

To modernize or not to modernize: there is no question

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I see the question of 'modernizing Shakespeare' has reared its head again – most recently in the last issue of *Around the Globe*. And once again, as in previous debates on this topic, the discussion is being carried on with a remarkable shortage of facts. I believe that once the relevant facts are put on the table, the argument dies away.

The two positions are easy to state: in one corner, there are the modernizers, who take the view that Shakespearean English is largely unintelligible and needs translation to make sense to a modern audience/readership; in the other corner, there are those who deny all this. As someone who writes a regular column in this magazine about Shakespeare's invented words, drawing attention to the differences of meaning between his words and those of today, you'd think I would be on the side of the modernizers. But I'm not.

As I say, it's all a question of fact. Modernizers use examples like 'super-serviceable, finical rogue' (*King Lear*) to make their case; their opponents use examples like 'To be or not to be; that is the question'. To my mind, the question is very simple: how much of Shakespeare's language is like the former, and how much is like the latter? I've been doing some counting.

Let's begin with vocabulary. The fundamental question is: how many *different* words are there in Shakespeare – that is, words which have changed their meaning between Shakespeare's time (Early Modern English, or EME) and now (Modern English, or ME). Notice that the question is one of difference, not difficulty. Shakespeare uses plenty of words which haven't changed their meaning but are still difficult: Classical allusions are a good example. There is no linguistic problem in the sentence which Paris

uses to explain why he has not mentioned his feelings to the grieving Juliet: 'Venus smiles not in a house of tears' (*RJ* 4.1.8), but it makes no sense until you know who Venus is. She turns out to be the same goddess of love today as she was 400 years ago. This is not a matter of language change.

Similarly, Shakespeare gives us plenty of difficult and challenging thoughts, and these remain difficult and challenging today, but there are many cases where this is nothing to do with the language they are expressed in. 'To be or not to be' is the perfect example. It is the rhythmical simplicity of the language that gets it into the quotation books. Difficult thoughts are not a matter of language change, either.

So how many 'different words' are there in Shakespeare? I know the answer to this, because Ben Crystal and I have just spent three years compiling a dictionary of them, *Shakespeare's Words*. We went through all the plays and poems, line by line, and every time we came across a word or phrase which presented even the slightest degree of difference in meaning or use from that found in Modern English, we put it into our database. We also included any 'hard words', even if they had not changed their meaning (such as *damask*). How many did we find?

A technical point, first. What is a word? We included all the variant forms of a word as if they were the same item: so, for example, *take*, *takes*, *taking*, *taken*, and *took* we counted as 'forms of *take*', not as separate words. Using that criterion, there are some 20,000 words in any given edition of the Shakespeare canon (a little more if *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Edward III* are included, which we did in our book). Using the same criterion, we

found just over 3000 of these words presenting some sort of problem because of differences between EME and ME.

Another technical point. This figure of ours ignores the cases where the same word is being used as separate parts of speech. *Counterfeit* is one such word, used as a noun, a verb, and an adjective (as when Rosalind defends her fainting fit to Oliver in *As You Like It* 4.3, or Falstaff explains his apparent death in *1 Henry 4* 5.4). The core meaning is the same ('pretend, pretending, pretence'), regardless of which way the word is used, so we counted this as one problem, not three. (If we had made the opposite decision, our figure would have risen only by about another 500.)

A third technical point. For present purposes, we have to ignore the number of senses that a word contains. Most words in English have more than one sense – as can be seen by glancing at any dictionary: *table*, for example, means a piece of furniture, a diagram in a book, and so on. Some words, such as *take*, have dozens of senses. The same applied in Shakespeare's time. Unfortunately, no-one is in a position to compare the senses of EME with the senses of ME, because no-one has ever worked out just how many senses there are in either state of the language. A dictionary of 100K words probably contains about 250K senses, but I don't know of any precise figures. So we have no alternative, for the present, but to rely on the word-forms themselves.

Now we can look at those 3000 'different words'. They include everything from really difficult words, such as *grise*, *incarnadine*, and *finical*, to words which would hardly give you a second thought, because they are so

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close to modern words, and in some cases continue to be used in special contexts (such as poetry or religion) – such as *morn* and *bedazzle*, and those words where the metre has prompted a variant coinage, such as *vasty* instead of *vast* ('the vasty fields of France'). So the really interesting question is: how many of these different words pose a *true* difficulty of interpretation.

There are two types of candidate. First, there are words which are totally opaque – like *incarnadine*, where no amount of guessing will produce a correct interpretation. Second, there are words which look easy but which are seriously deceptive – the 'false friends' – such as *merely* meaning 'totally' or *ecstasy* meaning 'madness'. Final counts for these are still in progress, as I write, but based on what I've done so far I shall be very surprised if the combined total passes 1000. That's only one in 20.

However, I'm not sure that even this figure is meaningful, because it ignores those cases where a word is intelligible at one level and not at another. Much of the insult-language is like this. When Kent harangues Oswald (*KL* 2.2) as being 'a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue', we

may not know what *finical* is, or several of the other words, but we jolly well know that Kent is not paying Oswald a compliment. The same point applies to modern English. If I call you a 'blithering idiot', you know the strength of my feeling – but if I were to ask you what 'blithering' means, very few people would be able to answer (it literally means 'senselessly talkative'). Tom Deveson made the same point in the last issue with reference to *hurley-burley* (in *Macbeth*). Few people could define this, but as he says, 'we know what it means when we hear it spoken'. At a pragmatic (as opposed to a semantic) level, we do indeed; and the pragmatics mustn't be ignored.

Another example of part-meaning is in a case like Toby Belch's offer to Maria, 'Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip...?' (*Twelfth Night* 2.5.183). We may have no idea what *tray-trip* is (many such Elizabethan practices are shrouded in mystery), but the association (what linguists call the *collocation*) with *play* shows that it must be some kind of game. Collocations provide major clues to meaning – something that translation enthusiasts regularly forget. Translators well know that meaning does not lie only within

a word, but actually comes from an examination of a whole sentence. It is the sentence that, literally 'makes' sense of words. Curiously, this point is often lost sight of when people talk about Shakespeare's 'difficult words'.

I conclude that the case for modernization is supported by only about 5% of Shakespeare's vocabulary. Even if we included all 3000 differences (including the *morn* and *vasty* cases, and the instances like *damask*) we would still reach only 15%. Turn this on its head. Modern English speakers already know 85% or more of Shakespeare's words. Not a very strong case, it seems to me, for a general modernization policy.

The same approach can be applied to other domains of language. How many differences are there between EME and ME grammar? A convenient source for making a rough calculation is G.L.Brook's *The Language of Shakespeare* (1976), in which he conveniently sets out points of difference between EME and ME in numbered paragraphs. He identifies about 250 points in his chapters on syntax and accident. This sounds like a lot, until we reflect on just how many grammatical points there are in English – about 3500 described in the



large grammar compiled by Randolph Quirk and his associates, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985). So only 7% of EME grammar is likely to cause a comprehension problem. The vast majority of the grammatical rules found in Shakespeare are the same then as now.

So, in response to some of the claims made by Susan Bassnett, in the last issue of *Around the Globe*.

- We need to modernize because 'language changes very fast indeed'? No, we don't, because it doesn't. English changed very rapidly between Chaucer's time and Shakespeare's, and the case for translating Chaucer is quite strong. But the period between EME and ME is one of the slow-moving periods of English linguistic change.
- Again, 'the actual language is losing its meaning'? I think not. Over 90% of the English used in Shakespeare's day has not lost its meaning.
- Actors and directors 'have to work with words that neither they nor the audience can fully understand'. True enough, from time to time – the point applies as much to Pinter as to Shakespeare – but not as a rule. And anyway, this begs the question as to whether 'full' understanding is needed before we can wring some sense out of a word. As the 'blithering' type of example indicates, we don't.
- And as for bringing in modern authors such as Heaney or Stoppard to do the job. 'They probably wouldn't have to change every word of Shakespeare's plays, only those parts that don't mean very much any more'. That's certainly true – and it seems to make my case for me. But there are more serious issues here. Disassociating authors from the language they have carefully chosen to use hits deeply at their identity. Language, as Heidegger said, is 'the house of being'. Any analogy with Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* is totally misleading, for that was from a language (Old English) which had very little in common with ME. Translation should only be employed after all other means of achieving comprehension have been explored. It is an invaluable last resort – but a last, not a first resort. If pushed, I am prepared to take one small step in Susan Bassnett's direction. I see no harm in translating those cases where a really difficult word becomes the focus of dramatic attention, and where there would be no poetic loss. 'No, not a grise', says Cesario (aka Viola) to Olivia, talking about pity being akin to love (*Twelfth Night* 3.1.121). Turning grise into 'step, whit, bit', or some such word is something that directors often do anyway, without anyone (bar a few scholars) noticing. I agree that some

of the local jokes in the comedies are beyond us now. But there are very few such cases. And we mustn't forget that often Shakespeare himself does the translating for us: the Duke says to Brabantio, 'Let me... lay a sentence / Which as a grise or step may help these lovers / Into your favour' (*Othello* 1.3.198). No need for Stoppard's help here.

Rather than modernize Shakespeare, all our effort should be devoted to making people more fluent in 'Shakespearean', by devising appropriately graded EME syllabuses and writing carefully graded introductions, phrase books, and other materials – just as one would in the real foreign-language teaching world. All modern English speakers have an immensely powerful start, in that they already know some 90 per cent of the language. That remaining 10 per cent or so is admittedly an impediment, but it should be seen as an opportunity and a challenge to be overcome, not as a barrier to be evaded. The sense of achievement, once the energy has been devoted to the task, is tremendous, and yields a reward which is repeated every time we encounter one of the plays.

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