

# THE LANGUAGE OF THE SUPERNATURALS- AN ANALYSIS OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

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## **Abstract**

***The supernatural beings in the form of the three witches play a key role in the Shakespearean tragedy-Macbeth. It is the bizarre choice of linguistic elements in their utterances which are essentially in the form of couplets that brings out the curiosity among the mortal beings in the play. Their power of language is such that can motivate the participants in the conversation to adopt means which can lead to their gradual downfall with a momentary period of being in absolute power. The problem lies in interpreting the reason as to whether the witches play with words to deceive the humans or they are in fact foretellers. Their speech is dominated by ambiguities, paradoxes, vagueness and enticement which keeps the addressee confused and greedy for power. In this paper, an attempt has been made to critically analyse the conversations of the witches in the play to understand the linguistic features that characterise their speech and leave an everlasting impression on the interlocutors.***

**Keyword:** *discourse, tragedy, supernatural, conversation, strategies*

## **1.INTRODUCTION**

'Language is essentially a social phenomenon' (Kress 1985a:1) which is characterised by exhibition of power. The power can be imposed through speech. Speech is marked by features of coaxing, command, deception, manipulation and exertion. The choice of lexical items, punctuation, prosody and allegorical remarks characterize such features of speech more particularly. In this paper, the conversations among the supernatural beings in the form of the three witches and also between them and the mortal beings have been critically

analysed to understand the attributes of powerful language. The language of the 'weird sisters' gives an outline of their identity. In the entire course of the play, the impact and influence of the witches' words on the minds of the major characters can be genuinely felt in spite of their physical absence in most of the moments. They have established an entangled relationship between the paranormal and normal manifestations of incidents in worldly affairs. Their dark thoughts and evil temptations are evident from the way they converse with the ones they plan to doom. In the play, the witches are well aware of Macbeth's 'vaulting ambition' to rise to power. They play with Macbeth's desires and hopes by their 'supernatural solicitings' to which he succumbs completely under the influence of his wife who is attributed as the 'fourth witch'. This paper will try to address the linguistic intricacies adopted by the witches in their utterances which left the mind of Macbeth to be constantly disturbed and ultimately led to hamartia.

## **2.MACBETH: A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PLAY**

This famous play by William Shakespeare revolves around the themes of ambition, power, deceit and murder. The chief protagonist of the play Macbeth is foretold by the three witches as he returns from the battle about his rise to the power of king in immediate future. While prophesying the same, the witches also envisaged that the following generation of kings will descend from Banquo, Macbeth's friend and fellow army man. Instigated, impelled and constantly exhorted by his wife, Macbeth killed King Duncan acting against his nature of being '*full o'the milk of human-kindness*' to rise to the 'great' power. He further sent mercenaries to kill Banquo and his sons and set clear the position of power for him and his lineage. Soon after, Macbeth visits the

witches yet again to know more about what the future beholds. The witches assured that Macbeth can never be eliminated until the forest of Birnam moves towards his stronghold at Dunsinane and until he meets an enemy "not born of woman." Although impossible to believe, the witches' words came to be true in an unexpected turn of events as Malcolm's army moved towards Dunsinane carrying branches in front of them which seemed to be moving woods. At the final stage of the battle, Macbeth further came to know that Macduff was born out of the caesarian section of his mother. He fought back to defy the words of the witches but ultimately failed and lost his life at the hands of Macduff.

### 3. THE IDENTITY OF THE SUPERNATURALS

The play written in 1606 represents the society of England and Wales which had faith in witchcraft. The idea and belief that the supernaturals can influence and cause evil to human lives mainly came into existence during the reign of King James I. *Malleus Malleficarum*<sup>1</sup> had a great impact on King James which generated a constant and severe perturbation in his mind. He was of the opinion that the witches had tried to kill him when was at the sea. Thoughts of this nature are not sudden but a combined effect of the literary work he had faith on and also on the series of unnatural events that threatened the life of his ancestors. Stephen Greenblatt says,

*"James was nervous deeply nervous. [...] He had great reasons for fear. Not only had his mother been executed by the queen on whose thrown he now sat, but his father had died at an assassin's hand. He himself had narrowly escaped assassination on at least one and perhaps more than one occasion. [...] He feared not sharp steel alone but also wax figurines stuck with pins and the mumbled charms of toothless old women."* (Greenblatt 2005:14)

In Macbeth, similar to the popular belief of the time, the witches are presented with appearances that are unearthly. They have the appearance of women but with

beards. Their rhymed speeches which dominate in unprecedented choice and combination of lexical elements create an aura of evil, darkness and mystery. The first meeting of Macbeth and Banquo with the extramundane characters takes them aback and Banquo soon reacts threatened by their uncanny look. He says,

*[...] What are these  
So withered and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth,  
And yet are on 't?—Live you? Or are you aught  
That man may question? (1.3.40-44)*

Under normal circumstances, a supernatural-human interaction is followed by the humans to be in a state of fear, anxiety and astonishment. But contrary to the usual, unusual follows. The witches greet them with prophecies that cannot be just set aside but are bound to be in their thoughts till they are achieved. Macbeth seeks to meet them further and the curiosity to know more from the witches controls his overall thought process throughout the play. Macbeth is greeted by the witches with the title of Thane of Cawdor and 'king hereafter'. The fact that he is welcomed by the news of King Duncan having conferred him the title of Thane of Cawdor, soon thereafter, strengthens his trust on their power of foretelling. On the other hand, Banquo is foretold that though he himself will not be the king but his lineage will be.

However, it can be predicted from the actions and words of the supernatural elements that though they are the ones who spark the thought of conspiring against the crown through their dark power, they cannot harm the humans directly or physically. The weird sisters are followers of evil goddess, Hecate and adopt every means to poison psychologically the mind of Macbeth. They are well aware of his secret ambition to rise to power and therefore try to boost the same with partially true prophecies. They make him ravenous for power and bring the immoral and wicked side out of his soul. The first prediction having come true<sup>2</sup>, Macbeth

pronounced death sentence to the Thane and conferred the Title upon Macbeth who had fought valiantly and brought victory to the country. King Duncan in Act I Scene II (65-66) says to Ross, '[...] Go pronounce his present death, / And with his formal title greet Macbeth.'

<sup>1</sup> Written by Heinrich Kremer and Jacob Sprenger in 1486. The translation in English is titled as *The Hammer of Witches*. The book contains a detailed treatise on witchcraft and legal & theological theory which deals with the extermination of witches.

<sup>2</sup> The Thane of Cawdor betrayed during the battle with the Norwegians. King Duncan saddened by the affairs of the state

contemplates murder of King of Duncan. He eventually does so under the sustained persuasion of his wife, Lady Macbeth. The sisters having gained Macbeth's complete confidence with he being the King of Scotland, gradually ruin him and ultimately lead him to his downfall. They tell him that nothing can cause harm to Macbeth except if the forest of Birnam moves towards his fort or he meets someone 'none born of woman'. Having no idea about the witches' calibre of playing with words, Macbeth become overconfident about being invincible. With absolutely no clue that the witches actually indicated towards Macduff who did not have a natural birth and also that his army would use trees as disguise to move towards the Dunsinane, Macbeth failed to resist the onslaught was ultimately defeated and beheaded.

#### 4. THE LANGUAGE OF THE SUPERNATURALS

*'Fair is foul, and foul is fair*

*Hover through the fog and filthy air.'* (1.1.12)

The first scene of the first act of the play ends with these words as the witches cry out in unison amidst thunder and lightning. The echo of this very line pervades through the lives of the characters in the play and the mood of evil and gloom sets in. Though the witches point towards themselves through the above lines that appearances are deceptive and are always not bad, the inconsistencies between apparition and reality, good and bad are also indicated. The wicked intentions of the witches are clear through their unusual utterance aided by the eerie surroundings.

This very utterance by the witches is characterised by paradox, symbolism and also consonance which are representational enough of the unique linguistic formation of sentences that they use in normal speech, unlike most of the mortal characters. It is paradoxical in the sense that the foretelling of the witches will allure Macbeth to take the path of crime and evil to ascend to ultimate power but will ultimately lead to his death and downfall. The statement is symbolical as the speakers are themselves 'foul' in appearance but asserts to be 'fair' from within. It also points towards the character of Macbeth as gradually the hidden features of Macbeth being a plotter, murderer and treacherous under the veil

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<sup>3</sup> Consonance refers to the recurrence of similar-sounding consonants in close proximity. Similar but not exact formations of the kind are found in works of contemporaries

of a 'hero' are revealed. Finally, the pattern of consonance<sup>3</sup> is also represented which indicates the rhythmic and poetic uniqueness of supernatural utterances:

*Fair is foul, and foul is fair.*

The characteristic behavioural patterns of the witches and their situational reactions can be interpreted from the way they converse among each other and with human. It is completely different from the way humans speak and is unique. They bring about chaos in nature with their supernatural solicitings and by enchanting spells through methods that give an aura of evil, darkness and fear. In Act I Scene III, when the first witch queries the second witch about her whereabouts she responds that she had been 'killing swine'. It is one of the practices of witches that was prominent in the Elizabethan Era which the people complained. It is believed that they did so make their hand bloody.

The witches were also believed to have control over the winds. When the first witch plans to sail to Allepo in a 'sieve', the other witches help her with winds- *'I'll give thee a wind'* says the second and the third supports *'And I another.'* The gruesome, cruel and revengeful shades of the witches are also evident when the first witch decides to sail far away to exhaust the sailor and leaven him *'dry as hay'* as his wife declined to share chestnuts with her. Here, *'dry as hay'* indicates of one being left almost lifeless, sleepless and cursed after repeated forceful sexual encounters with the witch. The first witch says,

[...]

*Sleep shall neither night nor day*

*Hang upon his penthouse lid:*

*He shall live a man forbid.* (1.3.19-21)

It is one of the ways of how supernaturals were believed to taken revenge on the humans when their desires were not respected.

#### 5. THE RECURRENCE OF NUMBERS

The conversations of the witches exhibit significant use of numbers. The numbers 'three' and 'nine' are closely associated with witchcraft and evil and their recurrences in the utterances of the witches are prominent. The first

of William Shakespeare. In *The Faerie Queene*, Book IV, Edmund Spenser makes a similar construction- *'Then faire grew foul and foul grew faire in sight'*.

witch in the mood of revenge through forceful sexual act decides to torture the sailor 'nine times nine'.

The witches play with the numbers so as to either strictly use the two numbers only, convert them to their multiples or add three for three times to arrive at nine. While preparing magic charm through their spells, the witches move 'hand in hand' with steps of three to add up to nine. They chant in unison,

[...]

*Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,  
And thrice again, to make up nine.*

*Peace, the charm's round up.* (1.3.35-37)

Again, in the cauldron scene when the witches gather for a spell, they begin conversation discussing about evil calls of nature that are three in number. The first witch says,

*'Thrice the brinded cat hath mewed.'*

To this, the second witch responds,

*'Thrice. And once the hedge-pig whined.'* (1.4.1-2)

Besides these elements, the witches themselves are three in number, thus heightening the idea about how evil, misleading, shrewd and deceptive they can be. They greet Macbeth and tempt him to take the path of crime through their evil predictions at the very first meeting. It is interesting to note that Macbeth is greeted with titles that are quite unnoticeably three. The three witches greet Macbeth with three titles as follows:

Witch I: *'All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.'*

Witch II: *'All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.'*

Witch III: *'All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter.'*

The seed of evil was thus planted at the very inception which only grew with time and led to ruination.

## 6. THE PROSODY OF SPEECH

The speech of the witches' is marked with uncanny and sinister designs. The prosody of their utterances add to the eerie feeling. Most of the speeches are characterised by rhyming couplets in trochaic tetrameter which have stressed syllables followed by unstressed.

The witches chant together,

*Double, double toil and trouble,  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.* (4.1.10-11)

Furthermore, in contrast to other major characters of the play whose speeches have five stresses in the form of iambic pentameter, the witches' utterances majorly consist of four through trochaic tetrameter.

Witch I:

[...]

*Sleep shall neither night nor day*

*Hang upon his penthouse lid:*

*He shall live a man forbid.* (1.3.19-21)

Macbeth: *So foul and fair a day I have not seen.* (1.3.38)

Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, a supernatural being too, however deviates from the normal prosodic pattern that defines the speeches of witches. This might possibly be because of her greater mastery over the art of witchcraft. The distinction is to highlight her higher status amidst other witches. She initiates her first speech with two trochees and completes the tetrameter with two iambs.

*O well done! I commend your pains,*

*And everyone shall share i'th'gains.* (4.1.39-40)

Hecate, however, gradually shifts to trochaic tetrameter, the usual prosodic pattern of the witches to join the witches in their witchcraft.

These definite prosodic elements which characterise speech of the supernatural characters throughout the play bring out the emotional elements to the forefront which navigate their minds.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The witches represent the evil and creators of chaos in natural order. At the time of English history, when faith in supernatural beings and their power to control the elements of nature dominated the society, William Shakespeare presented pictures of human-supernatural conversational patterns. A critical discourse analysis of the speeches of supernatural beings represented through the three characters of the witches revealed more about their identity. Their speeches are filled with paradoxes, imageries and sarcasm which when carefully observed take the readers deep into their minds and reveal the evil and wicked designs. A right way of interpreting the speeches which are marked with unique lexical combinations can prevent the inescapable downfall.

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