

# Language – antigone essay sample



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The language of a play serves more than one role. In “Antigone”, language is used to help identify the characters and chorus: characters speak more literally whilst the chorus speak metaphorically. The dialect of a character’s language is used as an indicator of their social status. The variance of simple and complex language keeps the audience interested in the play. Finally, language sets the mood and atmosphere in sections of the play. However, as this is a play in translation certain problematic issues arise. Identification of characters is possible by observing differences in language.

Haemon, as a royal, will speak differently than the Watchman. Both men attempt to tell Creon their views and these differences are visible. Haemon, who is of a higher class, is more educated and this is reflected in his style of speech: (line 699) “For this, hasn’t she earned glory bright as gold?”

Haemon is not only able to express his opinion tactfully, he raises a question using a simile which creates imagery. This contrasts the Watchman’s language which is very simple: (line 238) “First, I want to tell you where I stand”. The Watchman’s language is more direct and does not attempt to soften the news which Creon is about to receive.

Sophocles includes this difference in language between characters to allow the audience to distinguish characters. This would have been important for people sitting near the back of the amphitheatre as the masks of two characters start to look the same from a distance. Language also varies between the chorus and the main characters. Characters talk about issues related to events occurring at that section of the play. An example can be seen when Antigone is about to be banished to death: (line 892) “I’m

coming home forever". As Antigone is about to die it is obvious that the topic of conversation should be death.

However, when the chorus performs their fourth stasimon, which is linked to and follows Antigone's death speech, the language covers more diverse topics such as the Gods, people and places: (line 966 - 968) " At the Black Waters ... Lies a city of Thrace known as Salmydi?? ssus". Sophocles makes the chorus do this to make the play cover wider issues. The theatre was meant to provoke debates but not everyone might have wanted to talk about death. By including other issues the platform for discussion is widened which allows more people to start a debate of their choice.

Another way that characters can be defined is through the dialect of the language and it's style. The Watchman is the perfect example of this as he speaks differently from all other characters in the play. The Watchman speaks very colloquially and with a dialect that sets him apart: (line 317) " So where's it biting you? On your ears or in your mind? " Here the watchman's language is very informal when he is speaking to the king. The way that he is speaking is an indicator of his social status - lower status. If he is speaking to Creon in such a way he must be either ignorant or uneducated.

A lack of education is obvious when the Watchman describes the place that Polyneices was buried (Line 249): " The ground was so hard and dry". A person of higher status would have made the statement a bit more elaborate or included a simile or metaphor especially as the news is very sensitive. However, as the Watchman is uneducated he does not have a wide

vocabulary or knowledge of such language devices. A mixture of complex and simple language is used in Antigone. An example of how the language varies is monologues (complex) and stichomythia (simple).

Monologues are spoken at a slow and comfortable pace which allows the speaker to order his choice of words and think about what he will say. This means that the words or language devices used in monologues are of a more complex nature to their stichomythic counterparts. An example of this can be seen when Haemon tries to tell his father to be more lenient: (line 715) "If a sailor keeps the footline taut ... he'll capsize". Haemon compares leniency with the act of a sailor and cleverly uses imagery and a simile to convey his message to Creon: Creon should be a bit more flexible with Antigone.

However, When Creon and Haemon engage in stichomythia there is little time to think about similes and imagery as the pace of conversation is very fast. This leads to words spoken being more concise but great enough to have an impact. An easy way of doing this is by picking up on what your opponent has previously said (lines 737 + 738): Haemon - "A place for one man is not a city." Creon - "A city belongs to its master. Isn't that the rule?" I believe that Sophocles varies the language to keep the audience interested.

For if the language used was always the same, the audience would lose focus and the play would not be so successful. The mood and atmosphere of the play are also influenced by the language or more specifically; semantic fields. When the play is dealing with a negative issue, negative words are

used to describe the event. For example when Creon finds out that Polyneices has been buried Creon is angry. The words he uses during his speech reflect this anger: (page 12 + 13) “ Rage, Wickedness, Crime and Death”. It would be illogical to use happy words to describe how Creon feels as this would confuse the audience.

The use of semantic fields is also visible when Antigone is about to die. Sophocles wants the audience to feel sorry for Antigone through her speech so he includes lots of guilt words such as: (page 39) “ Hollow, Hope, Abandoned and Misery”. Whilst the English edition of “ Antigone” is very accurate, certain problems arise with this text in translation. The grammatical arrangement of words in Greek differs from the arrangement of words in English. The way that sentences were structured in Greek might have helped the audience understand the play or might have sounded more poetic.

Yet as the language structure between English and Ancient Greek differs this is lost. The nuances of words are also lost as the play is a direct translation. The names of people in Ancient Greece had meanings. Antigone meant “ born against”. There are obvious parallels between Antigone’s name and her character; she goes against Creon’s wishes thus making her an antagonist. Yet, modern audiences fail to see the connection of Antigone’s name and her character and see her as a protagonist. This has occurred because languages have evolved so much from the original forms of ancient Greek and Latin.