

Cognitive Linguistics and Characterization in Euripides' *Electra*

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My interest in cognitive approaches began when I was a DPhil student in Oxford. My dissertation dealt with Euripides' play *Electra*, and more specifically with how the characterization of that play's characters is shaped by their use of language. I was inspired by the ways in which such issues were studied in the field that calls itself Stylistics, and I got hooked particularly when I read Jonathan Culpeper's *Language and Characterisation: People in Plays and Other Texts* (Culpeper 2001). That book helped me to fine-tune my ideas about how language contributes to characterization in various ways, but it was the cognitive model which Culpeper formulates in his introduction (and in other publications) that really steered me towards thinking about how the cognitive sciences might help us understand what goes on in literary characterization.

In my view, insights from the cognitive sciences can be helpful for that enterprise in two ways. First, they might help us get to grips with how the interpretation of characters actually works, that is, with what goes on in our brains and bodies when we meet characters in literature, drama, or film. An eclectic variety of 'cognitive' (broadly conceived) subdisciplines may shed light on such questions: cognitive linguistic models of discourse processing can elucidate how we dynamically form and adjust models of characters on the basis of textual cues; psychological theories of attribution and the literature on mindreading can provide insight on how we attribute beliefs, motives, and other mental states to characters; embodied and enactive theories of interpersonal interaction offer a different perspective on how we understand characters through our own physical and emotional ways of engaging with the world around us. The [special issue of *Biblical Interpretation*](#) edited by *Diegesis in Mind*'s project leaders (Rüggemeier & Shively 2021) offers a sampling of some of these approaches (and, indeed, of [my own views](#), which I also lay out more fully in a contribution to [a volume on Greek tragedy](#) due to appear later this year).

The second (not unrelated, but differently oriented) way in which cognitive approaches can help us understand issues of literary character is as a 'lens' through which to look at the characterization of individual figures in literature (and drama, tv, film, etc.). This is not so much a matter of *thinking about* character interpretation and how it works, as it is one of *doing* character interpretation using ideas from the cognitive sciences. Examples of this approach could be the careful analysis of how characters in a text or play demonstrate an understanding (or lack thereof) of themselves and each other – that is, mindreading by characters – and what this tells us about the workings of their minds; or the use of cognitive linguistics to isolate specific patterns in the language of an individual character and so get at the (fictional) minds behind those patterns.

That last approach, a cognitive linguistic analysis of patterns in a character's language, is one I have recently used myself. I was invited to revisit the character with which it all started for me, the protagonist of Euripides' *Electra*, for a [special issue of the journal *Cahiers du Théâtre Antique*](#) on that play and its characters (Mauduit & Saetta Cottone 2022). In my article, I use cognitive linguistics to identify three striking patterns in Electra's language in the play. First, I use the notion of 'construal' (on which see e.g. Croft & Cruse 2004: ch. 3, Langacker 2008: ch. 3) to show that Electra has a very strange way of looking at space in her home city of Argos. Electra has been married off to a poor farmer and lives as an exile in his hut on the city's outskirts. From the way she uses spatial language, however, it becomes clear that she still takes the royal palace (in which she used to live) as her central point of orientation. When Electra mentally scans and configures Argive space, she starts, always, from the palace: she will never say that the palace is far away from her home, but instead she will assert that her house is far away from the palace. An example is the way in which she responds to a stranger's (actually her brother Orestes, but she doesn't know that yet) questions about her living circumstances (verses 246-51):

OR. Why are you living here, so far from the town?

EL. I have come into a marriage, stranger, that is like death.

OR. Ah! I groan for your brother. With which of Mycenae's men?

EL. Not the man to whom my father once expected to marry me.

OR. Tell me, so that I can hear and report it to your brother.

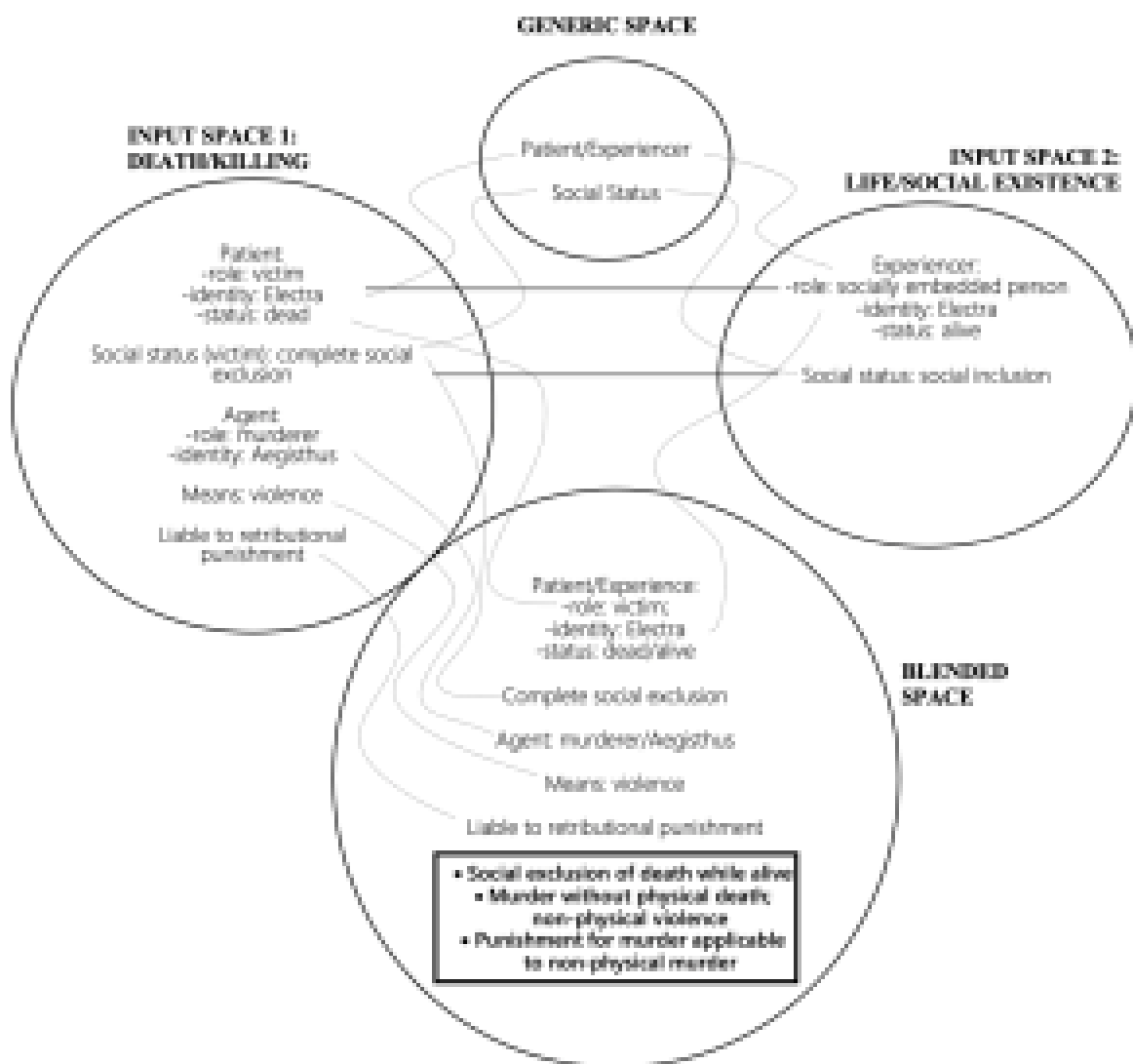
EL. It's in his house that I live here far away.

This may all seem normal enough, but the insistence with which Electra configures her own location as displaced and peripheral throughout the play is striking. Occasionally, she even slips and seems to forget that she doesn't live in the palace anymore, resulting in a few awkward formulations which have puzzled scholars working on the play. In her monody earlier in the play, for instance, Electra sings about her brother's absence (vv. 130-134): 'In what city, what house, unhappy brother, are you a wandering exile, leaving your pitiable sister in her father's halls amidst grievous misfortune.' Commentators have explained away the apparent inconsistency here (Electra is no longer in her father's halls), but I'd like to think that it is a deliberate move by Euripides, who has his protagonist sing as if she never left home.

Secondly, I analyze the ways in which Electra uses negation. A key insight from cognitive linguistics is that negation and related forms necessarily involve mentally activating the positive counterpart of the thing that is negated (see e.g. Langacker 2008: 59, Sweetser 2006, 314). A famous example, often used by George Lakoff, is the command 'Don't think of an elephant!' (e.g. Lakoff 2003) - which we can't do, because to process the command we have to think about an elephant. Electra, for her part, has a knack for talking about everything about her life that *isn't* true: she does *not* live in the palace, she is *not* properly married to her cousin (as was the plan), and is *not* in the company of her brother Orestes (or so she thinks: Orestes is actually onstage to hear most of these complaints). We've already seen an example of this above: in response to a direct question about who her husband is, Electra replies 'Not the man to whom my father once expected to marry me' (v. 269). Later in the same scene, she describes herself as 'missing festive rites, excluded from the chorus, [refusing] women's company ..., [and staying away from] Castor' (vv. 309-313). By constantly evoking the positive counterparts to such negative phrases, Electra's repeated negations reveal an obsession on her part with a thwarted alternative life and underscore the gap between Electra's actual circumstances and the way in which she understands her proper role.

Lastly (though relatedly), Electra several times describes her marriage to the poor farmer as a form of social death, and in one case even as a case of social murder by her mother's lover Aegisthus. The striking phrases she uses to

portray her life this way, ‘a marriage that is like death’ (verse 247) and ‘[Aegisthus] has killed me twice as much as my sister [was killed], while I am alive’ (1092-1093), can well be analyzed using Fauconnier and Turner’s conceptual integration theory or blending (repeatedly discussed in these blog pages). Using blending, we can see more clearly how Electra’s metaphors compress together into a single image several difficult-to-reconcile notions and connotations: life and death, marriage and social exclusion, violent eye-for-an-eye retribution in response to a non-violent treatment. An attempt to visualize some of these dynamics for the second phrase (‘he killed me ... while alive’) in a conceptual integration network is the following image:



It is only in the blended space here that the starkly contrasting notions can co-exist, and it is only by ‘running the blend’ that we can follow Electra’s thinking as it leads to rather grim conclusions, such as that Aegisthus deserves to be killed for the way he has treated her, even though he used no violence. (Those

familiar with the play will appreciate the dark irony in Electra's words here: in fact, Aegisthus is already dead, and his corpse lies hidden in the hut as Electra complains about her treatment to her also-about-to-snuff-it mother).

My three points, of course, capture only some of the many ways in which cognitive linguistics can help us to analyze the individual speaking styles of this and other characters in literature. And more broadly, such cognitive approaches to characterization constitute only a fraction of the numerous ways in which the cognitive sciences can help us both to *understand* and to *do* literary interpretation (in other publications, I have focused on things like visualization, world building in lyric poetry, the emotional structuring of narrative, etc.). But for me, the fact that cognitive approaches have helped me to understand literary characterization better, and to understand individual characters better, will always be the first and best reason why such approaches are worthwhile.

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