

Speaking in Deeds

Shakespeare and Pragmatics



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David Crystal illustrates how grammar can assist interpretation in Shakespeare through a discussion of the differences between 'thou' and 'you' in Early Modern English.

There has been a fundamental change in our study of language in recent years, and nobody can fail to be affected by it - not even Shakespeare.

Pandarus sums it up, when he tells Troilus (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.ii.54):

Words pay no debts; give her deeds.

The linguistic change has been just that: a change from the study of words to the study of deeds - or, more precisely, a change from an exclusive concentration on the forms and patterns of language to an investigation of their meanings and the effects they have on us as interacting human beings. In the terminology of modern linguistics, we have moved from *grammar* into *semantics* (the study of meaning) and *pragmatics* (the study of the effects conveyed by the linguistic choices we make).

The change of direction is especially relevant to the study of drama. No playwright, director, actor, critic, or drama teacher would ever have thought to be much concerned about grammar, in its earlier incarnation, and rightly so, for the naming of grammatical parts has no obvious relevance to what happens on stage. Why should anyone be interested in noting that a character uses subordinate clauses or personal pronouns? After Lady Macbeth receives her husband's letter (in *Macbeth*, I.v) she talks to him in her imagination. She uses *thou* forms fourteen times. So what?

The new perspective makes us think differently about such questions. Everyone, from playwright to teacher, is intimately involved in the way a play conveys meaning and effect. Everyone is concerned with the relationships

between characters. And if we explore grammar in the right way, using the perspectives of semantics and pragmatics, intriguing insights into the nature of these relationships begin to emerge.

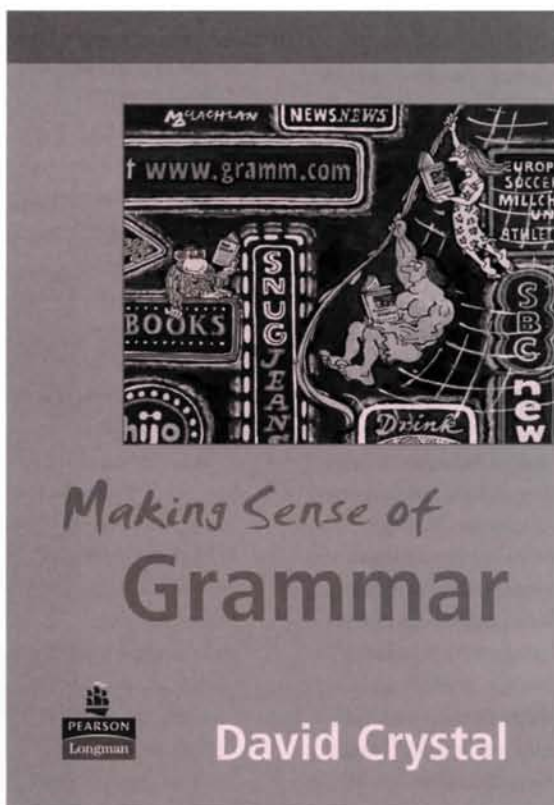
From words to DEED: the D part

In a recent book, *Making Sense of Grammar*, I have summarized this new direction using the acronym DEED.

The D stands for Description, which was the traditional focus of language study. All scientific investigations begin by noticing something which intrigues us, and which makes us want to talk about it. We need to identify what we have noticed, and that means naming it.

This was the primary purpose of the traditional approaches to grammar which dominated schoolrooms from the 18th century until the 1960s: to provide us with terms to label things. Once we have such labels as 'adjective', 'noun', and 'pronoun', then we can talk about such patterns as 'an adjective going after the noun'. It is an essential first step. Terminology is intrinsic to grammar, as it is to chemistry, geography, and all other subjects which describe things.

But noticing and naming a feature of grammar is not an isolated exercise. It is not enough to say, '*Banana?* Aha, that is a singular noun'. If we are bold enough to identify *banana* as a noun, this means that we must also have noticed that it is not some other part of speech - a verb, say, or an adjective. To have noticed Lady Macbeth



saying *thou* means that we must have noticed she has not said you.

In grammar, one observation is always part of a network of other observations. We learn about concepts in clusters - often clusters of two, such as singular and plural, or *thou* and *you*. But the descriptive skill, on its own, is not very informative. In an educational context, it is sometimes called 'feature-spotting'. It is a facility that computers have, and the skill shows a similar mechanical-mindedness in humans. Accurate as such descriptive statements may be, we feel that they are somehow missing the point. They do indeed invite the reaction: 'So what?'

What point is being missed? Underneath all such observations lurks the crucial question: Why? Why is the speaker or writer using a particular construction? Why does Lady Macbeth use *thou*? We need explanations, and feature-spotting does not explain anything.

From words to DEED: the E part

The E stands for Explanation. There are two answers to the 'why' questions, and both are important. One answer explains the usage in terms of the meaning it expresses - a *semantic* explanation. The other explains the usage in terms of the effect it conveys - a *pragmatic* explanation. In the context of drama, the pragmatic perspective is especially relevant, so this provides the focus for the rest of this paper.

Pragmatics is always a matter of *choice*. We have in our heads a wide range of words and constructions available for our use, and it is up to us to choose which ones will work best to express what we want to say and to achieve the desired effect. Choosing a particular usage inevitably conveys an effect. Some usages convey an informal tone, others a formal tone. Some give an impression of elegant care, others of casual spontaneity. Some elicit a reaction of humour, respect, or admiration. Some establish rapport, antagonize, or persuade.

From Description to Explanation: that is the new direction in language study. We notice how someone is using a grammatical feature, and want to explain the effect it conveys. And the approach is also concerned with the opposite process: from Explanation to Description. We reflect on the kind of effect we want to achieve, and then choose the usage which will enable us to communicate our intentions effectively. It is this two-way approach that is reflected in the acronym: DEED.

Finding deeds in Shakespeare

All of this might seem a long way from Shakespeare. But in developing our understanding of the language of Shakespeare's time (Early Modern English) we have to work through the same process:

- we notice a linguistic feature - something which strikes us as particularly interesting, effective, unusual, or problematic (often because it differs from what we would expect in Modern English);

- we need to describe the feature, in order to talk about it;
- we have to explain why the feature is there, at this point in the play.

We might select any feature and look for explanations, but the choice between the two second-person pronouns (in all their forms - *thee, thy, thyself, thine* and *you, your, yourself, yours*) is a good one, as it is one of the most frequent features of Shakespearian English. Why do characters use one and not the other? To see what is happening, we have to go back a few centuries.

In Old English, *thou* was singular and *you* was plural. But during the 13th century, *you* started to be used as a polite form of the singular - probably because people copied the French way of talking, where *vous* was used in that way. English then became like French, which has *tu* and *vous* both possible for singulars. So now there was a choice. The usual thing was for *you* to be used by inferiors to superiors - such as children to parents, servants to masters, and so on; and *thou* would be used in return. But people would also use *thou* when they wanted special intimacy, such as when addressing God. *Thou* was also used when the lower classes talked to each other. The upper classes used *you* to each other, as a rule, even when they were closely related.

So, when someone changes from *thou* to *you*, or the other way round, in a conversation, it must mean something. It will express a change of attitude, or a new emotion or mood. It could be anything - a sign of extra affection, or of anger. It could be a piece of playfulness, or an insult. To say *thou* to someone could be to antagonise him, as Toby Belch knows when he advises Andrew Aguecheek how to write a letter to his enemy (*Twelfth Night*, III.ii.42):

Taunt him with the licence of ink. If thou 'thou'st' him some thrice, it shall not be amiss.

Switching from *thou* to *you*, likewise, indicates a change in a mood or a social relationship.

As an illustration, note the switching of pronouns as an index of Regan's state of mind when she tries to persuade Oswald to let her see Goneril's letter (*King Lear*, IV.iv.19). She begins with the expected *you*, but switches to *thee* when she tries to use her charm:

REGAN: *Why should she write to Edmond? Might not you Transport her purposes by word? Belike -- Some things - I know not what. I'll love thee much: Let me unseal the letter.*

OSWALD: *Madam, I had rather --*

REGAN: *I know your lady does not love her husband.*

Oswald's hesitation makes her return to *you* again, and she soon dismisses him in an abrupt short line with this pronoun; but when he responds enthusiastically to her next request she opts again for *thee*:



Much Ado About Nothing (Sam Goldwyn/Renaissance Films/BBC, The Kobal Collection)

*I pray desire her call her wisdom to her.
So, fare you well.
If you do chance to hear of that blind traitor,
Preferment falls on him that cuts him off.
OSWALD: Would I could meet him, madam. I should
show
What party I do follow.
REGAN: Fare thee well.*

Here we have *thee* being used as an index of warmth of feeling.

We have to be careful when interpreting *thou* and *you*. It all depends on who is saying what to whom, and where and why. Context is everything. Here is an example from *Hamlet*. At the very opening of the play, the soldiers meet on the battlements.

BARNARDO: *Who's there?*
FRANCISCO: *Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold
yourself.*

Yourself is a formal usage - appropriate, when you do not know who you are talking to.

BARNARDO: *Long live the King!*
FRANCISCO: *Barnardo?*
BARNARDO: *He.*
FRANCISCO: *You come most carefully upon your
hour.*

We would expect *you* in a professional and courteous observation. But then we encounter the intimacy of fellow-soldiers:

BARNARDO: *'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to be,
Francisco.*

And we would expect *thee*-forms to continue in any further banter. But what we get is this:

FRANCISCO: *For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter
cold, And I am sick at heart.*
BARNARDO: *Have you had quiet guard?*

This now seems to be the professional soldier speaking, not the friend. Francisco is sick at heart, so maybe there has been some trouble. Barnardo needs to check it out, officially. He could have said, 'Hast *thou* had quiet guard?', but that would have been much more akin to a casual chatty remark, hardly appropriate in the circumstances.

Here is a more detailed example of the way *thou* and *you* alternate: IV.i of *Much Ado about Nothing*. The pronouns show the way the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick is going. Beatrice uses *you* throughout the scene; she is keeping her distance. Benedick is not so cautious. When they meet, he starts by using *you* to her, because he is talking about a general issue, and a serious one. Beatrice's cousin, Hero, has been wronged - she is sure, by Claudio - and she has been crying about it. But Benedick soon changes.

BENEDICK: *Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?*

BEATRICE: *Yea, and I will weep a while longer.*

BENEDICK: *I will not desire that.*

BEATRICE: *You have no reason; I do it freely.*

BENEDICK: *Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged.*

BEATRICE: *Ah, how much might the man deserve of me that would right her!*

BENEDICK: *Is there any way to show such friendship?*

BEATRICE: *A very even way, but no such friend.*

BENEDICK: *May a man do it?*

BEATRICE: *It is a man's office, but not yours.*

BENEDICK: *I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?*

BEATRICE: *As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you; but believe me not, and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.*

BENEDICK: *By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me. He has made his play now, switching to thou. But Beatrice is not impressed.*

BEATRICE: *Do not swear, and eat it.*

BENEDICK: *I will swear by it that you love me; and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.*

BEATRICE: *Will you not eat your word?*

And she then gives Benedick a good talking to, at the end of which Benedick is convinced. He has to kill Claudio. And notice what happens to the pronouns then. To begin with, he still uses *thee* to her. But then he switches back.

BENEDICK: *Tarry, good Beatrice. By this band, I love thee.*

BEATRICE: *Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it.*

BENEDICK: *Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?*

BEATRICE: *Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.*

BENEDICK: *Enough, I am engaged. I will challenge him. I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you.*

Why does he change to 'you', after so many *thous*? It is a change of mood, just like Barnardo's to Francisco. He now wishes to show Beatrice that he is serious in wanting to help her. He is not speaking now as her lover, but as a supporter.

The use of *thou* is bound up with the way people feel about each other, and if we monitor the way they use their pronouns we usually get a good barometer of their relationships. In fact, Beatrice never addresses Benedick as *thou* anywhere in the play - except once, when she's talking to herself, fantasising about him in her mind (at the end of III.i).

Any encounter with Shakespeare, on page or on stage, presents us with a *pragmatic* challenge: we have to appreciate the effects that his choice of language conveys, if we are to explain the style in which he or his characters talk, see why other characters react in the way they do, and understand what is happening to our intellect and emotions as we read, watch, or listen to their exchanges. And the detailed study of points of grammar, even a point as tiny as the second-person pronoun, can help us achieve these goals.

So yes, Lady Macbeth uses *thou* to her husband a great deal in I.v ('Thy letters have transported me...'), as indeed he does to her. Their choice of forms reflect their closeness. But two scenes later, everything changes. In I.vii.29, she meets him outside the dining chamber, and addresses him coldly: 'Why have you left the chamber?' When Macbeth replies 'We will proceed no further in this business' she rounds on him with seven contemptuous *thou*-forms in rapid succession: 'From this time/Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard...'. She then switches to *you*: 'What beast was't then/That made you break this enterprise to me?' Macbeth tries to maintain a *thou*-relationship with his wife, using these forms a further nine times in later scenes; but they are not reciprocated. After I.vii.43, Lady Macbeth never uses *thou*-forms to her husband again.

He has been rebuffed, and it knocks his pronouns off balance - he reverts to *you* - but only for a moment.

BENEDICK: *With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.*

BEATRICE: *Why, then, God forgive me!*

BENEDICK: *What offence, sweet Beatrice?*

BEATRICE: *You have stayed me in a happy hour. I was about to protest I loved you.*

She means, 'you've caught me at a good time' - but it is still not a very strong protest, if she stays with *you*.

BEATRICE: *I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.*

BENEDICK: *Come, bid me do anything for thee.*

BEATRICE: *Kill Claudio.*

BENEDICK: *Ha! Not for the wide world.*

BEATRICE: *You kill me to deny it. Farewell.*

BENEDICK: *Tarry, sweet Beatrice.*

BEATRICE: *I am gone, though I am here. There is no love in you. Nay, I pray you, let me go.*

BENEDICK: *Beatrice -*

BEATRICE: *In faith, I will go.*