Political Obfuscation and Literary Ambiguity
Levelling (up) from Boris Johnson to William Shakespeare

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Abstract In this paper, we are addressing the relationship between ambiguity and obscurity by comparing political with literary use of language. In particular, we are considering contexts in which ambiguity, deriving from underspecification, is strategically used as a device to establish a certain degree of obscurity. We suggest that this strategy is based on an undeclared identification of meanings that are in fact distinct, thus creating false or at least misleading impressions. By contrast, we present literary strategies of ambiguity which also work with combinations of meanings. While the strategies share this combination, they differ vastly in purpose and effect. Our examples are taken from Boris Johnson’s 2021 »Levelling Up«-Speech as well as from poetry and plays by William Shakespeare. Their comparison proves to be particularly fruitful when it comes to conceptualising the ambiguities of »levelling (up)« and their uses in context.

Keywords Obscurity · Underspecification · Strategy · Ambiguity · Political Speech · Literary Texts · Literary Language · Levelling up
Politische Veruineindeutigung und literarische Ambiguität
»Levelling (up)« von Boris Johnson zu William Shakespeare

Zusammenfassung In diesem Beitrag untersuchen wir das Verhältnis von Ambiguität und Verdunkelung anhand des Vergleichs politischen und literarischen Sprachgebrauchs. Wir betrachten dabei insbesondere jene Kontexte, in denen auf Unterspezifikation beruhende Ambiguität strategisch gebraucht wird, um politische Absichten zu verdunkeln. Unserer Auffassung nach basiert diese Strategie auf einer uneingestandenen Identifikation von Bedeutungen, die tatsächlich distinkt sind, woraus falsche oder wenigstens irreführende Eindrücke resultieren. Im Unterschied dazu werden literarische Ambiguitätsstrategien vorgestellt, die ebenfalls mit dem Zusammenspiel von Bedeutungen agieren. Trotz dieser Ähnlichkeit unterscheiden sie sich wesentlich hinsichtlich ihres Zwecks wie auch Effekts. Unsere Beispiele sind die »Levelling Up«-Rede von Boris Johnson aus dem Jahr 2021 sowie einige Beispiele aus dem Werk William Shakespeares. Dieser Vergleich erweist sich als besonders produktiv hinsichtlich der Konzeptualisierung der Ambiguitäten von »levelling up« und ihrem Gebrauch im jeweiligen Kontext.

Schlüsselwörter Verdunkelung · Unterspezifikation · Strategie · Ambiguität · Politische Rede · Literarische Texte · Literarische Sprache · Levelling up

1 Introduction

In this paper, we are addressing the relationship between ambiguity and obscurity by comparing political with literary use of language. In particular, we are considering contexts in which ambiguity, deriving from underspecification, is strategically used as a device to establish a certain degree of obscurity. In this way, speakers may create the impression of pursuing, for example, definite political aims while in fact not doing so. We suggest that this strategy is based on an undeclared identification of meanings that are actually distinct, thus creating false or at least misleading impressions. By contrast, we present literary strategies of ambiguity which also work with combinations of meanings. As distinct from the political strategies discussed, however, they do not tend to obscure the differences involved but create awareness of them and point to their relationship. What the two strategies have in common is the combination of meanings in one utterance or expression, while they differ in purpose and effect. In order to make our discussion of political and literary uses of ambiguity comparable, we focus on the expression, as well as the concept, of »levelling«, which has the advantage of addressing the issue of (removing) distinctions not only in the manner of using language but also in terms of utterance content. The examples we have chosen to show how »levelling (up)« may serve to obscure or expose meaning, Boris Johnson’s 2021 »Levelling Up«-Speech as well as passages from the works of William Shakespeare, are particularly productive when it comes to the comparison of political speech and literary language. The apparently »strange bedfellows« (Shakespeare, The Tempest 2.2.39) Johnson and Shakespeare help understand how obfuscation and awareness of meaning work on the basis of as well
as interact with ambiguity. As an additional benefit, we hope to offer some insight on the logic of a universal levelling up.

2 Boris Johnson and »Levelling Up«: Political Obfuscation

On July 15, 2021, PM Boris Johnson gave a speech on the »levelling up« policy of his government. The speech was criticized for being »ambiguous«, with Tory backbencher Laura Farris commenting: »It means whatever anyone wants it to mean« (see, e.g., Stewart and Elgot 2021). While ambiguity usually designates at least two distinct meanings, i.e. to the co-existence of two or more denotations that can be clearly assigned (Winter-Froemel 2019, pp. 70–72; Bauer et al. 2010, p. 27), Farris refers to what is defined as underspecification, something that is »indeterminate or unspecified, if it is definitely true or false, but could be made more specific« (Poesio 1996, p. 161n; see Lahrsow 2021; and Pinkal 1996). The very notion of »levelling up« as employed by Johnson entails a rhetorical strategy of obfuscating the line of argument, mainly by creating ambiguous frames of reference. This is similar to but not identical with what Klein calls strategies of concealment (Klein 1998), for while not expressly admitting to ambiguity, Johnson does not even try to evoke the impression that he uses the term in a clear and univocal manner.1 In what follows, we will trace how this obfuscation works and also take into account the historical dimension of the notion of »levelling up«.

»Levelling up« in itself has a fairly straightforward meaning. The first reference in the OED is to Samuel Johnson, as recorded by John Boswell: »1791 J. Boswell Life Johnson anno 1763 I.43 [Johnson:] Sir, your levellers wish to level down as far as themselves; but they cannot bear levelling up to themselves« (OED, »level, v.1«), insinuating the action »to level up, down: to bring up, down to the level of something (expressed or implied)« (3.b.). Which is to say that, historically, »levelling (up or down)« means »making equal«, and levelling, as associated with the Levellers’ movement of the seventeenth century, was a byword for political radicalism.2 While it is therefore unsurprising that Samuel Johnson clearly was against the notion, it may be astonishing that the concept was recently brought up in a positive sense in the Conservative Party by the former MP for Putney, Justine Greening, who used the term in 2014 »while attempting to explain the concept of »social mobility« to her mother« (Greening 2021; see also Newman 2021, p. 313). She took it up again in a speech following the securing of her seat in the 2015 General Election3 as

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1 In that respect, we both add to and specify Klein’s (1998) criteria.

2 For the historical identification of levelling with taking away property and privileges, see e.g. »A manifestation from Lieutenant-Colonel John Lilburne, Mr William Walwyn, Mr Thomas Prince, and Mr Richard Overton (now prisoners in the Tower of London), and others, commonly (though unjustly) styled Levellers«: »First then, it will be requisite that we express ourselves concerning levelling – for which we suppose is commonly meant an equality of men’s estates, and taking away the proper right and title that every man has to what is his own.« (Sharp 1998, p. 161). On the history of Levellers, see e.g. Hill (1972), Foxley (2013), and Rees (2016).

3 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Levelling_up_policy_of_the_Boris_Johnson_government; »It also means that I’ll work hard on the policies that matter to me as national priorities on equality of opportunity,
well as during her term as Education Secretary. In 2019, the notion of »levelling up« then made its way into the Conservative Party’s manifesto for the General Election of that year, including the statement that the government »will use this investment [the public sector net investment] prudently and strategically to level up every part of the United Kingdom, while strengthening the ties that bind it together« (Conservative Party 2019, p. 7). Here we see first indications of strategic ambiguity: a term traditionally associated with a radical agenda is used in a conservative context. While Greening defines »levelling up« as part of social mobility, the term becomes more and more underspecified as it is used in the manifesto: »Boris Johnson has set out an agenda for levelling up every part of the UK« (p. 26; emphasis in original). The manifesto goes on to define »levelling up« as not just investing in our great towns and cities, as well as rural and coastal areas, but giving them far more control of how that investment is made. In the 21st century, we need to get away from the idea that »Whitehall knows best« and that all growth must inevitably start in London. Because we as Conservatives believe you can and must trust people and communities to make the decisions that are right for them. (p. 26)

The manifesto thus appears to specify what »levelling up« means: local investment. The kind of investment still remains unspecified, but a topographical frame of reference seems clear. Since the levelling up is to happen in »every part of the UK«, however, the specification is undermined by a contradiction: As the notion of levelling implies establishing equality, it cannot be realized by investing everywhere. The only way out of this contradiction would be to leave »part« sufficiently unspecified, but the emphasis on decentralized decision-making prevents such a redeeming interpretation. The tension between a comprehensive levelling up and the equality implied in the term is not only to be noticed as regards topography but also, as we shall see, as regards further frames of reference: to whom does it refer, and to what exactly does it refer? One way of hiding these tensions and contradictions is not to describe those frames in detail, and not to translate »levelling up« into specific actions.

2.1 Equivocation as Rhetorical Strategy

The phrase »levelling up« is among the most frequently used terms in the speech (with 16 mentions), only topped by »country« (25), »people« (18) and »new« (17). »Levelling down« is used only once (see below), while »levelling up« reoccurs on social mobility, on making sure we have a levelled up Britain where everyone can achieve their potential wherever they start, wherever they’re born« (South West Londoner 2015).

See Neame (2021); and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Levelling_up_policy_of_the_Boris_Johnson_government.

Johnson’s speech was published in written form on the basis of his oral performance (https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-prime-ministers-levelling-up-speech-15-july-2021). A quick analysis with the help of Voyant shows that the speech has 4,237 unique word forms with an average 59.7 words per sentence (which is rather long; in Jane Austen’s Emma, for instance, the average sentence length is 19.6). Johnson is hence using rather long sentences, which makes it comparatively hard to follow.
The individual uses are vastly underspecified. While the strategic use(s) of ambiguity in political contexts have been widely recognized as a means of ensuring consensual action, Johnson’s speech does not seem especially suited to achieve this, as it remains unclear which action is to be taken at all. In his speech, Johnson sets out to explain why he thinks that levelling up is needed and begins with an example from his time as mayor of London:

[...] the inequalities were so acute that when I became mayor in 2008 you could travel from Westminster to Canning Town on the jubilee line and lose a year of life expectancy with every stop and yet at the end of my time as mayor that was no longer true – life expectancy had increased across the capital – but the gains had been greatest among the poorest groups and that is what I mean by levelling up.

The increase of life expectancy as one meaning of »levelling up« can be regarded as an attempt at addressing the contradiction between »levelling« and »every part«: a general rise goes together with a relatively greater rise in some parts.

There is much more to do in London, and there are still huge inequalities – but deprivation levels have been dramatically reduced and let us be clear about the difference between this project and levelling down. We don’t want to level down. We don’t want to decapitate the tall poppies, we don’t think you can make the poor parts of the country richer by making the rich parts poorer and you can’t hope to stimulate growth around the country by actually constraining companies from developing as the Labour government did in the 1960s, with the ludicrous industrial development certificates.

His usage of adjectives and adverbs that convey subjective evaluations is noteworthy: »dramatically« and »ludicrous« foreground his own achievements and assess earlier failures. The anaphoric repetition »We don’t« contributes to the overall strategy of underspecification: it could mean the government but it could also express a common ground between him and his audience and is hence inclusive. The same applies to cultural reference: He makes an allusion to Livy and Tarquinius Superbus
when speaking of »tall poppies«\(^8\) while at the same time employing a metaphor easily understandable by everyone. Thus, the inclusion goes (at least) two ways: he implicitly reassures the rich to protect them from paying more taxes while, at the same time, reassuring the poor that »growth« will be »stimulated«; with regard to both groups of his audience, the strategies behind these aims are left unmentioned.\(^9\) He continues to also explain the difference between his own political agenda of levelling up and the notion of levelling down. But while affirming that he wishes to »be clear about« this difference, it turns out that he is not as he never explains it. Instead, he subtly shifts the frame of reference from the »tall poppies« not to be decapitated to »companies« not to be restrained from developing and thus mixes up individual wealth with economic growth. This mixing up goes together with the rhetorical strategy of mentioning dimensions of »levelling up« without linking them to concrete actions:

\[
\text{...} \\
\text{Levelling up can only be achieved with a strong and dynamic wealth creating economy.} \\
\text{And so the process of levelling up is not just aimed at creating opportunity throughout the UK, it is about relieving the pressure in the parts that are overheating and to those who seriously worry that levelling up could in some way be to the detriment of London and the south east [...]} \\
\text{and so levelling up is not a jam-spreading operation, it’s not robbing Peter to pay Paul, its not zero sum it’s win win for the whole United Kingdom and so here is the plan for levelling up. And I believe we will have made progress in levelling up when we have begun to raise living standards, spread opportunity, improved our public services and restored people’s sense of pride in their community.}
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There is little to disagree about when his claim is that »a strong and dynamic wealth creating economy« is needed as much as »creating opportunity« – but the statements continue to be void of any specification that could involve potentially conflicting actions. At the same time, he suggests clarity by embedding this line of argument in a contrast of what »is not« and what »it is«; similarly, the colloquial metaphors in the latter part of the passage signal plain speaking. They tie in with Johnson’s earlier inclusive »we« by which, however, he may cover and address quite diverse groups of hearers.\(^10\) The range of possible references is wide: »a strong

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\(^8\) See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tall_poppy_syndrome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tall_poppy_syndrome).

\(^9\) His rhetorical strategy can be linked to Goffman’s different groups of hearers and their »roles« (see Goffman 1981; Winter-Froemel 2016, p. 13). Johnson accordingly works with different »audience designs«, according to sociolinguistic studies, for instance, by Bell (1984); see also Clark and Murphy (1982). See also Goffman 1971 on »Strategic Interaction.« Knape notes more generally: »In normal \textit{lebenswelt} communicative frames, text makers (i.e. every one of us) occasionally utilize strategic ambiguity for rhetorical reasons (for instance, to create doubt in a court of law)« (Knape 2021, p. 389).

\(^10\) Bruhn notes similar phenomena as a means to »indicate a plurality of incongruent positions engaged by the rhetor« (Bruhn 2019, p. 22). – Bull (2008) refers to Bavelas et al. (1990, p. 34) and the four dimensions of equivocation they identified, »sender, context, receiver, and context« (Bull 2008, p. 334); he states: »Content refers to comprehensibility, an unclear statement being considered more equivocal« (334). Johnson even goes beyond this in making clear statements that, however, can be attributed to different frames of reference.
and dynamic wealth creating economy« may include a higher level of income as much as effects on education, housing, the job market ... He moreover mentions »pride in the[] community«, which implies patriotic feeling11 – everyone should feel elated after listening to the speech. The strategy is indeed »noncommittal« (Bull 2008, p. 333): by leaving explicit references aside, he can, if necessary, easily deny having made commitments in specific areas that audience groups might identify in his speech. Which is to say: he pursues a rhetorical strategy that convinces both the privileged that there will be no disadvantages (no »levelling down«) and the underprivileged that there will be hope for improvements. The underlying content-based strategy is that he evokes different frames of reference (see Goffman 1974; Winter-Froemel 2016) in mixing material and immaterial goods, i.e. living standards that include wages and infrastructure as much as knowledge and education, together with devolution and community spirit. What is left unmentioned is that material goods work differently: while knowledge, for example, can be equally distributed, without anyone’s loss, this is hardly possible when it comes to the tax burden.

2.2 Historical Dimensions

In his paper on the »Ambiguous Ideology of Levelling Up«, Jack Newman takes issue with Johnson’s rhetorical strategy as it »invokes a wide range of disparate political ideologies without addressing the underlying tensions between them« (Newman 2021, p. 312). He also refers to the historical dimension of the notion of »levelling up« and the appearance in Hansard records of parliamentary speeches »since the nineteenth century« (Newman 2021, p. 313; the archive goes back to Jan 1, 1800). He notes the »association with social policy, and particularly with the distribution of school funding« (p. 313),12 taken up again »during the New Labour era, when the use of the term increased sharply« (p. 313). Indeed, a quantitative analysis in Hansard shows that the term »levelling up« was used 6,684 times since the beginnings of the archive, with 524 mentions between January 1800 and January 1940.13 But Newman’s claim is somewhat inaccurate (albeit it certainly fits his overall line

11 The rhetorical strategy uncomfortably evokes the equally underspecified and potentially ambiguous slogan »Make America Great Again« in the electoral campaign by Donald Trump in 2016 (who drew on earlier usages – as does Johnson, see below – e.g. by Ronald Reagan but also both Bill and Hillary Clinton); see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Make_America_Great_Again.

12 Newman does not mention that the notion also played a role in religious conflicts between the Churches of England and of Ireland; cf. the debate in the Commons Chamber on Thursday 30 April 1868 (vol. 191) by Lord Elcho, continued on Friday 26 June 1868 (vol. 193) by the Earl of Carnarvon in the Lords Chamber: »He [the Earl of Mayo] went on further to say that it was desirable to promote the cause of religious equality, and with that view he proposed a process of ›levelling up‹. Now, the interpretation which was placed on those promises was certainly not such as to satisfy either party. Both were discontented. [...] The Roman Catholic University was abandoned; religious equality was explained by the Prime Minister himself to mean simply that religious position and status in the eye of the law which is enjoyed by every religious denomination not only in Ireland but in England; and the process of ›levelling up‹ was reduced to this, that the status, or the salary, or the position – I know not what – of the Roman Catholic complains [sic] of prisons and workhouses in Ireland was to be improved« (col. 7–8; www.hansard.parliament.uk). See also the Commons debate on Thursday 15 April 1869 by Sir Hervey Bruce (vol. 195, col. 910ff.).

13 According to www.english-corpora.org/hansard, the corpus of parliamentary speeches created as part of the SAMUELS project (2014-2016) and funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council,
of argument): The term »levelling up« was used 1.189 times in the postwar period until May 2015; between January 1990 and May 2015, the number of uses was to 506, which does not necessarily express a »sharp« increase. The real increase sets in with the 2015 General Election: since then, the term has been mentioned 4.932 times (until March 2022), with 4.785 since the publication of the Conservative party manifesto in November 2019 (see Fig. 1).14 Even though the number cannot be clearly related to the number of tokens, the increase is significant in comparison to other terms that are used in the same political area, such as »equality«. 15

The increase in frequency reflects the loss of specific meaning. In the party manifesto, the slogan was being »repurposed [...] as a general approach to post-Brexit renewal, in which they [the Conservatives] sought to address place-based inequalities« (Newman 2021, p. 314). Newman goes on to note: »Their post-Brexit vision of levelling up emerged with three key aspects: firstly, the existing notion of equality of opportunity through education; secondly, an agenda to improve infrastructure and connectivity in regions with low productivity; and thirdly, a commitment to devolving powers to the English regions« (p. 314). In his 2021 speech in the context of the Covid crisis in the UK, Boris Johnson pursued an even more leftist approach. Overall, this appears to be part of the more general strategy of the Conservative party to win left-wing voters.16 The underspecification in the 2021 speech was widely noted, e.g. by Stewart and Elgot in the subheading of their Guardian article: »Experts criticise

14 Even though this is just a figure of absolute rather than relative frequency, and is therefore of limited use, we still think that that the ubiquitousness of the term is significant.
15 Between Nov 1, 2019 and March 21, 2022, the term is used 2.699 times; in the reference period from Jan 1800 to May 2015, 32.124 mentions are documented, between January 1990 and May 2015 14.118.
16 One is quite struck by the final image in the 2019 manifesto which depicts a group of (exclusively male) workers in overalls with a placard »We love Boris« (2019, p. 64). – See also Newman on the manifesto as
lack of new policy while Tory MPs fear agenda may be little more than ambiguous phrase. «17 At the end of the day, Johnson’s speech was ambiguous as he created the impression of pursuing a particular political aim while using the underspecified expression »levelling up« in different and even mutually exclusive ways, as it »can be said to contain at least four ideological strands: social liberalism; social democracy; economic liberalism; and one nation conservatism« (Newman 2021, p. 317); and yet (or because of this?), his rhetorical strategy turned out to be overall successful: »Rather than dismissing levelling up as an empty election slogan, media outlets and think tanks have engaged in widespread discussion about what it is and how it should be delivered« (Newman 2021, p. 316). This means that, in fact, Johnson’s failure in not pursuing a concrete action but leaving a variety of referential frames open proved to be effective in instigating a number of initiatives: »The ideological ambiguity of levelling up is precisely why it has been so successful as a political slogan; it acts as an expansive container for disparate policies and priorities without the need to address the tensions between them« (Newman 2021, p. 316–317). This strategy of using »expansive container[s]« has, in various contexts, been linked to »positive face« (Bull 2008, p. 341; see Goffman 1967), i.e. to »present[ing] a positive image both for himself and the party« (Bull 2008, p. 341). Obfuscation hence is a means to reach out to a range of possible groups of audiences while remaining non-committal and ostensibly committed at the same time.

3 Ambiguous Levelling in Shakespeare

We have noted that »levelling (up)« has been applied ambiguously in order to obscure its meaning and political function. This is neither the fault of the term nor of ambiguity as such. The point is that the same terms and techniques can be used pragmatically to obscure and to clarify. This can be seen by comparing Johnson’s use of the term to that in the works of a master of rhetoric, political and otherwise (see Müller 2019). Shakespeare repeatedly uses the word and concept of level(ling) and makes us see the ambiguities involved. His literary usage is not primarily or directly political – such a usage was only to gather momentum in the seventeenth century in the wake of the levellers’ movement – but nevertheless has social and moral implications. Recently, Shakespeare’s view of equality (Ryan 2021) and even »communism« (Holbrook 2021) has been of critical interest, with a strong emphasis on disillusionment when it comes to social reality. Timon of Athens may not be the author’s general spokesperson but what he says when he is in exile in the woods, »There’s nothing level in our cursed natures/But direct villainy« (4.3.19–20), is

»an all-embracing mantra in its [the government’s] attempt to pull together a divided electoral coalition« (2021, p. 312).

17 They go on in the first paragraph: »Boris Johnson’s flagship ›levelling up‹ speech has been criticised by experts for containing scant new policy as concern grows among Conservative MPs that the guiding principle of his premiership risks becoming little more than a soundbite.«.

18 Bull’s reference is to Tony Blair’s usage of »modernization« in the 1997 General Election campaign of the Labour Party (2008, p. 341) which can be compared to Johnson’s »levelling up« in rather many respects.
expressive of a cynical vision of levelling down that can be found elsewhere in the Shakespeare canon. In Sonnet 121, for example, the speaker defends himself against false allegations of being »vile« (l. 1), concluding that this defence does no longer make sense if »All men are bad, and in their badness reign« (l. 14). Up until this point, he insists on difference. Those who »level« (in the sense of »aim«) at his abuses only »reckon up their own« (ll. 9–10); his being »straight« is contrasted with their being »bevel« (the word for »A common joiner’s and mason’s tool, consisting of a flat rule with a movable tongue«). In spite of his sarcasm, Shakespeare’s speaker asserts differences, insists on not obscuring moral distinctions by indiscriminate speech.

Implicitly, Shakespeare presents an alternative model of dealing with ambiguity: not as the evocation of identity where there is none (achieved by underspecification) but as a means of perceiving relations. Some of his most intriguing cases of »levelling« ambiguity are loving relationships in which there is a marked difference between the two partners.

A case in point is Shakespeare’s comedy Twelfth Night in which the female protagonist, Viola, falls in love with the Duke Orsino, into whose service she has entered, disguised as a young man under the name of Caesario, after being shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria. Between the two, there is a discrepancy of age, social rank, and gender (in this case, the problem being that Caesario is apparently a man). In a dialogue full of dramatic irony, Viola talks to Orsino about her love, without, of course, lifting the veil from her true state of affections. Orsino asks Viola/Caesario what the person is like s/he loves, what age this person is, etc. »About your years, my Lord«, is Viola’s answer (2.4.28), upon which Orsino replies:

ORSINO
Too old, by heaven. Let still the woman take
An elder than herself; so wears she to him,
So sways she level in her husband’s heart.
For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,
Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,
Than women’s are.

Orsino’s words seem paradoxical: Caesario is to choose someone who is younger than himself because in this way a levelling is achieved. The dramatic irony of course consists in the fact that Viola, the woman, is younger than Orsino, and he thus unwittingly confirms the appropriateness of their relationship. But what exactly do Orsino’s words mean? They appear paradoxical: in terms of age, Orsino recommends a discrepancy because in this way (»so«) the woman, being younger, »sways [...] level in her husband’s heart«. In other words, they are to be different

19 OED »level, v.1« II.7.–8.

20 OED »bevel, n.1« B.1. The OED cites Shakespeare’s sonnets as the first example of »bevel« A. adj. 2., defining it as »Oblique; exp. at more than a right angle; sloping, slant, inclined from a right angle, or from a horizontal or vertical position.« In the context of »level«, however (another carpenter’s tool), the evocation of a tool with a »moveable tongue« as an image of defamation seems plausible.
because in this way they are equals. If we assume a consistent, unambiguous frame of reference for »level«, this does not make sense. In the age frame of reference, levelling (as a process of adaptation) can never be achieved, even though one may assume that age difference becomes less marked as both grow older. Still, if Orsino’s statements are to make sense, we must look for other, implied, frames of reference. We are called upon to do so since there is clearly a dynamic in what Orsino talks about: »So sways she level« indicates a process, just as the parallel construction »so wears she to him« does.

Orsino himself introduces a second frame of reference for the levelling of husband and wife after his mysterious utterance. He gives a reason (»For ...«) explaining his recommendation, which is an imbalance between men and women in the field of »fancies«. Orsino, who thinks he talks to another man, maintains that male fancies are inconstant, »more giddy and unfirm« than women’s; the context suggests that »fancies« are wishes and desires (»longing«), which are »wavering« (33–34). In the psychological and moral frame of constancy, women are in a more elevated position than men. As distinct from age, this frame of reference allows levelling in both directions. The combination of the two frames of reference now makes it possible to explain Orsino’s earlier statement, according to which the younger woman »sways [...] level in her husband’s heart«. Orsino implicitly adds up the two relative positions, according to which the woman is lower in one respect (age)21 but higher in another (constancy); this results in a process in which she »sways [...] level in her husband’s heart«. Thus, while the age difference cannot be levelled up or down in itself, it may do so in combination with a moral difference.

The ambiguity of »sways« contributes to the description of the process, as it may either refer to the woman’s movement (OED »sway, v.« 1.–7.) or to her power and influence (OED »sway, v.« 8.–12.). As to the former, the relevant definitions by the OED (†1.b. and 4.) indicate going to one side or downwards,22 but as »level« implies a vertical movement, it must mean that the woman steps down to the man she loves. This down-stepping is also implied in the statement »so wears she to him«, which at first (without the moral explanation) seems to suggest her impossibly growing older while he stays the same. In the light of her superior constancy, the statement connects with Orsino’s observation that men’s fancies are »sooner lost and worn« than women’s. In a moral frame of reference, the woman’s wearing to a man is the very opposite of her fancy being soon worn; she can step down to him because of her superior quality (and, presumably, find adapting to him easier both because of her youth and her moral firmness). As to the latter, the meaning of »sways [...] level in her husband’s heart« could be paraphrased as »rules equal«; this happens »in her husband’s heart« since, externally, differences will remain.23 Thus a certain

21 Conceptualizations of age as an ascent followed by a descent were common in the Renaissance; a well-known expression of this vertical movement is Othello’s self-doubt; he thinks Desdemona may be unfaithful because of his downward journey, »for I am declined / Into the vale of years« (3.3.269–70).
22 The line from Twelfth Night is quoted by the OED under »4.†b. transferred. To have a certain direction in movement; to move. Obsolete.«.
23 The equality expressed by »level« is confirmed by the OED definition (3.†c.) and example of the noun: »to hold its level with: to be on an equality with. Obsolete. 1598 W. Shakespeare Henry IV, Pt. I iii. ii. 17 Could such inordinate and low desires..hold their leuell with thy prinvely heart?«.
tension remains: equality is achieved by a conjunction of what is logically disjunct, the age frame and the constancy frame of reference of »level«. Orsino’s words are an example of the poetic use of »level«; it is specified in two different ways which are placed into a relationship with each other that allows us to infer a complex but clear statement about age, gender, as well as psychological and moral propensities.24

A similar complex of references is evoked when the word and concept of »level« comes up in *Othello*. In Act 1, when Othello is about to leave for the »war against the Ottomites« (1.3.235), he asks for an appropriate »accommodation and besort« for his wife Desdemona, »As levels with her breeding« (1.3.239–240). This insistence on a high level of comfort and attention is motivated by the context in which Othello is accused by Desdemona’s father Brabantio of bewitching or drugging her into accepting him as her husband (1.3.93–95, 104–107). For Brabantio, Othello is below her on so many levels at once (he claims a disparity »of nature,/Of years, of country, credit, everything«) that it is impossible she fell in love with him. The Duke tries to help them up into Brabantio’s favour, offering the »grise or step« (1.3.201) of proverbial wisdom. This frame of personal and social evaluation based on a commonplace notion of »nature« is contrasted immediately afterwards with that of military prowess, in which Othello ranks highly. The latter overrules the former, since to grin and bear it will be possible as long as family matters are concerned, but not when Cyprus will be lost to »the Turk« (1.3.211).

It is Desdemona, however, who explicitly reframes the issue of levelling. What her father regarded as a levelling down, she declares to be a levelling up. She actually inverts the levels when she says: »My heart’s subdued/Even to the very quality of my lord« (1.3.251–252). Desdemona, in her own view, submits to Othello’s higher quality, which is to be noticed in his mind and soul (rather than, by implication, his external appearance): »And to his honours and his valiant parts/Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate« (1.3.254–255). She perceives him to be above her and evokes a moral and religious frame to express their relative vertical positions and her desire to ascend to him. What her father and Othello perceive as her superior social and ethnic level, is replaced by her own evaluation in which the relationship is reversed. Othello’s tragedy consists in his inability to believe Desdemona’s conviction to be true. In *Othello*, we again see different kinds of level and levelling combined; Desdemona’s conviction that the one (honour, virtue, »quality«) may cancel out the other (social standing based on descent) proves impossible for the male protagonist.

A third famous Shakespearean loving couple reflecting on different frames of reference for »level« are Antony and Cleopatra. In this case, the notion of death as a leveller25 is evoked by Cleopatra when Antony has killed himself. After he

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24 As the dialogue between Orsino and Viola/ Caesario goes on, the gendered age-frame is supplemented by references to a woman’s beauty and »perfection« (2.4.41). Orsino’s argument here seems to be that the ascent and decline of a woman’s beauty requires her to be younger than the man in order to »hold the bent« (2.4.35) of his affection. This introduces yet another frame of reference, beauty, to the negotiation of levels, and it marks Orsino’s preoccupation with his own (male) perspective.

25 The classical commonplace is summed up by Samuel Johnson in one of his *Idler* essays (no. 32, 25 November 1758): »Philosophy has often attempted to repress insolence by asserting that all conditions are levelled by death; a position which, however it may deject the happy, will seldom afford much comfort to the wretched.« (Johnson 1963, p. 99).
has fallen on his sword, Antony is lifted up to the monument where she dwells, thus making the notion of levelling up ironically visible to the audience. Cleopatra realizes that »heav[ing] Antony aloft« (4.15.38 stage direction) is not a moral and spiritual elevation at all:

O withered is the garland of the war,
The soldier’s pole is fallen; young boys and girls
Are level now with men; the odds is gone
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon. (4.15.66–70)

Anthony’s death has levelled everything. To Cleopatra, however, this levelling effect of death lies not so much in the fact that with a person’s death their social and personal distinction is evened out (»yet death we fear/That makes these odds all even«, as the Duke in Measure for Measure has it; 3.1.40–41). She rather claims that the measure of distinction itself is gone since Antony, the standard, has died. The reference to the age frame of »level« marks the event as a disruption of nature itself: While it is impossible that »young boys and girls« are on the same level as »men«, this has become true now when Antony’s death has erased the very concept of different levels: »All’s but naught« (4.15.82). Cleopatra herself has experienced a levelling down by Antony’s death; now she feels she is »No more but e’en a woman, and commanded/By such poor passion as the maid that milks/And does the meanest chares.« (4.15.77–79). This levelling down is the consequence of the gods having »stolen our jewel« (4.15.82); before that, there had been an equally radical levelling up in her union with Antony: »this world did equal theirs«, the gods’ (4.15.81). In Antony and Cleopatra, there is thus no balancing of one frame of reference with another; the divine, utopian levelling up of the loving couple is replaced with universal loss. These two kinds of total levelling, up and down, which lead to the extinction of all differences, are juxtaposed with each other by Cleopatra. As a rhetorical strategy employed by her, she thus speaks of »level[ling]« not to obscure intentions by underspecification but to emphasize the effect of Antony’s death and contrast it with the equally superlative elevation of the human world when he was alive. Her purpose is not to hide but to stress the fact that the two kinds of levelling are mutually exclusive.

26 Wilders, in the Arden edition of Antony and Cleopatra, suggests that »pole« is used in the sense of »measuring rod« (OED sb¹ 3): »the standard by which soldiering was measured has collapsed« (Shakespeare 1995, p. 268, note on 4.1.67). This evokes Antony’s earlier reference to two carpenter’s measures when talking to Octavia: »I have not kept my square, but that to come / Shall all be done by th’ rule« (2.3.6–7). Accordingly, there is dramatic irony in Cleopatra’s reference to a measuring rod and her echoing the name of yet another carpenter’s measure, the level, in her lament that »young boys and girls / Are level now with men.« On the metaphorical and symbolic use of the various measuring instruments, see Blank (2006), especially ch. 5, »The Lesbian Rule of Measure for Measure«.
4 Conclusion

The comparison of the seemingly incommensurable examples of Boris Johnson and William Shakespeare helps us understand both Johnson’s strategy of obfuscation and Shakespeare’s elucidating strategy of ambiguity. In our examples, we have seen a fundamental difference between the non-literary and literary uses of levelling. Shakespeare’s adoption of the term and the technique is representative of literary strategies that do not primarily use language for purposes of political persuasion but use examples of persuasion for purposes of reflecting on language and rhetoric. In that way the comparison, by referring to individual cases in point, is indicative of more general tendencies relating to literary and non-literary language use. Such tendencies become manifest in examples from the Shakespeare canon, with the potential ambiguity resulting from a lack of specification that is not strategically hidden but strategically exposed. Especially when it comes to levelling up, the meeting on a higher level, conflicts and discrepancies between different frames of reference, including material and immaterial kinds of ascent, are not obscured, as in the »Levelling Up«-speech and much of its political context, but made visible. Much of the difference has to do with the fact that literary uses of ambiguity are fictional, which implies that there are at least two levels or kinds of communication, the one between the fictional characters and the other by means of them. In this way, ambiguity is never just a feature of utterances but a feature that we, the readers, as our examples have shown, are meant to reflect upon.

Levelling up, in the fictional world of Shakespeare’s plays, is presented in matters of love as a balancing of different frames of reference: the age of the one lover and the constancy of the other will meet on the same level (in Twelfth Night), as will the perceived imbalance of physical and social levels (in Othello) be overcome by levelling up in terms of virtue and quality of the soul – or so it seems, before the tragedy unfolds of Othello’s lack of belief in this kind of levelling up. It seems then that the comedy of love is the only place where the levelling up of everyone truly exists, in a fictional and perhaps even fantastic manner, but nevertheless as a way of showing how the ambiguity of levelling may be dealt with.

At the same time, Shakespeare was not unaware of the social and political (ab)use of imagining a general levelling up to camouflage partial interest. Jonathan Baldo (1993), in his discussion of Timon of Athens, identifies two early modern concepts of levelling, a republican and egalitarian one, regularly viewed with scepticism and fear, and a representative one, based on degree, in which the sovereign is regarded as incorporating the whole commonwealth. He then goes on to show that in Timon of Athens these two kinds of levelling are confounded (p. 564). One of his examples is provided by the character of the Poet, who proudly presents to the Painter his vision of the hill of Fortune:

27 The homecoming to Belmont (the name indicating elevation) at the end of The Merchant of Venice is an example; cf. Leimberg (2011), p. 94–95.
28 He quotes (p. 562) from Sir Thomas Elyot’s The Boke Named the Gouernour (1531, p. Aii): »if there shuld be a commune weale, either the communers only must be welthy, and the gentil and noble men nedy and miserable, or els excluding gentilite, al men must be of one degre and sort, and a new name prouided.«
POET
Sir, I have upon a high and pleasant hill
Feigned Fortune to be throned. The base o’th’ mount
Is ranked with all deserts, all kind of natures
That labour on the bosom of this sphere
To propagate their states. Amongst them all
Whose eyes are on this sovereign Lady fixed,
One do I personate of Lord Timon’s frame,
Whom Fortune with her ivory hand wafts to her,
Whose present grace to present slaves and servants
Translates his rivals. (1.1.65–74)

The image is one of equality on a low level beneath Fortune’s hill, where everyone desires social rise but only one (Lord Timon) is elevated. As a result, everyone strives for a levelling up in order to be once more his equal; they »laboured after him to the mountain’s top« (1.1.88) – and promptly »let him slip down« (1.1.89) once he is spurned by Fortune. The double communication of drama provides us with a doubly critical perspective on levelling up: in his words to the Painter, the Poet presents the vision of universal ascent as governed by Fortune’s arbitrariness. And taken together with the Painter’s reply, we see that the Poet’s allegorical image is not without self-interest, as the Painter regards it as expressive of the »condition« of the two artists (1.1.79; cf. Baldo 1993, p. 571).

Thus Shakespeare unmasks the Poet’s praising the policy of levelling up introduced by the good fortune of a public man, Timon, as a strategic device of promoting his own interest, preparing the ground for the cynical vision of a levelling down to the general human nature of villainy. In this way, Shakespeare satirizes those members of his profession who hide their personal ambition under the veil of a supposedly impersonal truth of fiction. At the same time, the play is an example of such a fictional uncovering of truth. Literature thus helps us see that there are strategic ways of both hiding and using ambiguity by using container terms, that it may be politic to do so but that the ways of resolving the tensions and contradictions thus obscured are rarely to be found outside comedy.

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