Violent Communication and Verbal Deception in Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*

Laura Tosi

*Università di Venezia, Ca’ Foscari*

Over the last few centuries, Jonson’s theatre of humours and dupe-plots has inspired various interpretations, among which the rhetorical and semiotic aspect of communication is perhaps one of the least investigated. On the contrary, an analysis of communicative interactions between characters reveals how the scenic and verbal brilliance of Jonson’s dialogue are deeply rooted in the dramatist’s acute interest in the dynamics of conflictual verbal exchange, which is at the heart of theatricality.

One of the elements that characterize communication in Jonsonian comedies, especially *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, is undoubtedly the high concentration of verbal violence: cues are often reduced to insults and threats, in an escalation of aggressiveness which has the result of emptying speech of meaning, to replace it with mere noise. This is precisely what happens in the rows between Subtle and Face that are interspersed in *The Alchemist* (which in a way can also be read as a story of a stormy personal/work relationship). An example of this is provided by the play’s *incipit*, a long quarrel (about 180 lines) which is only ended by Grace’s pacifying words and the sound of the bell that indicates the arrival of Dapper, the first dupe. The whole exchange represents a violation of turn-taking and other norms of cooperative communication (for an analysis of the
row as non-cooperative form of communication see Castelfranchi and Poggi):

FACE. Believ't, I will.
SUBTLE. Thy worst. I fart at thee.
DOL. Ha' you your wits? Why gentlemen! For love -
FACE. Sirrah, I'll strip you -
SUBTLE. What to do? Lick figs
Out at my-
FACE. Rogue, rogue, out of all your sleights.
DOL. Nay, look ye! Sovereign, General, are you madmen?
SUBTLE. O, let the wild sheep loose. [threatens FACE with Phial]
I'll gum your silks
With good strong water, an' you come.
(1.1.1-7)

Words turn into verbal ammunition, and noise itself must insult, hurt, humiliate (“I fart at thee”). As W. Reborn has written:

The breaking of the wind, like the Yahoos’ pelting their enemies with excrements in Gulliver’s Travels, is a primitive form of aggression which is identified directly only in the first line of the play. Elsewhere it is replaced by the equivalent, sublimated form of violent, verbal attacks. (363)

Later on Subtle will try to explain the reason for his resentment (still in the process of heaping insults on his accomplice) and even Face will attempt to express himself in a more articulate way. However, the new exchange is affected by the difference in volume. Face is irritated by Subtle’s loud voice (“Will you be so loud?” v. 18; “You might talk softlier, raskall” v.89) while Subtle has the opposite problem of not being able to hear Face properly (“I do not heare well” v. 23; “I wish you could advance your voice, a little” v. 32). It appears that neither man is really interested in taking the discussion on to a more rational level (which would be more useful from a communicative point of view); the dialogue degenerates into a new firing of insults until Doll, aware of the disastrous effects that ineffectual communication can have on their criminal enterprise, gives them a lecture on the necessity to make it up “and cozen kindly, and heartily, and lovingly” (v. 137). The motif of the row as a release for aggressive-
ness or a surrogate for physical violence is to be found in the character of Kastril, the young gallant, whose humour is to learn “some speech of the angry boys” (III.iv.21), “an angry tongue” (IV.ii.29), a sort of linguistic style of aggressiveness which he practices elsewhere in the play, with comic-parodic effects.

In *Volpone* it is Mosca who encourages the birds of prey to verbalize their wish for the death of Volpone:

MOSCA. ‘Pray you let me. Faith, I could stifle him, rarely, with a pillow, As well, as any woman that should keep him.
CORVINO. Do as you will, but I’ll be gone.
(I.v.66-69)

Later on Corbaccio will try to persuade Mosca to give his master a poisonous drink “couldst thou not gi’ him a dram?” (III.ix.139) but here the homicidal drive has gone well beyond verbal violence and is ready to turn into murderous action.

Any discussion of verbal violence and aggressive characters in Jonsonian comedy cannot fail to mention Jonson’s aggressive personality and his passionate involvement in the literary disputes of his time (the War of the Theatres and the quarrel with Inigo Jones). Even if a direct superimposition of author and character is to be avoided and simplistic psychoanalytic interpretations of the historical Jonson (like Wilson, who concludes that Jonson is “an obvious example of a psychological type which has been described by Freud and designated by a technical name anal erotic” [63]) have been corrected by further studies (see Riggs), it is nevertheless impossible to deny Jonson’s predilection for violent public communication. Part of his poetic production is devoted to personal attacks on his literary enemies and it is well known that in many comedies some of his characters are satirical portraits of his fellow dramatists (like Crispinus in *Poetaster*). As M. Chute, author of a very generous biography of Ben Jonson, has observed: “No man in the history of English letters ever started more fights or continued them with more wholehearted enthusiasm” (17). What should be stressed, apart from often improper equations between the verbal and physical violence of fictional characters and their author, is Jonson’s profound personal and artistic exploration of the most conflictual aspects of human communication and the way it may deterio-
rate into downright destructive abuse. It is ironic that in Jonson’s identification with the public role of the scourger, dramatic fiction seems in some way to have ultimately affected the author, whose identity appears to be ‘self-fashioned’ by his theatrical roles of angry opponents (in Greenblatt’s words, “the social discourse is charged with aesthetic energies” [11]). It would appear that Jonson had himself modelled (to whatever degree of awareness it is impossible to establish), aestheticized his public figure on the role of a witty and aggressive Asper, always ready to criticize other people’s follies. In the portrait given by William Drummond in his Conversations, Jonson’s satiric persona has definitely crossed over the boundaries of real life to become a typically Jonsonian character, the protagonist of a “biographic performance” in which he will be the most celebrated among his unforgettable humour creations.

The investigation of communicative interaction is also useful to indentify the linguistic idiosyncrasies and strategies of verbal deception used by Jonsonian characters. Most studies of deceit in Elizabethan (and specifically Jonsonian) drama have concentrated on deceit as structural motif or on the figure of the schemer/deceiver (Curry; Woodridge; Gibbons; Savage; Leggatt; Blake; Griswold; Dynes). The contemporary popularity of coney-catching pamphlets has also been studied in connection with Jonson’s plays, as a form of mutual feedback between the Elizabethan underworld and its stock characters (the trickster, the prostitute, the projector, the pimp etc.) and the literature inspired by such picturesque (and often partly fictional) examples of criminal life. In the present essay the linguistic approach to deception will centre on the swindlers’ verbal ability to manipulate their victims and their victims’ beliefs. As has been observed, verbal deceit is a form of non-cooperative communication which may cause harm to the receiver:

L’inganno è un modo subdolo di non cooperare grazie a una sua bizzarra autoreferenza. Chi inganna usa la comunicazione per fingere di comunicare: usando la comunicazione compromette lo scopo dell’altro di usufruire dei vantaggi della comunicazione, cioè avere conoscenze vere, ingannando inganna anche, fra l’altro, sul suo star comunicando: spesso finge di comunicare, e in realtà non comunica. (Castelfranchi 191)

As Castelfranchi has recently underlined,1 deception is an aggressive social act not only because it prevents the victim from getting relevant
information, but also because it turns the deceived person into a laughing stock (which is precisely what most of Jonsonian humours appear to be). In *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* the effect of the fraud is undoubtedly to damage the reputation and the credibility of the dupes as well as their fortunes.

The choice of these two plays to provide sample strategies of verbal deceit is justified by their extraordinary similarity in structure and in the characters' communicative strategies. In both comedies the discovery of the truth is staged as a highly painful and destructive event where victims gain a mortifying awareness of the end of their dreams (as well as appropriate punishment, as in *Volpone*) while tricksters must confront the disastrous effects of revealing their true identities to the world. At a metatheatrical level, the knaves' practical jokes at the dupes' expenses are equated with the dramatist's art: tricksters are, at the same time, consummate artists, verbal virtuosos, masters of visual/verbal disguises as well as amateur directors. The Jonsonian swindler's passion for dramatic direction is one thing with his skill at staging deceptions: the two elements coincide especially in the framing of duping episodes where the knave-director intervenes to correct the gulls' acting or prefers to watch, unobserved, the success of his performance (as when Volpone, believed to be dead, watches the birds of prey's disappointment, or Subtle, in *The Alchemist*, gives Dapper directions on how he should behave with the Queen of Fairies).

The claustrophobic space of the two comedies is the visual equivalent of verbal deceit: Volpone's bedroom is a theatrical set, whose props are perceived as such by the spectators, while the alchemist's laboratory reveals itself to be simply a creation of the tricksters' impressive verbal powers, a metaphor for artistic creation, "all deceptio visus".

It would seem obvious to assume that deceptive communication is an exclusive characteristic of the knaves-dupes communicative axis. As a matter of fact, if it is true that the swindlers mean to cheat the dupes, it cannot be denied that the dupes in their turn are trying to use the knaves as instruments to reach their goals: richness, eternal youth or absolute power. On the other hand, the knaves' relationships are built on endless conflicts and attempts at mutual deception which will eventually result in a final bitter separation. In order to describe the nature of interactive models in the plays, it could be helpful to refer to the Pragmatics of Communication of the Palo Alto group, which in the sixties exposed the relevance
of communication theory to the study of interpersonal interactions. Although we are not concerned here with its clinical implications, many concepts drawn from the theory (i.e. complementarity, the double bind etc.) are well known and have been applied to the study of theatrical communication (Stelleman). The main axioms of the pragmatics of communication are the following: 1. “One cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick 51); 2. “Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication” (54). Two main types of interactions are identified: symmetrical and complementary. In the first case partners tend to mirror each other’s behaviour, with the possibility of generating competitive situations between the subjects who might go through an escalating pattern of frustration (symmetrical escalation). In the second pattern, one partner’s behaviour complements the other’s. There are two different positions in a complementary relationship: “one partner occupies what has been variously described as the superior, primary or ‘one-up’ position, and the other the corresponding inferior, secondary, or ‘one-down’ position” (69). In the interactions individuals define their relationship and implicitly themselves: to this declaration the speaker can react 1. by confirming A’s definition of self 2. by rejecting it 3. by disconfirming A’s definition. “While rejection amounts to the message ‘you are wrong’ disconfirmation says in effect ‘you do not exist’ (86).

In The Alchemist the opening row is an example of symmetrical escalation. Both knaves give definitions of themselves as “creators” and saviours of their respective accomplice, poor and destitute:

FACE. I shall put you in mind, sir, at Pie Corner,
Taking your meal of steam in, from cooks’ stalls
Where, like the father of hunger, you did walk
Piteously costive. (I.i.25-28)

SUBTLE. Thou vermin, have I ta’en thee, out of dung,
So poor, so wretched, when no living thing
Would keep thee company, but a spider, or worse? (I.i.64-66)

The symmetrical conflict proceeds with alternating definitions and self-definitions until Doll suggests adopting a complementary pattern of interaction: “if your part exceed today, I hope ours may, tomorrow, match
it’, l.i.146-147 (the position of Doll in the “venter tripartite” is simply that of a shared sexual object. Apart from her initial attempts to occupy a one-up position, she is relegated to a subordinate position for the rest of the play). The pattern of symmetrical escalation ends in the disgregation of the Subtle-Face couple: Face finds a new accomplice in his master Lovewit, while Doll and Subtle form a new couple of tricksters who are hoping to outwit Face/Lovewit. The symmetrical pattern will nevertheless continue, with the competition between two couples instead of two individuals. The “winning” couple (which immediately adopts a complementary interaction, that of master-servant) will defeat the Doll-Subtle couple and the gulls: the ending of the comedy seems to to be open to the possibility that the new couple (Face-Lovewit) might continue their frauds “and invite new guests” (V.v.165) to witness their future performances.

In Volpone the relationship between Volpone and Mosca is more complex and many-sided than the couple Face-Subtle: it can be defined as a sort of long-standing surrogate family unit (Marchitell) in which the prevailing interaction model appears to be a particular type of complementary relationship, “in which A lets or forces B to be in charge of him” (Watzlauick 69), called metacomplementary. In the first four acts Volpone lets Mosca direct his own behaviour, the fictional illness, and the management of the birds of prey. Mosca is graciously allowed a one-up position by his master, whom he repays by giving him several confirmations of Volpone’s self definition:

VOLPONE. I glory
More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,
Than in the glad possession: since I gain
No common way: I use no trade, no venture;
I wound no earth with ploughshares ....
MOSCA. No, sir, nor devour
Soft prodigals ...
You loathe, the widow’s, or the orphans tears
Should wash your pavements ...
VOLPONE. Thou strik’st on truth, in all.
(l.i.30-34; 40; 49-50; 67)

As Mosca’s ability in handling the fiction becomes evident, his definition of the self starts to change: the parasite is now more concerned with praising himself (‘O! your parasite is a most precious thing, dropped from
above” III.ii.7-8) than recognizing his master’s worth (“I have not time to flatter you, now, we’ll part / And, as I prosper, so applaud my art” II.v. 37-38). Mosca’s growth in self-confidence parallels Volpone’s loss of his golden quality and ultimately own identity which reaches its climax in Volpone’s faked death and Mosca’s adoption of the ‘clarissimo’ self:

VOLPONE. Am I then like him?
MOSCA. O, sir, you are he:
No man can sever you.
VOLPONE. Good.
MOSCA. But, what am I?
VOLPONE. ‘Fore heaven, a brave clarissimo, thou becom’st it!
Pity, thou wert not born one.
MOSCA. If I hold
My made one, ‘twill be well.
(V.v.1-5)

Volpone’s alienated (or disconfirmed) self (“when I provok’d him, I lost myself” V.xi.22) will be recovered only through the unveiling of his true identity before the Avocatori in court: “I am Volpone and this is my knave” (V.xii.89). However, the price for Volpone’s confirmation of self is torture and ultimately death. In the play the change in interaction model brings about the crisis and the separation of the knaves as Volpone cannot adapt to the reversal of positions in the couple or accept Mosca’s one-up role as Clarissimo: the tragic reaffirmation of Volpone’s identity will result in social disgrace.

The other main conflictual communication axis explored in the plays is that between knaves and dupes. The knaves’ most typical linguistic strategy to deceive is lying, or hiding the truth; Jonsonian couples appear to break most of Grice’s maxims for effective communicative interaction. When the ultimate scope for communication is mutual deception, even the occasional abiding by the rules of politeness might turn out to be a coaxing strategy, a verbal and behavioural mask for the knaves’ aggressive intentions. Apart from practical jokes, disguises, and other forms of “visual misleading”, it is worth remarking that Jonsonian drama is essentially based on techniques of verbal deceit, without which the tricksters would not be able to take in their victims in such a clever manner: language becomes a sort of trap which the dupes cannot help falling into.
It is possible to identify three patterns of deceptive communication used by the knaves in *The Alchemist* and *Volpone*: a) adulation and praise of the desired object; b) one-directional communication; c) misrepresentation of the nature of the relationship between the knaves.

a) The knaves, especially in the first stages of the fraud, normally flatter their victim, name the qualities of the “product” they wish to “sell” (be it the philosopher’s stone or Volpone’s inheritance) or the advantages that it can give. Only through the progressive improvement of the dupe’s relationship with the knave will the dupe reach his goal, which inevitably becomes the main topic of their communicative interactions. Similarly, the knave can hope to enrich himself only by interacting effectively with his victim. In *The Alchemist*, Subtle’s strategy of making the puritans Ananias and Tribulation visualize the effects and the practical advantages of the philosopher’s stone is successful (the effectiveness of the repetition of the catchphrase “You have made a friend” should be noted - definitely a strategy of modern advertising):

**SUBTLE.** As, put the case,
That some great man in state, he have the gout,
Why, you but send three drops of your elixir,
You help him straight: there you have made a friend.
Another has the palsy, or the dropsy,
He takes of your incomestible stuff,
He’s young again: there you have made a friend.
A lady, that is past the heat of body,
Though not of mind, and hath her face decayed
Beyond all cure of paintings, you restore
With the oil of talc; there you have made a friend:
and all her friends.
(III.ii.26-37)

In *Volpone* Mosca uses a similar technique to create a picture of the dupe’s future richness (as he tells Voltore, “here wear I your keys / See all your coffers and your caskets locked / Keep the poor inventory of your jewels” I.iii.40-42). At the same time, however, the knave needs to make clear to the dupe why he is labouring towards favouring one prospective heir rather than another - and the reason is obviously the dupe’s personal worth (the birds of prey’s soft spot is vanity), as he declares to Voltore:
VOLTORE. Happy, happy, me!
But what good chance, sweet MOSCA?
MOSCA. Your desert, sir;
I know no second cause.
(I.iii.47-49)

b) A second pattern of deceptive communication is represented by specialized languages or pseudoscientific jargons (astrology, alchemy, magic etc.) which act as “lexical camouflage” to hide the knaves’ real criminal purposes. The use of such language has the function of putting the knave in a superior position (“one-up”) as a repository of a secret and superior knowledge. The obscurity is absolutely essential to deception: language is reduced to pure sound, noise, verbal disguise which discourages communicative reciprocity (with the exception of those cases when the dupe—such as Mammon in The Alchemist—pretends to share the secret code, with hilarious effects). In this play orthodox alchemic language may also be used as a “screen” to avoid giving embarrassing explanations, as in this exchange when the Puritan Tribulation insists on setting a date for the outcome of the experiment:

TRIBULATION. But how long time,
Sir, must the Saints expect, yet?
SUBTLE. Let me see,
How’s the moon, now? Eight, nine, ten days hence
He will be silver potate; then, three days,
Before he citronize: some fifteen days,
The *magisterium* will be perfected.
(III.ii.125-130)

In another instance Dol’s religious jargon turns into a parody of puritan sermons but also of specialized languages in general, which can sound like meaningless “cant”, devoid of any logic and meaning:

DOL. For, after Alexander’s death —
MAMMON. Good lady —
DOL. That Perdiccas, and Antigonus were slain,
The two that stood, Seleuc’, and Ptolomee—
MAMMON. Madam
DOL. Made up the two legs, and the fourth Beast.
That was Gog-north, and Egypt-south: which after
Was called Gog-Iron-leg, and South-Iron-leg -
MAMMON. Lady -
DOL. And then Gog-horned. So was Egypt, too.
Then Egypt-clay-leg, and Gog-clay-leg -.
(IV.v.1-8)

As Womack points out:

The comedies produce this contradiction as a persistent speech-type
which can be best described as linguistic *junk* - that is, a cultural object
ambivalently compounded of alienation, bad taste, cheapness, freedom,
fun, superabundance, uselessness, waste. (101)

Volpone’s verbal and visual performance as Scoto debases the tech-
niques of oratory and rhetoric (see Drew-Bear) by employing them for his
commercial (as well as sexual) goals. The Venetian audience appears
unable to refute the mountebank’s (“a socially accepted deceiver” [And-
erson 58]) convincing words and manipulation of advertising clichés.

c) Another verbal device to earn the dupes’ trust consists of staging
(before the dupes’ eyes) a misleading picture of the knave-knave rela-
tionship, where one member of the couple pretends to be unwilling to sell,
while the other shows himself to be ready to intercede with his accomplice
for the gull’s sake. The dupe is therefore a spectator of a conflictual rela-
tionship between the knaves who argue about the possibility of sharing
their treasure with strangers (in The Alchemist false arguments are a paro-
dy or real ones, performed “offstage” for the benefit of real spectators).
The apparent reluctance or even aversion to offering the desired object is,
as Subtle is well aware, a common salesman’s technique:

This will fetch’ em,
And make ’em haste toward their gulling more.
A man must deal like a rough nurse, and fright
Those, that are froward, to an appetite.
(Il.vi.87-90)

In Volpone the misrepresentation of the relationship between the
knaves is essential to a positive development of the fraud: only by seeing
Volpone’s performance on his death bed and Mosca betraying his old mas-
ter (but ready to be faithful to a new one) can the birds of prey be put in a position to be swindled. As in The Alchemist, the dupe, who has been given a distorted perception of reality, is ready to be taken in by his “ally”. As has been observed, dupes tend to take active part in the deception they are victims of, especially when their greed leads them to leave all moral scruples behind (as Dapper says, “I do think, now, I shall leave the law” I,ii,91).³

Jonson’s disjunctive endings seem to provide an adequate resolution to the constant state of contention in which characters find themselves. Rather than suggesting a conciliatory, pacifying solution to the conflict, both comedies show the final disgregation of the rogues’ couples. The end of the union and the end of the play occur at exactly the same time, the time where the knaves’ practical and dramatic deception is about to vanish. The guilt of dupes (typically Jonsonian humours) and knaves, “pathologically quarrellers” (Riggs 44), is punished, often with equal severity (as in Volpone). Recent neohistoricist studies have underlined how Elizabethan drama can be perceived as a highly conflictual ground of subversive forces which authority tries to contain, especially in those cases where the economically and socially mobile subject becomes threatening to society in his aggressive appropriation of discursive space. Jonson’s political awareness is to be found in the clash of two individuals within a couple in conflict on stage: the problematic re-reading of The Alchemist and Volpone places Jonson’s ideology at the centre of the most crucial literary conflicts as well as socioeconomic anxieties of the Elizabethan age.
“C’è poi una terza ragione [...] per cui l’inganno è un atto aggressivo: perché approfitta della buona fede dell’Ingannato e gli fa fare ‘la figura dello stupido’. Ma perché l’ingannato che ‘ci casca’ fa la figura dello stupido? Perché come lo stupido non capisce, non si accorge di qualcosa che per lui è rilevante, e sbaglia (‘cade’) perché non capisce. L’inganno dunque è un atto aggressivo anche perché compromette un altro importante scopo dell’Ingannato, il suo scopo dell’immagine; lo rende oggetto di derisione” (Castelfranchi 65).

“The king wears a nightcap instead of a crown; the courtiers wish him, not long life, but immediate death; the most favoured suitors are chosen for their exceptional avarice and stupidity; the court masque is a freak show in praise of folly” (Womack 73).

Within the group of dupes, which may be judged as hypocritical and morally wanting as the knaves, two characters stand out as more detached observers and expositors of the fraud. Of these Surly, in The Alchemist, is outwitted by the knaves while Bonario in Volpone is condemned by the Avocatori and is only rehabilitated by Volpone’s act of self-discovery. The knaves’ communicative abilities prove to be much more powerful and threatening than their naïve opponents’, even if supported by personal integrity.
Opere citate, Works Cited

Zitierte Literatur


Dynes, W. “The Trickster- Figure in Jacobean City Comedy”. Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 33 (1993): 365-384.


