

# The Plurality of Word Sense in Clytemnestra: the Focus on Disambiguation in Language

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**Abstract:** The methodology of narration, on a theoretical level, concerns textual narrative analysis. In this paper, it is applied to the text of Greek tragedy in Agamemnon and deals with the scene of the killing of the main character, on his return from Troy, by his wife Clytemnestra.

The method concerns the psychological vision that ranges from analysis of the characters to the understanding of dynamics and relationships on the subjective level of interpretations and experiences, up to the objective level of the interpretation of conflicting dynamics, and their evolution through unambiguous language.

In conclusion, the focus on the disambiguation process in word sense is a methodology that can be used in care taking, in the analytical process of psychotherapeutic practice to reveal the psychological dynamics favoring a bridge between the conscious and unconscious function, creating an interpersonal space of authenticity in the therapeutic relationship.

**Keywords:** Textual narrative analysis, Ambiguous language, Greek tragedy, Word sense disambiguation process.

## SUBJECTIVE LEVEL AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DRAMA

The first drama, on the subjective level, concerns Agamemnon and deals with the scene of the killing of the main character, on his return from Troy, by his wife Clytemnestra.

In Argos, Clytemnestra learns from a watchman that Agamemnon is about to return after the destruction of Troy. Thanks to the chorus of the Argive Elders, the queen receives confirmation of the truth of the news. A herald arrives, announcing the forthcoming arrival of Agamemnon, who happily landed in Greece, whilst his brother Menelaus was lost in a storm. In an atmosphere of anxious suspense, Clytemnestra enters the scene. In the return of her husband, she sees an opportunity to unleash her own action: revenge on him, since he killed her daughter Iphigenia, sacrificing her to the gods, and out of dedication to her lover Aegisthus, who is seeking revenge on Agamemnon for the misdeeds of his father, Atreus [1].

The first part of the tragedy prepares the meeting between Agamemnon returning from the war and Clytemnestra, who is waiting to kill him. The woman will trap him in a false speech [2].

## THE PLURALITY OF WORDS

This becomes possible because there is an asymmetric relationship between the interlocutors: the woman leads the game with lucid awareness through disambiguation of false rhetoric. On an objective level, the whole story is dominated by pain and blood, which is the central element of the scene.

The crimson carpet that Clytemnestra prepares for her husband represents and, at the same time, symbolically anticipates the blood that will be shed. It is a double sign: invoked, implied and cursed. The ambiguous signs of this reading can be found in the story of the double-headed axe with which Clytemnestra kills her husband, a symbol of male political power, but also in the opportunity she has of speaking out, despite being a woman.

Furthermore, it can also be depicted in the pre-imaginary vision of the two eagles that devour the pregnant hare: indeed, in the sacrificial lexicon of

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hunting, it is possible to kill domestic animals, but not if they are pregnant or rearing young, which are sacred and placed under the protection of Artemis. It would be like going against nature itself; nature that sees in a mother the love for children and, at the same time, the blinding rage towards those who dare to take them away from her.

Clytemnestra, at the interpretative level, represents woman's conflict: her own feeling of hatred, which is not a fictitious instrument that simply justifies the murder of her husband because he had slaughtered her daughter Iphigenia without mercy. In this reading, Agamemnon is the man of exhaustion, of disenchantment, the man who knows and has seen everything.

The image of Clytemnestra that emerges in the play can be traced back to the Jungian concept of *Animus*, the male element of the feminine unconscious. It constitutes the rational function (*logos*) and appears in dreams as a male figure.

In Greek tragedies, every story as a universal story is always present. Victims, executioners, murderers are on the scene. The dark shadows of the individual and collective psyche, which have always been lost in obscure labyrinths [3].

As a progression against nature itself, this play highlights the nature of a mother and her love for her children and, at the same time, the blinding rage towards those who dare to take them away from her.

In Clytemnestra, the *Animus* emerges in its negative form, as if it were a prey to male determination, driven by an impulse to accomplish a hasty action; she may represent the archetype of the betrayed woman and this allows her to question the relationship between man and woman and the contrast woman/emotion versus man/reason.

### THE PLURALITY OF SYMBOLS IN THE PLAY

The whole story is stained with blood, dominated by pain, and the central element of the scene is the concept: "from pain one learns; only to those who suffered, Justice grants in exchange knowledge" (verses 176-178).

The crimson carpet that Clytemnestra lays symbolically represents the blood that will be spilled; it is a double sign: invoked, implied and cursed. The tragic experience is the experience of the

internalization of knowledge, a process of psychological and character maturation, which passes through suffering, the *Pathei Mathos*. Clytemnestra, on an interpretative level, represents woman's conflict: within her, Penelope's wait becomes rage.

Finally, the Chorus, which is the expression and symbol of social voices, in a message of scandal and fear, makes vain attempts at mediation and wisdom. Among the verses of the play, everybody can dynamically be a victim or child of injustice.

Clytemnestra's feeling of hatred emerges, not as a mere fictitious instrument that justifies the murder of her husband because he ruthlessly slaughtered his daughter Iphigenia, "joy of the house" and "aching fruit of her labor", but a real *Mènis*, the terrible wrath of a wounded mother who does not forgive or forget [4, 5]. Clytemnestra, the archetype of the betrayed woman, represents the fear that has always tormented man: the woman, that one day, will be able to rebel with hot and explosive ferocity, unlike her husband's cold and calculating version. This is the archetype that allows us to better question the relationship between man and woman, as well as how woman/emotion contrasts with man/reason. The refusal of male supremacy or the subjection of women to men are possible implications, which we also find in aspects of myth and the complex [6].

It is from this perspective that we can read the contrast between light and shadow of the fire signal that characterizes the opening of the plot, and the nocturnal procession in the glow of torches with which it ends.

The psychological impulses that move within an individual are always translated into objective terms, according to the archaic principle that attributes inner impulses to a system of external interventions (demons and evil forces), which obstruct man at every step by leading him towards the abyss of guilt and disaster.

These negative energies, a hybrid "violence" and the underworld of punishing Erinyes and demons, upset a person's mind and haunt it, leading to ruinous gestures.

The fundamental conflicts of the tragic concern opposites: man/woman, young/old, individual/society, alive/dead, man/god.

On conflict, Jasper highlights the Tragic as a conflict, a point of view, a multiplicity of the truth, non-

unity. In tragedy, the ever-present question is "What is true?". And, consequently: "Who is right?" [7].

### THE NECESSITY OF THE DISAMBIGUOUS LEVEL IN LANGUAGE

The first part of the tragedy prepares the meeting between Agamemnon, on his return from the war, and Clytemnestra, who is waiting to kill him.

The woman will trap him in a false speech: the omen represented by the appearance of the two eagles that devour a pregnant hare is, at the same time, an announcement of victory in the expedition against Troy, but also an enigmatic reference to the sacrifice of Iphigenia [2].

Clytemnestra performs a transformation during the play, from victim to executioner; she takes justice into her own hands. In the first part of the text, she is often defined as a woman "by the male will" (vv. 11), and she is praised because she speaks like a wise man. She takes on a role that does not belong to her; that of skillfully using the weapons of *logos*, intended as public speaking, which belonged to men in classical Greece.

This is made possible because there is an asymmetrical relationship between the interlocutors: the woman leads the yoke with lucid awareness through the disambiguation of false rhetoric. Flattery and words of love are tools with which she can subtly and cunningly attract Agamemnon towards her and make him pay, once and for all, for his unforgivable sin, the killing of his children.

Her language is expressed repeatedly through an "agonal" lexicon of struggle and war, which is typically male.

Clytemnestra is presented from the first verses with the formidable definition of "female with the heart of a male". On the contrary, Cassandra is an emblematic figure of true speech that belongs to prophecy. She is immune from the persuasion exercised by Clytemnestra, and she will be the one to denounce the weapon used by the woman to trap her husband: "The commander of the ships, the destroyer of Ilion, does not know what he will do with a fateful destiny, like a hidden Ate, the tongue of the hateful bitch, who has spoken so long with a joyful heart. Such is his audacity: a female murders the male" (vv. 1227-1229).

In the first dialogue between Clytemnestra and the choir, contrasts emerge between the sure sign, on which one could rely as something seen with one's own

eyes, and the sign that deceives, originating from visions, omens and dreams.

The deceptive signs present in this work make things that have no concreteness appear true, offering to the mind's eyes illusory images, which distract the subject and cloud his mind, causing him to perform those actions that will bring him to ruin.

Clytemnestra's affection, which fits in her most proud forms both maternal feeling and feminine resentment, is at the same time the bearer of truth and falsehood: from love for her daughter and her previous attachment to her husband to betrayed conjugal love, which generates hatred and revenge.

Today, as in the time of tragedies, we can experience ambiguous language daily, both in clinical contexts, in contact with psychopathology and patients, and non-clinical ones, in everyday life.

Ambiguity generates suffering: acted out in silence and in words, thanks to the semantic plurality and conscious lies that hide intentions. It brings with it the archaic air of irresolute taste; it has a double and false side, which lends itself to a double interpretation [8].

It is indeed important to reflect on how certain words take on a different meaning depending on the context, when a discrepancy occurs between the speaker and the listener. We can catch it in their eyes, in the climate we feel, in the sensations we experience, in the suffering we undergo in a relationship when, despite what they tell us, we feel we are not loved, *i.e.* gaslighting dynamics [9]. The context takes on an important role in the possibility of correct recognition of values and symbols, which constitute our life and language [10, 11].

The task of the therapeutic process is to act with an unveiling operation, which consists in revealing an ambiguous perspective. This can also be thought of as a "Word Sense Disambiguation" or WSD disambiguation, a linguistic operation, which specifies the meaning of a word or phrase, which denotes different meanings, depending on the context.

The task of the therapist, faced with the ambiguity of the word, is to invite the patient to explain their experience, to clarify it, to make it more explicit, clearer; in other words more conscious. In an ambiguous situation, this will clearly come to the surface. Psychoanalytic literature has spelled out the term "unspoken" for many years, clarifying how, in

communication, this can be a great source of suffering for the patient and of pathological communication [12].

Language, once again, represents not only a diagnostic bridge between the biological and psychic, as known linguistic diagnostic indices in the clinic, connected to psychopathology and psychosis, but it also has an intentional, communicative, specific function that distinguishes us from other species. Here, giving space to unconscious valences, it can become a tool of communicative perversion, gas lighting and psychological manipulation, or it can be a tool for treating authenticity, mental health and relational growth [13].

## CONCLUSIONS

The ambiguous signs of this interpretation can be traced in the story of the double-edged axe with which Clytemnestra kills her husband, a symbol of male political power, and when Clytemnestra speaks publically, despite being a woman. Just like the omen of the two eagles that devour the pregnant hare: indeed, in the sacrificial lexicon of hunting it is possible to kill domestic animals but not if they are pregnant or rearing young, which are sacred and placed under the protection of Artemis.

It would be like going against nature itself, which sees in a mother the love for her children and, at the same time, the blinding rage towards those who dare to take them away from her.

The falsity of Clytemnestra's language with which she presents herself at the beginning of the story is purely occasional; indeed, at the moment of confession of the crime, the queen is very happy to throw off her mask and sigh "first, I said many things out of necessity, now, I will be ashamed to say the opposite" (vv. 1371-1373).

The image of Clytemnestra that emerges in this play can be linked to the Jungian concept of *Animus* [14]. The *Animus* (Latin "spirit") defines the masculine element of the feminine unconscious. It constitutes the rational function (*logos*) and appears in dreams as a male figure. Identification with the *Animus* can manifest itself with characteristics of obstinacy, hardness, challenge, while, in its most positive aspect, it relates women to the creative energies of the unconscious. In Clytemnestra, the *Animus* emerges in its negative meaning, as if it were prey to a masculine determination, guided by an impulse to perform a hasty action. This theme finds a current implication in certain

couple dynamics, in which the register of ambiguity reigns; a complex relational story in which anger and revenge emerge. It is, as history taught us, that revenge generates revenge and that stories like this only make people a part of the other in ethical terms. In other words, once again, tragedies and myths teach men that evil is not cured by adding more evil.

The figure of Clytemnestra makes us reflect on the evolution from being a victim to being guilty of a story full of pathos, but also of conflicting and strong feelings, of deceit and pun, the absence of forgiveness and resentment. Clytemnestra remains the symbol of a *femme fatale*, without *pietas*. Clytemnestra is a victim of her husband who becomes an executioner. In this Greek tragedy, we are thus witnessing massacre and bloodshed for crude family justice, driven by a desire for revenge.

The Clytemnestra that we find in Aeschylus' "Oresteia" is a different woman. In the sentimental dynamics with Agamemnon, which may seem distant to us nowadays, revenge momentarily attenuates pain and generates more revenge. This is the dilemma of tribal law, in which only the introduction of a rational rule, the law, can convey the contrasts and transform them into benevolence, the passage from the Erinyes to the Eumenides.

In this unveiling work, the therapeutic relationship becomes a space for the creation of new shared meanings, new words and new languages through which to see facts [15, 16]. Thus, one of the therapeutic passages consists in the work of disambiguating and revealing psychological dynamics, resolving conflicts and working towards a creative work of transformation of the person, of individuation, achieving balance between the parts and what one authentically is.

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