

Iago and Othello's conversation – language and power

Who's in control?

- Read through Act 3 Scene 3 lines 91-261 and discuss your first impressions of the way Othello and Iago speak to each other.
- In pairs, read the conversation again, this time indicating in some way which character you think has the upper hand. (Who is in control? Who has more power?) You could, for example, indicate the shifts in power through sitting down or standing up. Talk about what you discover. Were you always in agreement? If not, spend a few minutes exploring the points at which you disagreed and what this reveals about your interpretation of the relationship between the two men.
- Feed back to the rest of the class.

A language focus

- Again in pairs, read aloud the first part of the dialogue between Iago and Othello, experimenting with echoing or whispering or shouting any words that are repeated or seem to be particularly important.
- Highlight these words on the text. Look for patterns and shifts in key words across the whole scene.



The Haymarket Theatre, Basingstoke, 2003



The Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, 2003

Conversation analysis

One way of exploring what is going in a dialogue is to apply some of the concepts used in the linguistic analysis of conversation. Linguistic analysis can reveal a lot about the relationship between the characters, who is in control and so on. Some of the main concepts in conversation analysis are shown in the box below.

- Use these to help you analyse a short section of the conversation between Iago and Othello (for example lines 91-131). You should pay particular attention to where one or both of the participants doesn't follow the expected rules.

Conversation analysis

- Who decides what the conversation will be about and who changes the topic? (**Agenda-setting and topic changes**)
- Who initiates the dialogue? Does each person wait till the other has finished or does one person keep interrupting? (**Turn-taking**)
- Distribution and length of turns.
- Types of exchange, for example whether or not the normal expectations of **adjacency pairs** are followed:
 - greeting/greeting
 - question/answer
 - congratulations/thanks
 - apology/acceptance
 - leave-taking/leave-taking
- How much each person says, the quality of what they say, how relevant it is and the manner in which it is said. (**The co-operative principle**)
- **Politeness principles** (maintaining or breaking conventions about being polite in conversation, for example phrasing criticism positively rather than negatively).
- Names people call each other by. (**Modes of address**)
- **Taboo words** (who uses them, what provokes their use, how the other character reacts).
- Implied meanings, the meaning intended or the way words are understood in context, rather than the words themselves. (**Pragmatics**)