Original utterances, progressive as they are, have a slope of zero on my graph, whereas “dynamic repetition,” though it signals stasis or even retreat, facilitates upward motion.

My adaptation is far from flawless, and I’m farther from convinced that it isn’t rather delirious. (I couldn’t figure out how to render the recurring “O,” to add to my worries.) Still, might the account of repetition it hopefully approaches provide a way of reading less immediately legible appearances of redundant speech, such as those with which I began?