Case studies in English

1.6 Semantic and pragmatic concepts

Case study Nº 1.6
William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1599,
act 3, scene 2 (verses 79-113, 174-202 and 215-235).

Brutus is at the head of the conspirators who have just assassinated Julius Caesar. In the second scene of Act 3, the conspirator appears before the Roman people and explains that the purpose of the regicide was to protect Rome from Caesar's unbridled ambition. Brutus declares that he did what he did: « Not that I loved Cæsar less, but that I loved Rome more ». He then adds that Caesar's life would have meant slavery for the Romans, whereas Caesar's death allows them all to live in freedom. Brutus, whom Caesar particularly loved and protected, describes the conflicting emotions within his soul: « As Cæsar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honor him: but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honor for his valor; and death for his ambition. ». He ends his speech by declaring that he is ready to die if his country so wills it. Antony then arrives with Caesar's corpse. Brutus departs, but before leaving, he invites the people to listen to the funeral oration Antony is about to deliver.

Antony

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Cæsar, not to praise him. (80)
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Cæsar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Cæsar was ambitious:
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Cæsar answer'd it.
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest—
For Brutus is an honorable man;
So are they all, all honorable men—
Come I to speak in Cæsar's funeral. (90)
He was my friend faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honorable man.
He hath brought many captives home to Rome
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
Did this in Cæsar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Cæsar hath wept:
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honorable man. (100)
You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And, sure, he is an honorable man.
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.
You all did love him once, not without cause:

What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?
O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts, (110)
And men have lost their reason. Bear with me;
My heart is in the coffin there with Cæsar,
And I must pause till it come back to me.

Upon hearing Antony's arguments, the citizens begin to doubt Caesar's ambition and to question whether the assassination was truly necessary. This is the moment Antony chooses to show the people Caesar's will. However, he announces that he will not read it, because it contains proof of the late Caesar's love for Rome and for the Roman people. Antony declares that if the people were to learn the contents of the will, it would "inflame" them and make them "mad". He adds that his intention is to avoid offending the "honourable men" who stabbed Caesar. The crowd then begins to call the conspirators "traitors," and Antony interrupts them to give precise details of the assassination:

Ant.

I fear I wrong the honorable men
Whose daggers have stabb'd Cæsar; I do fear it.

Ant.
If you have tears, prepare to shed them now. (174)
You all do know this mantle: I remember
The first time ever Cæsar put it on;
'Twas on a summer's evening, in his tent,
That day he overcame the Nervii:
Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through:
See what a rent the envious Casca made:
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb'd; (181)
And as he pluck'd his cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Cæsar follow'd it,
As rushing out of doors, to be resolved
If Brutus so unkindly knock'd, or no;
For Brutus, as you know, was Cæsar's angel:
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Cæsar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all;
For when the noble Cæsar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms, (190)
Quite vanquish'd him: then burst his mighty heart;
And, in his mantle muffling up his face,
Even at the base of Pompey's statua,
Which all the while ran blood, great Cæsar fell.
O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!
Then I, and you, and all of us fell down,
Whilst bloody treason flourish'd over us.
O, now you weep; and, I perceive, you feel
The dint of pity: these are gracious drops.
Kind souls, what, weep you when you but behold (200)
Our Cæsar's vesture wounded? Look you here,
Here is himself, marr'd, as you see, with traitors.

What Brutus had announced as a patriotic act is now perceived as a betrayal. The Roman people begin to express their desire to revolt and punish the murderers. Antony's third long speech closes his argument:

Ant.
Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up (215)
To such a sudden flood of mutiny.
They that have done this deed are honorable:
What private griefs they have, alas, I know not,
That made them do it: they are wise and honorable,
And will, no doubt, with reasons answer you.
I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts: (221)
I am no orator, as Brutus is;
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man,
That love my friend; and that they know full well
That gave me public leave to speak of him:
For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
To stir men's blood: I only speak right on;
I tell you that which you yourselves do know;
Show you sweet Cæsar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths, (230)
And bid them speak for me: but were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue
In every wound of Cæsar that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.

Analysis

Antony addresses the Roman people and begins by announcing that he intends to bury Caesar, not to praise him. He adds that he will not oppose the general rule that, when speaking of the dead, people forget their good deeds and remember only their faults. According to Brutus, Caesar's greatest flaw was his ambition. This, from the conspirators' point of view, justifies the decision to kill him. Antony quickly mentions the ambition Brutus spoke of. It is his way of beginning to recall a negative side of Caesar. But it is no coincidence that Antony refers to this fault in indirect speech. Antony simply quotes what Brutus said ("Caesar was ambitious"), but quoting Brutus does not mean sharing his point of view. The indirect speech with an introductory verb ("Hath told you") clearly shows that these are two voices and, presumably, two different perspectives.

By choosing to quote Brutus' point of view of Caesar rather than presenting his own opinion, Antony creates some distance. The obsessive insistence on what Brutus said about Caesar confirms the speaker's reservations about the conspirators' perspective. But Antony's strategy is more complex and skilful than that. This becomes evident when he begins to break his initial commitment to emphasize only the deceased's faults. Antony lists the virtues of the deceased: he first says that Caesar had always been his "friend faithful" (verse 91), then he recalls Caesar's military exploits that enriched Rome (because the ransoms from prisoners captured by Caesar helped fill the state coffers). Antony adds that Caesar had always been sensitive to the suffering of the poor and asserts that he never intended to accumulate more power. To prove this and contradict those who accused him of wanting to become king, Antony recalls the three times Caesar publicly refused a crown.

From a discursive point of view, it is interesting to note that as soon as Antony begins to mention Caesar's virtues, he is forced to introduce each reference to the deceased's ambition with an adversative conjunction ("but" / "yet", verses 92, 99, 104). Each quotation of Brutus' statements about Caesar's ambition is also followed by a reference to the conspirator's honour, a reference which, unlike the previous one, is

not a citation introduced by indirect speech but an opinion apparently shared by Antony and his audience.

The first time Antony presents the opposition between Brutus (“honourable”, man of honour, verse 88) and Caesar (“ambitious”, verse 84), the device may seem natural: Brutus is part of the ruling elite, and this elite is supposed to be virtuous. The fact that Antony insists on the honour of Brutus and his companions is not particularly striking in this context. However, the immediate and obstinate repetition of this reference to the conspirator’s honour and its contrast with the statements about Caesar’s ambition introduce another message. The path chosen to convey this is that of implication.

Indeed, we observe that Antony repeats Brutus’s assertion about Caesar’s ambition four times in his first speech, and he emphasizes Brutus’ honour just as many times. At first glance, one might think that Antony shares Brutus’s view with his audience, but the repetition blurs beliefs and certainties. Contrary to what one might expect, the insistence on the opposition between "ambitious" and "honourable" does not reinforce the idea that on one side there is a villain (Caesar) and on the other a virtuous man (Brutus), but quite the opposite. By excessively emphasizing this opposition, Antony blatantly violates one of the conversational maxims identified by Grice as characteristic of verbal exchanges: the maxim of quantity.

The maxim of quantity stipulates that at each stage of a verbal exchange, the contribution must be neither more nor less informative than necessary. If Antony cites Brutus once to mention Caesar’s ambition and then adds that Brutus is an honourable man, it is natural to understand that what he means is simply this: that Brutus—an honourable man—says that Caesar was ambitious. But Antony repeats the same idea, even the same words, four times. The repetition of a message whose understanding poses no problem triggers in the addressee (in this case, Antony’s listeners and simultaneously the audience of the play itself) an inferential process that allows them to find another meaning. This gives rise to what Grice calls an “implicature.” Antony’s implicit message is that he does not at all think that Caesar was ambitious and, consequently, he does not believe that Brutus is truly an honourable man either. Because when Brutus claims that Caesar was ambitious, he is lying. And a person who lies cannot be considered honourable.

At the end of his first speech, Antony bitterly observes the Roman people’s impassiveness in the face of the death of the man who devoted his life to his country and laments that people have lost their reason. Antony expresses what he feels without making any direct accusation. This allows him to say, at the end of the speech, that he “speak[s] not to disprove what Brutus spoke” (verse 106). The use of the implicit is an indirect way of beginning to ask his audience to react. The encouragement, still implicit for now, is hidden beneath a general reflection on madness and reason, a reflection that Antony justifies by evoking his grief over the loss of his friend (verses 110-113), as if preemptively responding to anyone who might oppose his deviation from the pact made with the conspirators. Recall that in the first scene of Act 3, Brutus and Cassius told him:

> You shall not in your funeral speech blame us,
> But speak all good you can devise of Caesar,
> And say you do't by our permission;
> Else shall you not have any hand at all
> About his funeral.
> (act III, scene 1, verses 270-274)

So, for the moment, it is not a question of directly accusing anyone. The use of implication and the general reflection on human folly and wisdom coming from someone deeply shaken by the death of a loved one prevent the too quick revelation of what Antony really thinks. This revelation will be gradual.

Shortly after this first speech, Antony shows Caesar's will and declares that if the people were to learn its contents, it would "inflame" them and make them "mad." He also justifies his silence by saying he wants to prevent the "honourable men" who stabbed Caesar from taking offense. The attribution of honour to the murderous conspirators here is clearly ironic. The people begin to call the assassins traitors, and Antony resumes speaking. In his second long speech (verses 215 and following), Antony uses a register of pathos and points out on the corpse the exact places where each conspirator's stab wounds entered. The mention of Caesar's blood flowing toward the door after Brutus's atrocious attack (« the most unkindest cut of all », verse 188) and the emphasis that it was the ingratitude of his protégé that broke Caesar's heart open the door to Antony's direct expression of what he really thinks. The speaker wants to urge his audience to action as he moves from Caesar's physical fall to the spiritual fall of the Romans. Antony says:

> … great Cæsar fell.
> O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!
> Then I, and you, and all of us fell down
> (verses 194-196)

From that moment on, the reference to the "bloody treason" (verse 197) and the characterization of the conspirators as "traitors" colour Antony's speech and mark a turning point in his argumentative strategy. The speaker abandons the use of implication and begins to call things by their proper names.

In the conclusion of his speech, Antony's assertion that he has no intention to "stir you up / To such a sudden flood of mutiny" (verses 215-216) among his people is clearly ironic. His later insistence on the honour of the conspirators and their possible justification for what they have done is completely incongruous:

> They that have done this deed are honorable:
> What private griefs they have, alas, I know not,
> That made them do it: they are wise and honorable,
> And will, no doubt, with reasons answer you.
> (verses 217-220)

Antony presents himself as "a plain blunt man" (verse 223) and, contradicting what his actions have just shown, he claims to be incapable of making speeches. He imagines that if Brutus were in his place, he would call a mutiny to rebel against what has happened. In doing so, Antony reaches the height of his argumentative skill, as he uses his opponent's abilities to achieve his own ends:

> … but were I Brutus,
> And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
> Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue
> In every wound of Cæsar that should move
> The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.
> (verses 231-235)

It is the wounds on Caesar's body that, through the rhetorical talents of a Brutus imagined by Antony, inflame the minds and make the stones of Rome rise up in revolt.

The people then come to the conclusion that Caesar's murderers must be condemned. This is exactly what Antony wanted to demonstrate.

These excerpts from Shakespeare's play highlight the *perlocutionary* dimension of Antony's speech (perlocutionary in the sense of Austin and Searle's speech act theory). Words do not only serve to describe, state, question, or narrate, but also to do various things, such as convincing. By convincing those who listen, Antony's speech has very concrete effects. To avoid a violent breach of his pact with the conspirators (who gave him permission to speak on the condition that he refrain from accusing them), Antony first takes the path of implication. By violating one of the maxims which, according to Grice, govern conversational exchanges, the audience gradually gains access to what Antony is trying to demonstrate. The strategy is completed by the evocation of Caesar's virtues, by the use of pathos as a means to awaken the audience's emotions, and finally by the direct enunciation of what Antony thinks.