

Shakespearean Grammar

in Hamlet's monologue on his way from the churchyard.

(written with the help of E.A. Abbott, *A Shakespearean Grammar: An Attempt to Illustrate Some of the Differences Between Elizabethan and Modern English*. Macmillan, 1870 and C.T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*. Oxford; at the Clarendon Press, 1911)

The Monologue is published in two versions – the Forum version (*Shakespeare Discussion Group at online-literature.com*) and the Journal version (*International Journal of ELT, Linguistics and Comparative Literature, Vol.8. Issue 3. 2020 May-June*). The Journal version is completed by some remarks on Shakespearean Grammar. But the interest to the Monologue needs more attention to the peculiarities of Elizabethan English used in the text.

1. Ellipses

1.1. The Monologue ends with the Horatio's question:

“But, if that love oh heavens do (him) outlive the time?”

with the ellipse of “*him*”. Abbott wrote: “*Similarly "do" is used like the French "faire" or "laisser" with the ellipsis of the person who is "caused" to do the action, thus—*

“Do stripen me and put me in a sakke, And in the nexte river do me drenche.” CHAUCER, Marchante's Tale, 10,074.

i.e. "cause (some one) to strip me--to drench me."

1.2. The other Ellipses are exposed differently in the Forum version and in the Journal version. In the Forum version, when Hamlet starts talking to himself, he omits the verb “*contrive*” and then replaces “*aught*”:

“Why, do nor let thy soul aught (contrive) againts thy mother.”

Abbott wrote: “*Several peculiarities of Elizabethan language have already been explained by the desire of brevity which characterised the authors of the age. Hence arose so many elliptical expressions that they deserve a separate treatment. The Elizabethan authors objected to scarcely any ellipsis, provided the deficiency could be easily supplied from the context.*

“Vouchsafe (to receive) good-morrow from a feeble tongue.” **J.C.ii.1.313.**”

Hamlet repeats Father’s words almost step-by-step but with some differences. Thus, the ellipse appears. But there is another solution. It is the “**let to**” irregularity. Abbott wrote: “*In the Elizabethan period, while this distinction between auxiliary and non-auxiliary verbs was gradually gaining force, there was some difference of opinion as to which verbs did, and which did not, require the "to," and in Early English there is much inconsistency in this respect. Thus in consecutive lines "ought" is used without, and "let" with, "to."...To is inserted after "let" both in the sense of "suffer" and in that of "hinder."*”

“And let (suffer) no quarrel nor no brawl to come.” **T.N.v.1.364.**

“If nothing lets (prevents) to make us happy both.” **T.N.v.1.256.**

Hamlet remembers the words of his father and repeats them. But their emotions are absolutely different. The King admonishes his son, but as Shakespeare tells us throughout the play and especially in the Queen’s closet, Hamlet really suffers from that feeling. So, the same words can be repeated under different emotions. And “**let to**” in the sense of “**suffer**” appears. But the use of this irregularity makes the ellipse senseless. So, the Journal version gives us:

“Why, do not let thy soul to contrive against thy mother aught.”

1.3. There is one more ellipse, which has come unvoluntarily. There was an original phrase:

“Alack, that canon is a-shooting false fires off”.

But one of Forum readers proposed to omit “**is**” and it was accepted because: “Tis certain, every man that dies ill, the ill (is) upon his own head.” **Hen.V.iv.1.197**”.

Here, the preposition ‘**a-**’ before a verbal noun is also used. Abbott wrote: “*It is easy also to understand a- before verbal nouns and before adjectives used as nouns, where it represents on:*”

“I would have him nine years a-killing. **Oth.iv.1.188.**

i.e. "on, or in the act of killing."

2.Infection of Personal pronouns.

There are a lot of them in The Monologue:

“King Hamlet, abroad You watched the providence, methinks.”

“Alas, thee’ve lost thy treasure.”

“E’en thee make me guilty?”

Abbott wrote: “*The inflections of Personal Pronouns are frequently neglected or misused. It is perhaps impossible to trace a law in these irregularities. Sometimes, however, euphony and emphasis may have successfully contended against grammar... For reasons of euphony also the ponderous **thou** is often ungrammatically replaced by **thee**, or inconsistently by **you**.*” However, Abbott paid attention to some particularities. ‘Thou’ is used between intimate friends, but not from son to father: “*Fathers almost always address their sons with **thou**; sons their fathers with **you**... [But] In the excitement of the battle (I HEN.VI.IV.6) the son addresses his father as **thou**: but such instances are very rare.*” So, Hamlet could tell his father:

“Thou wert, methought, offended.”

3.Passive Verbs.

3.1.Passive verbs produce many peculiarities. For example, “*with some few intransitive verbs, mostly of motion, both **be** and **have** are still used. "He **is** gone," "he **has** gone." The **is** expresses the present state, the **has** the activity necessary to cause the present state.*” And Hamlet’s revelation is followed by:

“Here the understanding is come at once.”

3.2.The formation of Passive Verbs is also interesting. Abbott wrote: “*Hence arose a curious use of passive verbs, mostly found in the participle. Thus "famous'd for fights" (Sonn. 25) means "made famous;" but in*

“Who, young and simple, would not be so lover'd?” L.C.

lover'd means "gifted with a lover." And this is the general rule. A participle formed from an adjective means "made (the adjective)," and derived from a noun means "endowed with (the noun)." On the other hand, stranger'd below means, not "gifted with a stranger," but "made a stranger." This use will be best illustrated by the following examples:--

Childed (provided with children).—

“He childed as I father'd.” **Lear,iii.6.117.**

Woman'd (accompanied by a woman).

“To have him see me woman'd.” **Oth,iii.4.195.**

3.3. One of the most exciting participle formed by Shakespeare from a noun is presented in Hamlet’s self-mockery:

“But I am pigeon-liver'd” **Hamlet,ii.2.605.**

The Monologue uses both the same grammar structure and Hamlet’s personal emotions in:

“When thy dishonest, plume-armour’d son search’d grounds for a honorable action in the show.”

Here the double sense is quite obvious. “*Plume-armoured*” means “*armed with plume*” where “*plume*” signifies “*plumage*” (Onion):

plume: (?) plumage **Tp. III. iii. 65** “One dowle that's in my plume”

and Hamlet makes a mockery of his Prince title. But the French “*plume*” means an English “*quill*” by which Hamlet could write his “*dozen or sixteen lines*” for ‘The Murder of Gonzago’. Shakespeare didn’t use “*plume*” in the sense of “*quill*” but the French vocabulary is widely used in the play that gives such an opportunity: Hamlet finally understands that it was his mistake to verify the veracity of Ghost’s story onstage; the fatal mistake that offended his father and led to all following deaths - of Polonius and Ophelia; of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Being irresolute to commit a fair murder, he has become a murderer.

4. Modal verb’s re-ordering.

The word order in phrases with modal verbs could change not only actor’s intonation but also the degree of modality itself:

“I must from this enchanting queen break off.” **AC, I.ii.129.**

“Then plain and right must my possession be.” **2H4,IV.v.221.**

“So must my voice be tragical again,” **E3,V.i.105**

And Hamlet also does this:

“I must my arm lay freely at his feet.”

5. Other peculiarities.

There are many other less important grammar details in the Monologue but one of them needs a particular attention.

Hamlet really insults Laertes with the following:

“I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.” **Hamlet.v.1.12.**

Coming back to the castle, Hamlet feels ashamed of his arrogance. Can love be measured? Shakespeare gives once the indirect answer to this question:

”It is not so. Ask them how many inches is in one mile: if they have measured many, the measure then of one is easily told.” **L.L.L.V.ii.189**

And the following sentence appears in the Monologue:

“What’s told about forty thousand brothers, if a hand of one can send the proud fellow to hell.”

Here the interrogative ‘*what for why*’ appears but the analysis of this peculiarity can be left to readers.