

Functions of the Verb in Determining Themes of Literary Texts: A Study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*

Dr. Pratap Kumar Dash

Associate Professor

Dept. of English,

C.V. Raman (Autonomous) College of Engineering,

Bhubaneswar, Odisha

pratapkumardash18@yahoo.com

Abstract

*This paper attempts at analyzing the semantic as well as syntactic functions of the verbs used in discourse in the dramatic texts and such verbs performing the function of MMVERB which leads us to tracing the major theme of the texts. At first, it takes into account the use of propositional as well as interactional meaning of the verbs in the selected dialogues of the protagonists of Shakespeare's **Hamlet** and Beckett's **Waiting for Godot**. Then, interpreting the stylistic as well as grammatical use of such verbs, attempts have been made to trace the major themes of both the plays on the basis of observation made from the analysis.*

Keywords: semantic and syntactic functions of verbs, MMVERB, stylistics, grammatical use

1.1 Introduction

Literary texts are interpreted mostly thematically basing on the story- line and analysis of the roles performed by the characters and settings. Intertextuality is yet another approach to analyze literary texts. Now interpretation is done considering the linguistic components like analysis of sound- meaning relationship of some important textual matters; and role of foregrounding features using stylistic devices. In this way, analysis can be made considering the semantic and syntactic role of the verbs. It is pertinent enough to say that analysis of the verbs opens up the road to understand the actions performed by the characters which are the keys to the development of the plot of a literary text. Whether it is a tragedy or comedy; whether the protagonist is active or passive can be determined from the actions performed by the respective characters only.

According to Hopper and Thomson (1980), the role of the verbs can be defined in terms of MMVERB i.e. material (actor or performer, goal i.e. affected by action, scope, attribute, client or for whom the action is performed, recipient), mental (senser, phenomenon), verbal (sayer, receiver, verbiage), existential (existent), relational (carrier/attribute, token/value), and behavioural (Material plus mental). The verb phrase constitutes a major role in determining the thematic role performed by the subject. It also gives clarity of the role of participants in getting involved with an event, action or state, etc. The semantic function of the verb as Jackson (1990) says can be defined in the two major domains of 'state' and 'non-state'. A state can be a quality, a temporary state or a private state (such as intellectual, emotional/attitude, perception and bodily sensation) and stance. Similarly, a non-state can be broadly divided into events and actions. Events represented by verbs can be goings-on, process, momentary event, and transitional events. Actions can be activities, accomplishments, momentary and transitional acts. Our experience of reality is captured in terms of processes (or "goings-on") -- happening, doing, sensing, meaning, being, and becoming. These processes constitute the transitivity system of language, which belongs to the experiential metafunction. In transitivity analysis, we can explore how language construes our experience of the world around us. Similarly, the syntactic role of the verb can give us idea of the role of the subject (active/passive).

In this context, two famous English plays of two respective genres have been taken in the light of analysis of the verbs leading to making out the major themes. They are Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Both the plays are no doubt most popular for their innovative themes and techniques.

Hamlet: The Play of Action

People usually perceive *Hamlet* as a play about hesitancy, and thus about Hamlet's collapse to act appropriately. In this, the theme of conviction is directly related to the theme of action. The doubt is how is it possible to take reasonable, effective, purposeful action? In *Hamlet*, the question of how to act is affected not only by cogent considerations, such as the need for certainty, but also by emotional, moral, and psychological factors. Hamlet himself appears to mistrust the idea that it is even possible to act in a prohibited and purposeful way. When he acts, he prefers to do it blindly, frantically, and aggressively. The other characters perceptibly think much less about "action" in the abstract than Hamlet does, and are therefore less distressed about the prospect of acting effectively. They simply act as they feel fit. But in some sense, they prove that Hamlet is right, because all of their actions go amiss. Claudius possesses himself of queen and crown through bold action, but his conscience torments him, and he is overwhelmed by threats to his influence. Laertes takes a strong decision that

nothing will divert him from acting out his vengeance, but he is easily prejudiced and manipulated into serving Claudius's ends, and his poisoned weapon is turned back upon himself.

The Role of the Verb in Determining Character is Destiny in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Hamlet by nature is prone to thinking. He analyses his action and sees whether there is justice in it or not. This kind of gloomy nature often restrains him from doing his action and he becomes less a man of action. In his soliloquies, he chides his delays in action. Still, he is inept of translating his thoughts into action. His thoughts become as futile as that of a dumb idealist. He is fully aware of his hesitant nature and in every consideration, he makes up his mind to be active in the future, but when action is demanded, he retreats.

Hamlet is a man of notable qualities. He is a noble-hearted scholar, an eminent soldier, 'the observed of all observers.' (III. 3. 7). In spite of all these noble qualities he suffers from the fatal defect of indecision. He is insightful by nature and speculates over his actions. If he acts quickly, he does this only on whim. ('Character is Destiny in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*', www.bachelorandmaster.com)

In fact, many opine that 'fate' plays an important role in determining destiny of the character (s). But as regard to our analysis, it is their actions or inactions in the form of state, non-state, event and process determine their performances. The logical sum total all these is destiny as popularly said that destiny is character in the plays of Shakespeare. In this light, we can say that: Hamlet is not able to come to terms with life or death at the beginning of the play. That is why he regrets having been born to set the time right. He is reluctant to accept the role he is intended to perform. He is torn between appearance and reality; between passion and reason; between what is expected of him and what his moral conscience revolt against. It is his mistake that he does not accept his position, but seeks to escape from it. But by the end he realizes that there exists an inexplicable power in the universe. Thus, he speaks of the divinity that shapes all things and, observes: "... If it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all." (V.2. 10). This is not a passive fatalist's submissive acceptance, but a mature mind accepting the necessity of acting without thinking too much. To sum up, both tragedies of character or a tragedy of fate interact and produce the overall effect of tragic loss as well as the glory of man. ('Character is Destiny in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*' www.bachelorandmaster.com)

The verbs in *Hamlet*: A Semantico-syntactic Analysis

The verbs constitute important syntactic role in propagating the thoughts and actions throughout the play. The analysis of the use of verbs used by Hamlet in his dialogues clearly indicates the movement of the major theme of the play.

In the beginning, Hamlet in a statement says, ‘Seems madam! Nay it is; I know not **seems**’ (I.2.13) where he emphasizes on the relational process. Here, the normal syntactic order changes which implies his strong interest in initiating action. This is clear from the next dialogue as he says, ‘... for they are actions that a man might **play**: But I **have** that within which passeth show; these but the trappings and the suits of woe.’ (I. 2. 13-14). The use of ‘might play’ refers to general possibility and then becomes specific with the use of ‘have’ which emphatically implies his constraints that he possesses followed by the poetic statement in which the main verb ‘is’ is omitted but it reemphasizes the cause of ‘woe’.

Initially, Hamlet seems to be confused and indecisive as he declares, ‘How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable **seem** to me all the uses of the world!... it is an unweeded garden. That grows to seed.’ (I.2.15). Here, the verb ‘seem’ again bears greater meaning in the context of his inaction. It clearly indicates Hamlet’s But, afterwards, he happens to meet the ghost of his father who reveals all the conspiracies and Hamlet’s mood is changed through perception as he says, ‘My father!... methinks I **see** my father.’ (I.2.16). He senses the reality and then projects his thought on experiencing the world.

When he prepares to watch the play, his action starts moving forward as he says, ‘I’ll **watch** to-night...(I.2.19). This reflects the outer evidence of inner workings and affects his behavioral process. Then, he expedites his intention of meeting his father’s spirit again and again for guidance by saying ‘If it **assume** my noble father’s person, I’ll **speak** to it, though hell itself gape and bid me hold my peace.’ (I.3.20), which is followed by the statement ‘My fate **cries out**.... I’ll **follow** thee.’ (I.4.27). Here, he is closer to the belief by assuming the truth of the murder. His mental change governs his dialogic process and action starts moving. In a sequential mental process, Hamlet responds to the ghost’s instruction, ‘**Revenge** his foul and most unnatural murder.’ (I.5.29). Hamlet then repeatedly leads to perform action by saying, ‘**Swear** by my sword’ (I.5.34). His behavior is thus affected by this statement of his dead father leading him to the initiate his mental and verbal process which implies action too. Then, his rhetorical resolution over a point that ‘... there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so....’ (II.2.49) implies the change his perception of the world view. His cognitive faculty becomes active. But, he is still put into indecision and dilemma as he says, ‘**To be, or not to be**: that is the question...’ (II.2.58). The question for him was whether to continue to exist or not which raises the question on the existential process.

He then resolves, 'That I the son of a dear father murder'd **prompted** to my revenge by heaven and hell, must, like a whore, **unpack** my heart with words, and fall a-cursing, like a very drab.....' (II.2.59). Here, Hamlet not only gets transformed but also acts out with a creative force. His action represented by the verbs 'prompted', and 'unpack' hint about his decision to act.

His strong intention is echoed when he says, 'The play's the thing wherein I'll **catch** the conscience of the king.' (II.2.60). His strong interest is aroused to obtain the fact from the play which strengthens his mental and physical process. Here, the verb 'catch' refers to the behavioral process which is created out of both mental and material means of taking a decision.

Hamlet in another context says, '**Be** not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: **suit the action to the word, the word to the action...**' (III.3. 67). This proverbial statement spoken with an imperative undertone reflects his creative mental process. His mature sense of imagination owing to experience finally makes him realize that actions and words must maintain coherence in order to maintain appropriate personality.

In a revengeful mood, he announces, '... A villain kills my father; and for that, I his sole son, **do** this same villain **send** to heaven.(III.3.83). The swinging of action between physical and mental process is clearly evident here. But at the end the action turns to be emphatically physical and the actor becomes a performer.

The same revengeful tone continues as he says, 'O from this time forth, my thoughts **be** bloody, or **be** nothing worth!' (IV.5.100). But, this leads to the catastrophic end of the protagonist corresponding to the theme of destiny is character. Finally, Hamlet says, 'O, I **die**, Horatio; The potent poison quite **o'er-crows** my spirit:.... The rest **is** silence.' (V.2. 140). A material process turns into a physical process and then gives rise to a metaphysical sense dramatically which continues with the remaining vigor but fails to cope up as Hamlet declares '...The rest is silence.' It shows a state of non-movement of the action as the being exists in an inaction state.

"What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!" II.ii. (286-9).

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Written in 1953, *Waiting for Godot* was a somewhat late successor to the vivacious experimentation in art and literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries known as Modernism. Modernist writers saw themselves as dramatically breaking with the past and

innovating in all aspects of art, literature, and culture. Beckett's play shares with Modernist works as a fascination with pushing the boundaries of literary genre, representation, and etiquette, as well as an interest in language and thought prioritized above action and plot.

The Verbs in *Waiting for Godot*

At the outset, Estragon **sitting on** a low mound **is trying** to take off his boot....He **gives up**, exhausted, rests, **tries** again.(I.1).Here the action continues and then stops abruptly. The playwright reflects on his physical state slowly which leads to actions in process. But the recurrent statement of Estragon, 'Nothing to **be done** (I.2) contains the verb in non-state expressing momentary act. It is in passive and non-finite form and repeatedly stated throughout the play implying passivity of human action.

In the initial conversation between Vladimir and Estragon, we notice that they use the verbs like 'hurt' (I.3), 'repent' (I.4), and 'remember' (I.5) which are mostly sensual and cognitive. This implies that they have a good mental process but physically dormant. They express their inability for any further movement. Then they declare that they are 'waiting' for Godot which is an event or process in non-state but it contradicts their repeated statements with negations like Vladimir says Estragon, 'I've nothing to say to you.'(I.10) to which Estragon compliments saying, 'Don't let's do anything.'(I.11) which express non-state activities. In addition, they decide to 'wait and see' (I.11) which is a non-state process again followed by Estragon's statement, 'No use struggling' and/or 'No use wriggling' which represent the non-state activities. The negative statements like 'I don't think so' or 'I don't know' (I.28) occur recurrently. Similarly, Vladimir repeats the statement 'We can't' (I.6) & (II.42).

After long waiting, they are exhausted and declare to go as Estragon says 'Well, shall we go? (49) to which Vladimir replies, 'Yes, let's go.' But they do not move which is quite contradictory to their statements relating to physical movement. The negation of the verbs followed by simple infinitives in imperative sentences giving proposals clearly yield an idea of assertion but the tone of absurdity reverses the action as they do not move. It clearly implies that action itself contradicts and turns into become hopeless. This incurs a sort of existential despair and the so called action in the so called world is quite absurd.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is found the verbs both in their transitive and intransitive positions determine the role of the subjects in relation to their corresponding objects, complements and/or adjuncts in differently meaningfully related to the literary as well as dramatic contexts. Whereas Hamlet declares to maintain coherence between word and action, in *Waiting for Godot*, words and their corresponding actions of both Vladimir and Estragon as antiheroes

never match. Therefore *Hamlet* is a moving tragedy, a tragedy of action and *Waiting for Godot* is a play of inaction. In this play, words are not reflected in actions for which it becomes one of the prominent features of absurdity.

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