PLAY ON ANTONYMS IN SHAKESPEARE'S *ROMEO AND JULIET*

Erna Andriyanti
Yogyakarta State University

Abstract

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the world's greatest writer of the English language. He wrote many poems, most of which are sonnets, and plays. Over the years, his writings have much influenced a large number of notably poets, novelists, dramatists and even today's film makers. Even though for some modern readers Shakespeare's language is difficult to read, until today his works are still enjoyed by many people all over the world, translated into many languages and some words are so frequently cited that they become quite well-known. For some other readers, his language is incredibly amazing.

One of his language talents is his skillful play on antonyms, which is defined as the use of two words which are normally contradictory in meanings in non-antonymous senses. Strange or distinctive expressions like "Parting is such *sweet sorrow*" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, scene 2) and "How shall we find the *concord of this discord*?" (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5, scene 1) are created to attract and evoke the readers to find their meanings. Those expressions contain semantic incompatibility because the words *sweet* and *sorrow*, *concord* and *discord* have opposite meanings. The odd combination between the words possibly causes the readers to have an illogical view of the meanings. Conversely, it also might invite the readers' curiosity to make acceptable interpetation of the expressions.

This paper tries to scrutinize the play on antonyms in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The use and the interpretation become the focus of the study. The reasons of choosing *Romeo and Juliet* is because it is quite popular and observed to have many interesting examples of the topic.

Key words: Play on antonyms, semantic incompatibality, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

A. Introduction

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the world's greatest writer of the English language. He wrote many beautiful poems, most of which are sonnets, and plays (both comedy and tragedy). Over the years, his writings have much influenced a large number of notably poets, novelists, dramatists and even today's film makers. Shakespeare's influence can be seen for instance in Herman Melville's and Charles Dicken's works; some popular stories like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* have been made into films. His works have been translated in many languages other than English and are still enjoyed by many people all over the world. His works have been abundant sources for scholars' scrutinies and many of words in the works are so frequently cited that become quite popular.

His language, despite the use of Elizabethan language that makes many people find it difficult to read, is expressive and poetic. Phrases like "All's well that ends well", "All the world's a stage" and "To be or not to be" are examples that make his language distinctive. He played words smartly and intelligenty in his works, inviting the readers to be imaginative in getting the meanings and arousing their senses and feeling both in sad and funny situations.

One of Shakespeare's famous plays is *Romeo and Juliet*, which has been adapted numerous times for film, stage, or opera. It is a drama that tells the tragic course of love of the main characters. The play ends with the death of the lovers, and their families' agreement to end their feud. Throughout the play the atmosphere of joy and sorrow colors the story, indicating that the play is not a full tragedy. The switch from comedy to tragedy and vice-versa is often regarded as one of Shakespeare's dramatic talents.

Shakespeare's language in this play also attracts many critics to discuss the work. Scholars often analyze the use of blank verse, sonnets, metaphors, iambic pentameter and puns in this world-famous play. This paper, however, views the work in terms of the use of play on antonyms and the interpretation from stylistic perspectives.

B. Shakespeare and Pun/ Wordplay

One of Shakespeare's distinctive language styles is known as pun. It is a foregrounded lexical ambiguity, which may have its origin either in homonymy or polysemy. Wordplay –or sometimes called only play- is one form of pun (Leech, 1968: 209). According to Ravasaat, wordplay is a stylistic device used to create ambiguity (2007). Leech (1968: 210) examines the technical aspects of punning and related forms of wordplay as follows:

1. *Punning Repetition*: A double meaning is brought to one's attention by a repetition of the same sequence, first in one sense and then in another.
   In *Romeo and Juliet,* act 1, scene 4, Romeo, lamenting that Cupid brings heaviness instead of gaiety, puns on *sore* and *soar*, *bound* (adj) and *bound* (verb):

   I am too *sore* enpierced with his shaft
   To *soar* with his light feathers, and so *bound*,
   I cannot *bound* a pitch above dull woe

2. *Play on Antonym*: The use of two words which are normally antonyms in non-antonymous senses.
   In the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet,* act 2, scene 2, Juliet apologizes, in these words, for having unwittingly declared her love without being wooed for it:

   > Therefore pardon me,
   > And not impute this yielding to *light* love'
   > Which the *dark* night hath so discovered

3. *The Asyntactic Pun*: One of the meanings does not actually fit into the syntactic context.
   Mercutio, wounded by Tybalt, jests about his impending death (*Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, scene 1*):

   > Ask for me tommorrow and you shall find me a *grave* man

4. *The Etymological Pun*: Puns which bring together an etymological meaning and a current meaning of the same word.

5. *Syllepsis:* A compound structure in which two superficially alike constructions are collapsed together, so that one item is understood in disparate senses:

   > Here thou, great Anna! Whom three realms obey,
   > Dost sometimes *counsel take* – and sometimes *tea*
   >   (Pope's Rape of the Lock, act 3)

6. *Play on Similarity of Pronunciation*: A 'jingle' depending on approximate rather than absolute homonymy (technically not a pun but its effect is similar)

   > A young man *married* is a man that's *marred*.
   >   (*All's Well that Ends Well*, act 2, scene 3)

In general, to justify a pun or play on words, we look for a significant connection, either of similarity or of contrast, between the meanings (Leech, 1968: 213)
   Shakespeare uses puns or wordplay for various different purposes. Based on the purposes, they can be categorized as the following:
1. Gag puns: These are just jokes – they have no other justification than raising a quick laugh, and tend to attract groans when performed today.
2. Bawdy puns: Dirty innuendos, which depend upon two meanings implied by one word.
3. Poetic puns: They raise more serious questions, for example about how language and poetry operate. (Bloomfield, 2007)

While Leech considers that wordplay is one form of pun, Morries (2005: 19) contrarily categorizes pun as a form of wordplay. She says that jokes, riddles, puns and humor in general are all forms of wordplay and ways in which we mentally manipulate language. Related to Shakespeare, she states that his extraordinary use of wordplay, especially puns, brought wit and cleverness to the stories in his plays, whether the plot was humorous, historical, or tragic in nature. Whether wordplay belongs to pun or conversely pun to wordplay, this paper considers the two similar.

Since this study focuses on (word)play on antonyms, a small discussion on antonym is necessary. The word *antonyms* is generally defined as words of opposite meanings. According to Leech, this very simple definition has many inadequacies in regard to contrasts of meaning. The general definition leads us to think that words contrast only on a single dimension; whereas in fact they may contrast with other words on a number of dimensions at once (1976: 99). Lyons gives a similar explanation about antonyms. He says (1977: 270-271) that the standard technical term for oppositeness of meaning between lexemes is antonymy. But this is hardly more precise in the usage of most authors than the word "oppositeness" which it replaces. The word antonymy makes us to categorize experience in terms of binary contrasts or dichotomization. What should be noted in antonymy is the positive and negative polarity. Kreidler (2002: 100) states that antonyms are opposite in meaning, and when they occur as predicates of the same subject the predications are contradictory. Furthermore, he states that antonyms can be binary, such as *dead-alive, asleep-awake, open-shut*, and non-binary, such as *old-young* and *wide-narrow* (2002:101). According to Hurford, Heasle and Smith (2007: 121-126) oppositeness of meaning can be identified into binary antonyms (*true-false*), converses (like *parent-child*), gradable antonyms (like *cold-hot*) and contradictory (two propositions which cannot be true at the same time).

In discussing play on antonyms as one of Shakespeare's styles, this paper uses a stylistic point of view. According to Znamenskaya (2004) stylistics is the branch of linguistics that studies the principles, and effect of choice and usage of different language elements in rendering thought and emotion under different conditions of communication. Leech points out that:

"In interpreting the language of literature, the linguists' aim is to make 'statements of meaning'. Meaning here is interpreted in a broader sense than usual, sometimes including every aspect of linguistic choice, whether in the field of semantics, vocabulary, grammar, or phonology. One advantage of this extended use of the word 'meaning' is that it liberates us from the habit of thinking that the only type of meaning that matters is 'cognitive' or 'referential' meaning: a view that literary critics have long found unsatisfactory." (2008: 28)

When two words having opposite meanings are used together to refer to or modify an object or situation, ambiguity or absurdity is likely to emerge. An example is taken from *Midsummer Night's Dream* Act 5 scene 1, when Duke Theseus reads through the program of entertainment:

*A **tedious brief** scene of young Pyramus,*
*And his love Thisbe: very **tragical mirth**.*

The word *tedious* and *brief* are antonymous; so are the words *tragic*(al) and *mirth*(ful). *Tedious* means tiresome; wearying; uninteresting. Without context, the combination of the antonymous words makes the noun phrases *a tedious brief scene* and *very tragical mirth* ambiguous. A scene that is tiresome or wearying is generally perceived to last long, not brief or short; we also might question how mirth (being merry, happy or bright) can be tragic, which has the opposite sense.

Another example of antonym wordplay (Leech, 1968: 142) is from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength". The words *war* and *peace* have incompatible senses; the words *freedom* and *slavery* do, too.

In play on antonyms, the words with opposite meanings are treated as if they had compatible senses. The expression "war is peace" can be made compatibly meaningful if we understand that the character saying it means war as a way to get peace. That "freedom is slavery" is acceptable in the sense of freedom of body but slavery of mind.

In "How shall we find the *concord of this discord*?" (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5, scene 1), the play on antonyms should be interpreted in a way so that the two antonymous words build non-antonymous sense. In the context of the scene of the play, the speaker asks how to make the chaotic situation become peaceful.

C. Play on Antonyms in *Romeo and Juliet*

The play on antonyms in *Romeo and Juliet* can be found from the early part until the last. The words or expressions are spoken by various characters, including the main characters Romeo and Juliet and the minor ones, such as Romeo's friends, Juliet's nurse, Friar Laurence and the Prince of Verona. The use of play on antonyms throughout the play is described in these following paragraphs.

The first example can be seen in a dialogue between Romeo and his friend, Benvolio:

BENVOLIO	: It was. What sadness lengthens Romeo's hours?
ROMEO	: Not having that, which, having, makes them short.
BENVOLIO	: *In love*?
ROMEO	: *Out--*
BENVOLIO	: *Of love*?
ROMEO	: Out of her favour, where I am in love. (Act 1, scene 1)

The words *in love* is contrasted to *out of love*. They are employed to refer to Romeo's psychological condition, which reflects his sadness. Benvolio wonders if being in love becomes the cause and Romeo replies that he is out of love because the girl he is in love with (Rosaline) does not seem to love him. Therefore, saying *in love* and *out of love* which semantically have opposite meanings in Romeo's context is all true.

The dialogue continues, still about love. In an occasion when Romeo takes part, we can see how he contradicts words to describe his feeling or perception of love and hate:

> Here's much to do with *hate*, but more with *love*.
> Why, then, O *brawling love*! O *loving hate*!
> O *any thing*, of *nothing* first create!
> O *heavy lightness*! *serious vanity*!
> *Mis-shapen chaos* of *well-seeming forms*!
> *Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire,*
> *sick health*!
> *Still-waking sleep*, that is not what it is!
> This *love* feel I, that feel *no love* in this.
> Dost thou not laugh?

Romeo uses words of incompatible senses to describe love and the extreme opposite feeling hate. For instance, he thinks that love is brawling 'full of noisy quarrel or fight' and hate is loving. Those two different feelings are also compared through antonymous words such as *heavy-lightness*, *serious-vanity*, *feather of lead, cold-fire* and *sick-health*. This implies that Romeo realizes that love or hate has always two opposite sides. In another part when Benvolio asks him whom he loves, he says " Do I *live dead* that live to tell it now"? The binary antonyms used describe that it is very hard or probably impossible (since *live* and *dead* cannot be attributed to a person at the same time) for Romeo to speak frankly about the girl.

Still in act 1 but in scene 3, Juliet's nurse uses "*Even* or *odd*, of all days in the year" to state that the words *even* and *odd* do not contribute a significant difference of meanings to her in counting how old her mistress is. In scene 4, while going to Juliet's mask party but still burdened with love for Rosaline, Romeo says:

> Give me a torch: I am not for this ambling;
> Being but *heavy*, I will bear the *light*.

> Is love a *tender* thing? it is too *rough*,
> Too *rude*, too *boisterous*, and it pricks like thorn.

The word *heavy* is opposite in meaning with the word *light*. By saying the words Romeo implies that going to the party will lighten his love burden. However, the word *light* in this context is ambiguous since it also refers to the previous word *torch* that illuminates light. For people in general, love is a *tender* thing, but for Romeo at that time it is *rough, rude* and *boisterous*.

The last scene of this act shows a play of antonyms by Juliet, expressing her uneasy feeling towards Romeo, whom she meets in her party and then falls in love with. Knowing that Romeo belongs to the Montagues, her family's enemy, she laments:

My only *love* sprung from my only *hate*!
Too *early* seen *unknown*, and *known* too *late*!
Prodigious birth of love it is to me,
That I must *love* a loathed *enemy*. (Act 1, scene 5)

Juliet's psychological conflict is shown through her use of several antonyms, namely *love-hate*, *early-late*, *unknown-known* and *love-enemy*. The use of those antonyms shows that Juliet, who is in love for the first time, fully understands her difficult situation of being in two opposite sides, which are incompatible with each other.

Romeo, who also feels really in love and realizes that he takes risks in loving the Capulets' daughter, finds opportunities to meet his sweet heart despite the high wall and the house guard. Looking upward to the balcony, he says, "She *speaks* yet she *says nothing*: of what?" (Act 2, scene 2). Speaking means saying something. In this scene Juliet does speak, but due to the distance Romeo cannot hear a word, making he then climbs the wall to the balcony. At the end of their meeting, Juliet says:

I shall *forget*, to have thee still stand there,
Remembering how I love thy company.

Good night, good night! parting is such
sweet sorrow,
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.

Juliet admits that Romeo's company is sweet to remember, however, she should *forget remembering* it. To her parting is "such *sweet sorrow*" causes sadness but it is sweet, since there is a hope to meet again the next day. So even though the words *sweet* and *sorrow* have positive and negative senses, the use of them together refers to one occasion, which has two different sides at once.

In act 2 scene 4, a play on antonyms exists through Mercutio's words while joking with Romeo and Benvolio. To Romeo he says, "Thy wit is a very *bitter sweeting*; it is a most sharp sauce", implying that Romeo's wit makes their joke more humorous but at the same time he feels defeated in playing words. In scene 6, a play on antonym is found in Friar Laurence's words before he marries Romeo to Juliet. He calls their secret marriage as *violent delights*, which semantically have contradictory meanings. The word *violent* has a negative sense while the word *delights* has a positive sense. The word *delights* refers to their happiness because of being united as husband and wife; the word *violent* here means breaking the social rule since their parents do not know it and certainly will not give their blessing.

Juliet's psychological conflict happens again when she knows that Romeo, her three-hour husband, kills Tybalt, her dear cousin. She calls Romeo a *beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical, dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb, damned saint* and *honorouble villain* (Act 3, scene 2), all of which are phrases containing words of opposite meanings. All the names for Romeo make sense since on one side, he is his dear husband but on the other side, he is the killer of her cousin. Meanwhile, Romeo

cries out in front of Friar Laurence knowing that he is banished to Mantua for his deed of killing Tybalt. For Romeo, death punishment is much better than banishment. On the contrary, Friar Laurence considers that Romeo is *an unseemly woman* (because he is physically a man) in *a seeming man* (since facing the punishment, he cries like a woman).

The use of play on antonyms is also found to describe the night spirits. In act 4 scene 3, there is a time when Juliet is doubtful to drink the liquor given by Friar Laurence to make her temporarily dead. She is afraid if the plan does not work well. Her thought brings her to imagine a possibility of her waking up in the cemetery at night while Romeo has not come yet:

Alack, alack, is it not like that I,
So early waking, what with loathsome smells,
And shrieks like mandrakes' torn out of the earth,
That *living mortals*, hearing them, run mad

She uses the words *living mortals* to refer to the spirits, which people usually see moving or flying, as if they were not dead.

The play of antonyms is still employed through several characters until the last act. Friar Laurence (in act 5 scene 2), for instance, uses the opposite words *unhappy fortune* to describe a dangerous situation that might happen because a plan does not work as expected. Friar John, whom he sends to give a letter to Romeo, cannot go to Mantua. It makes Friar Laurence think what should unite Romeo and Juliet in happiness turns to a dangerous situation. Friar Laurence also uses the words *poor living corse* (an old use of word for today's *corpse* 'dead body') to refer to Juliet, who is apparently dead as the effect of drinking the drug from him. If we do not know the context, we will question about the compatibility of the words' meanings.

The next example is from Friar Laurence's reply to the Prince when he asks what has happened. Friar Laurence admits that he is "the *greatest*, able to do the *least*" (act 5, scene 3). The contradictory meanings lie in the words *greatest* and *least*. What is generally assumed about the greatest person is for him to do the greatest things. Conversely, Friar Laurence is the greatest in the tragedy since he is the playmaker, whose game causes three people, namely Romeo, Juliet and Paris, die. In fact, he cannot control his own game, or becomes the one who do the least to prevent their death.

The last play on antonyms can be seen from the Prince's statement, responding to the sad ending of Romeo's and Juliet's love and the feuding families' reconciliation. He describes the situation as a *glooming peace*, the former referring to the end of the lovers' love and the latter to the reconciliation.

The use of a lot of play on antonyms in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can be regarded as a means of strengthening the type of the play, which is not fully tragic. The play on antonyms in this literary work brings an effect to the readers that two sides of things are continuously shown at the same time. For example, Romeo and Juliet's love springs from their families' hatred and the feuding families ultimately reconcile after their children's death, resulting in the restoration of the civic order.

The play on antonyms in this play is found through numerous different characters, implying that things and human beings themselves are of two contrastive characters. They are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. The duality of things and beings is foregrounded in the story. It is apparently to be a crucial theme, reflected by the use of play on antonyms right from the first until the last act.

Regarding that wordplay is overlapped with pun, it is observed that the purposes of using the play on antonyms in *Romeo and Juliet* can be grouped generally into two, namely to play jokes and to express seriousness, such as sadness, worry and irony. The former is supported by examples of play on antonyms spoken by Romeo and his friends while they are having intimate conversations. The latter has more examples, conveyed through Romeo, Juliet, Friar Laurence and the Prince. The intention to be serious in using the play on antonyms, which is bigger in portion than the intentions to joke, indicates the type of the play, which is a tragedy. However, the jokes sometimes color the intense atmosphere of the story so that they make the play a comic-tragedy.

D. Conclusion

The use of play on antonyms in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is conveyed through many different characters, namely the main characters Romeo and Juliet, Romeo's friends, Juliet's nurse, Friar Laurence and the Prince, throughout the whole play. The antonymous words are employed to create compatible senses, which are literarily acceptable. Its effect is that two sides of things are continuously shown to the readers. It can be concluded that duality of things or beings is foregrounded in the story. The play of antonyms in *Romeo and Juliet* generally has two functions, namely to play jokes or to express seriousness. These functions support the type of the play, that is a comic tragedy.

REFERENCES

Bloomfield, Jem. 2007. "Shakespeare and Puns: Wordplay in the Plays of Shakespeare"
http://www.suite101.com/content/shakespeare-and-puns

Hurford, James R, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith. 2007. *Semantic A Course Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kreidler, Charles W. 2002. *Introducing English Semantics*. London: Routledge.

Leech, Geoffrey. 1976. *Semantics*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.

_____. 2008. *Language and Literature: Style and Foregrounding*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Lyons, John. 1977. *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morries, Alana. 2005. *Vocabulary Unplugged*. Vermont: Discover Writing Press.
Ravassat, Mireille. 2007. "Assessing and Translating the Ambiguities of Wordplay in Shakespeare's Macbeth". In *Société de Stylistique Anglaise* (an electronic journal).

Shakespeare, William. 1980. *The Complete Works*. Delhi: Mohan Primlani for Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd.

Znamenskaya, T. A. 2004. *Stylistics of the English Language: Fundamentals of the Course*. Москва: YPCC.