THE LANGUAGE OF SHAKESPEARE

by DAVID CRYSTAL

ANY encounter with Shakespeare, on page or on stage, presents us with two related linguistic challenges:

- a *semantic* challenge: we have to work out what his language means, if we are to follow the plots, understand the descriptions of people and places, and take in what he (in the poems) or his characters (in the plays) are saying and thinking,

- a *pragmatic* challenge: we have to appreciate the effects that his choice of language conveys, if we are to explain the style in which he or his characters talk, see why other characters react in the way they do, and understand what is happening to our intellect and emotions as we read, watch, or listen to their exchanges.

Most of the time we respond to these challenges with unselfconscious ease, because the language of Shakespeare is the same, or only minimally different, from the language we use today. We need no explanatory linguistic notes, or specialist dictionaries or grammars, to understand the semantics of such lines as:

> SIR JOHN Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?
>> (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.1)

> ORSINO
>> If music be the food of love, play on.
>>> (*Twelfth Night*, 1.1.1)

> HAMLET
>> To be, or not to be; that is the question.
>>> (*Hamlet*, 3.1.58)

The thought may be demanding upon occasion; but the language is no barrier.

Nor do we need a corresponding scholarly apparatus to appreciate the pragmatic force underlying such lines as:

> PRINCE HARRY [*of Sir John*] That villainous,
> abominable misleader of youth
>> (*1 Henry IV*, 2.5.467)

> MARINA
>> My name, sir, is Marina.
>>> (*Pericles*, 21.131)

> SHYLOCK [*of a jewel*] . . . I had it of Leah when I was a
> bachelor.
>> (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.113)

If we refer to the context in which these lines occur, we find that they are, in turn, a jocular insult, a moment of revelation, and a nostalgic reflection; but we do not need to look up editorial notes to decide whether to laugh, cry, or sympathize as we take in what is said.

At the other extreme, there is Shakespearian language which is so far removed from our modern linguistic intuitions that without specialist help we are at a loss to know what to make of it, semantically or pragmatically. We have problems understanding what it means, or how we should react to it, or why it makes characters behave in the way they do:

> SIR JOHN [to Prince Harry] What a plague have I to do
> with a buff jerkin?
>
> (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.45–6)

> KENT [to Oswald ... [you] lily-livered, action-taking,
> whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical
> rogue.
>
> (*The Tragedy of King Lear*, 2.2.15–17).

> SIR TOBY [to Sir Andrew, of challenging Cesario] ... If
> thou 'thou'st' him some thrice, it shall not be
> amiss.
>
> (*Twelfth Night*, 3.2.42–3)

The general meaning and force of these three utterances is plain: the first is a jocular expostulation; the second is a savage character assault; the third is an incitement to be insulting. But if we do not have a clear understanding of what the words mean or the impact they carry, we would be at a serious disadvantage if someone were to interrogate us on the point. Why should a buff jerkin upset Sir John? (We need to know they were worn by law officers.) How relevant an insult is *finical*? (The word meant 'nit-picking' or 'over-fussy' – a description, we might imagine, which a steward would find particularly irritating.) Why is *thou* such an asset in making a challenge? (Because courtiers would normally address each other as *you*, and their servants as *thou*; calling a fellow-courtier *thou* three times would be especially galling.) Difficulties of this kind have come about because of language change.

Shakespeare was writing in the middle of a period of English linguistic history called Early Modern English, which runs from around 1500 to around 1750. It was an age when the language was beginning to settle down after a turbulent few centuries when its structure radically altered from its Anglo-Saxon character. Old English (used until the twelfth century) is so different from Modern English that it has to be approached as we would a foreign language. Middle English (used until the fifteenth century) is very much more familiar to modern eyes and ears, but we still feel that a considerable linguistic distance separates us from those who wrote in it – Chaucer and his contemporaries. During the fifteenth century, a huge amount of change affected English pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, so that Shakespeare would have found Chaucer almost as difficult to read as we do. But between Jacobethan times and today the changes have been very limited. Although we must not underestimate the problems posed by such words as *buff jerkin*, *finical*, and *thou*, we must not exaggerate them either. Most of Early Modern English is the same as Modern English. The evidence lies in the fact that there are many lines of Shakespeare where we feel little or no linguistic distance at all:

> BRUTUS ... If there be any in this assembly, any dear
> friend of Caesar's, to him I say that Brutus' love to
> Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend
> demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my
> answer: not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved

> Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living,
> and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to
> live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for
> him. As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it. As he was
> valiant, I honour him. But as he was ambitious, I
> slew him.　　　　　　　　(*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.17–27)

That is why we call the period 'Early Modern' English rather than, say, 'Late Middle' English. The name suggests a closeness to the language of the present day.

Writing and speaking

The identity between Early Modern and Modern English can be illustrated from all areas of language structure – the writing system, the sound system, the grammar, the vocabulary, and the structure of the spoken or written discourse. However, it must be recognized that in the first two of these areas the identity is an artefact – the result of conventional editorial and performance practice. The Early Modern English system of spelling and punctuation is actually very different from that which we encounter in Modern English; but we would never guess from reading most editions. Just under half of the words in the First Folio have a spelling which is different from the one we know today. At the end of the sixteenth century the alphabet was still developing: the distinctions between *u* and *v* and between *i* and *j* were not fully established, so that we find *vnuisited* alongside *vnvenerable* and *jigge* alongside *iigge*. Conventions of word-spacing, hyphenation, sentence punctuation, and capitalization also displayed many differences from modern practice. And spelling was still extremely variable: about half the words which appear in the Folio appear in more than one version – some with half a dozen or more alternatives. *Ancient,* for example, appears as *ancient, antient, aunchiant, aunchient, aunciant, auncient,* and *auntient.* Spelling did not achieve its modern standardization until the end of the eighteenth century – but most editors silently modernize Folio and Quarto spelling and punctuation, with the aim of making the texts more accessible to the reader.

Nor would we ever guess, from the way in which the poems are read aloud and the plays performed, that the Early Modern English sound system (the vowels and consonants, the stress and intonation) was at a considerable remove from modern pronunciation. It is an area where precise conclusions are unattainable. Attempts to reconstruct the way people spoke, based on a study of rhythmical patterns, rhymes, spellings, and contemporary phonetic descriptions can take us so far, but leave us well short of the character of the original. From the nature of the rhythm of the poetic line (the *metre*), for example, we can deduce that a syllable needs separate articulation, as in the opening lines of *Henry V*:

> O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
> The brightest heaven of invention.

It has to be: 'in-ven-see-on'. Similarly, it is the metre which motivates contrasting pronunciations of the same word in such cases as 'Hence banishèd is banished from the world' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.3.19). And from the way in which words rhyme or pun, we can deduce an earlier pronunciation, as when *wind* is made to rhyme with *unkind*.

But rhymes and puns do not tell us the whole story. They tell us only that two words must have sounded the same; they do not tell us in what respects that 'sameness' exists. In many cases, we can clearly see a pun, but still be unclear how to pronounce it. When Cassius says (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.157–8):

> Now is it Rome indeed, and room enough
> When there is in it but one only man

there is obviously some word-play intended – but is *Rome* being pronounced like modern *room*, or should *room* be like modern *Rome*, or was the Early Modern English pronunciation somewhere in between? Modern performances in 'original voices', based on research by historical linguists, are probably not too far away from the truth – at least, as far as the vowels, consonants, and word-stress contrasts are concerned; but there remain many uncertain areas. And the nature of the dynamic aspects of speech at the time (the intonation and tone of voice) is a matter of speculation. No modern accent corresponds, though the fact that the *r* was pronounced after vowels (as in *fire*) does tend to remind people of modern rural West of England accents, when they hear people attempt a Shakespearian pronunciation. Then, as now, there would have been many regional and class variations in accent, especially in the London area.

Despite their limitations, the reconstruction of the Early Modern English sound system indicates that pronunciation norms have changed greatly in the past four hundred years. Modern performances and readings, though, almost always introduce present-day sounds without comment, allowing only for cases where an earlier pronunciation is needed to satisfy the needs of the metre or to convey the effect of a pun. So the situation with speaking is very similar to that with writing: most modern readers and playgoers remain unaware of the extent of the difference. And this is why, when people discuss the distinctive language of Shakespeare, the main topics are usually restricted to the three areas of language that are present in both: grammar, vocabulary, and discourse conventions. In each case, the number of differences between Early Modern English and Modern English is relatively small, but several of the points of difference turn up very frequently – which is the chief reason that people think Shakespeare's language is more different from Modern English than in fact it is.

Grammar

The grammatical rules of the language have little changed during the past four centuries: some 90 per cent of the word orders and word formations used by Shakespeare are still in use today. A grammatical parsing of the prose extract from *Julius Caesar* above would bring to light nearly two hundred points of sentence, clause, phrase, and word structure, but there is only one construction which is noticeably different from Modern English: 'Had you rather Caesar were living'. Today we would have to say something like: 'Would you rather have Caesar living'. A less significant difference, in that passage, is the use of the subjunctive (as in *If there be any in this assembly*), which is unusual in British (though not American) English today. But apart from this, and allowing for the rather formal rhetorical style, the other grammatical usages in the extract are the same as those we would use now.

There is nonetheless a widespread impression that Shakespeare's grammar is very different from what we find today. The impression arises for two reasons: because of the way grammar operates within discourse, and because of the influence of metrical constraints.

GRAMMAR IN DISCOURSE

Grammar is different from vocabulary in the way it appears in connected speech or writing. An individual word may not be present in a particular speech – or even in a whole

scene – but core grammatical features are repeatedly used. Each page of this essay will provide many examples of the definite article, forms of the verb *to be*, plural endings, conjunctions such as *and*, and other essential features of sentence construction. In the same way, Shakespearian grammar repeatedly uses several Early Modern English features, such as older pronouns (*thou*, *ye*), inflectional endings (*-est*, *-eth*), and contracted forms (*is't*, *on't*). It is the frequency of use of such forms which can give a grammatical colouring to a speech – often, out of all proportion to their linguistic significance, as in this extract from *Hamlet* (5.1.271–5):

> HAMLET (*to Laertes*) Swounds, show me what
> thou'lt do.
> Woot weep, woot fight, woot fast, woot tear thyself,
> Woot drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
> I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine,
> To outface me with leaping in her grave?

Woot, often edited as *woo't*, is a colloquial form of *wilt* or *wouldst thou*. It is a rare literary usage, but here its repetition, along with the other contracted forms and the use of *thou*, dominates the impression we have of the grammar, and gives an alien appearance to a speech which in all other respects is grammatically identical with Modern English:

> Show me what you will do.
> Will you weep, will you fight, will you fast, will you
> tear yourself,
> Will you drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
> I'll do it. Do you come here to whine,
> To outface me with leaping in her grave?

Several other distinctive features of Early Modern English grammar likewise present little difficulty to the modern reader. An example is the way in which a sequence of adjectives can appear both before and after the noun they modify, as in the Nurse's description of Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.4.55–6): 'an honest gentleman, and a courteous, and a kind, and a handsome' [= an honest, courteous, kind, and handsome gentleman]. Other transparent word-order variations include the reversal of adjective and possessive pronoun in *good my lord*, or the use of the double comparative in such phrases as *more mightier* and *most poorest*. Many individual words also have a different grammatical usage, compared with today, such as *like* ('likely') and *something* ('somewhat'):

> Very like, very like.
>
> (*Hamlet*, 1.2.325)

> I prattle | Something too wildly.
>
> (*Tempest*, 3.1.57–8)

But here too the meaning is sufficiently close to modern idiom that they do not present a difficulty.

There are just a few types of construction where the usage is so far removed from anything we have in Modern English that, without special study, we are likely to miss the meaning of the sentence altogether. An example is the so-called 'ethical dative'. Early Modern English allowed a personal pronoun after a verb to express such notions as 'to', 'for', 'by', 'with' or 'from' (notions which traditional grammars would subsume under the headings of the *dative* and *ablative* cases). The usage can be seen in such sentences as:

line will be to understand. In this next example (*Richard II*, 1.1.123), three unexpected things happen at once: the direct object is placed at the front, the indirect object comes before the verb, and an adjective is coordinated after the noun. The glossed version is much clearer, but it is unmetrical: 'Free speech and fearless I to thee allow' [= I allow to thee free and fearless speech]. Sometimes the change in word order can catch us off-guard, as in this example from *Contention* (5.3.52–55), spoken by Young Clifford after seeing his dead father, and vowing revenge. Nothing, he says, will escape his wrath:

> Tears virginal
> Shall be to me even as the dew to fire,
> And beauty that the tyrant oft reclaims
> Shall to my flaming wrath be oil and flax.

A casual reading of the third line would suggest that 'a tyrant often reclaims [i.e. tames, subdues] beauty' – but this makes no sense. Rather, the meaning is 'beauty, that often tames the tyrant, will act as fuel to my wrath'. *Tyrant* is not the grammatical subject of *reclaims*, but its object. Only by paying careful attention to the meaning can we work this out, and for this we need to think of the speech as a whole, and see it in its discourse context. Metre is often thought of simply as a phonetic phenomenon – an aesthetic sound effect, either heard directly or imagined when reading. In fact it is much more. Metrical choices always have grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic – as well as dramatic – consequences.

Line variations

Many special effects are achieved by departing from metrical norms – making lines longer or shorter than usual, juxtaposing different kinds of feet, or breaking lines in unexpected places. Short lines provide an important type of example. Whether these are introduced by an editorial or an authorial eye, there is always a semantic or pragmatic effect which needs to be carefully assessed. The short line, for example, is often used to mark a significant moment in a speech, especially a pointed contrast, as in this example from *Othello* (1.3.391–4):

> The Moor is of a free and open nature,
> That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
> And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
> As asses are.

Lines of five feet normally express three or four semantically specific points. In this example, the first two lines each contain four lexical items (*Moor, free, open, nature; think, man, honest, seem*), and the third has three (*tenderly, lead, nose*). By contrast, the semantic content of the fourth line is a single lexical item (*ass*), which now has to fill a semantic 'space' we normally associate with five feet. Several prosodic means are available to enable an actor to achieve this, such as slowing the tempo and rhythm of the syllables or varying the length of the final pause.

Splitlines – a five-foot line distributed over more than one speaker – must similarly be interpreted in semantic or pragmatic terms. From a semantic point of view, the space of the five-foot line is being filled with more content than is usual. From a prosodic point of view, the more switching between characters, the faster the pace. These factors operate most noticeably in the (rare) cases where a line is split into five interactive units, as in the scene in *King John* (3.3.64–6) when the King intimates to Hubert that Arthur should be killed:

[KING JOHN]
Thou art his keeper.

HUBERT   And I'll keep him so
That he shall not offend your majesty.

KING JOHN
Death.

HUBERT   My lord.

KING JOHN   A grave.

HUBERT   He shall not live.

KING JOHN   Enough.

From a pragmatic point of view, there is an immediate increase in the tempo of the interaction, which in turn conveys an increased sense of dramatic moment. On several occasions, the splitlines identify a critical point in the development of the plot, as in this example from *The Winter's Tale* (1.2.412–13):

CAMILLO
I am appointed him to murder you.

POLIXENES
By whom, Camillo?

CAMILLO   By the King.

POLIXENES   For what?

Sometimes, the switching raises the emotional temperature of the interaction. In this *Hamlet* example (4.5.126–7) we see the increased tempo conveying one person's anger, immediately followed by another person's anxiety:

[KING CLAUDIUS]
Speak, man.

LAERTES   Where is my father?

KING CLAUDIUS   Dead.

QUEEN GERTRUDE
But not by him.

KING CLAUDIUS   Let him demand his fill.

An increase in tempo is also an ideal mechanism for carrying repartee. There are several examples in *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Petruccio and Katherine first meet, as here (2.1.234):

KATHERINE
Yet you are withered.

PETRUCCIO   'Tis with cares.

KATHERINE   I care not.

In a sequence like the following (*The Tragedy of King Lear*, 2.2.194–8) there is more than one tempo change:

LEAR
What's he that hath so much thy place mistook
To set thee here?

KENT   It is both he and she:
Your son and daughter.

LEAR   No.

KENT   Yes.

LEAR   No, I say.

KENT
  I say yea.
LEAR   By Jupiter, I swear no.
KENT
  By Juno, I swear ay.
LEAR   They durst not do't . . .

Here, if we extend the musical analogy, we have a relatively lento two-part exchange, then an allegrissimo four-part exchange, then a two-part allegro, and finally a two-part rallentando, leading into Lear's next speech. The metrical discipline, in such cases, is doing far more than providing an auditory rhythm: it is motivating the dynamic of the interaction between the characters.

Discourse interaction

The aim of stylistic analysis is ultimately to explain the choices that a person makes, in speaking or writing. If I want to express the thought that 'I have two loves' there are many ways in which I can do it, in addition to that particular version. I can alter the sentence structure (*It's two loves that I have*), the word structure (*I've two loves*), the word order (*Two loves I have*), or the vocabulary (*I've got two loves, I love two people*), or opt for a more radical rephrasing (*There are two loves in my life*). The choice will be motivated by the user's sense of the different nuances, emphases, rhythms, and sound patterns carried by the words. In casual usage, little thought will be given to the merits of the alternatives: conveying the 'gist' is enough. But in an artistic construct, each linguistic decision counts, for it affects the structure and interpretation of the whole. It is rhythm and emphasis that govern the choice made for the opening line of Sonnet 144: 'Two loves I have, of comfort and despair'. As the aim is to write a sonnet, it is critical that the choice satisfies the demands of the metre; but there is more to the choice than rhythm, for *I have two loves* would also work. The inverted word order conveys two other effects: it places the theme of the poem in the forefront of our attention, and it gives the line a semantic balance, locating the specific words at the beginning and the end.

Evaluating the literary or dramatic impact of the effects conveyed by the various alternatives can take up many hours of discussion; but the first step in stylistic analysis is to establish what those effects are. The clearest answers emerge when there is a frequent and perceptible contrast between pairs of options, and this is the best way of approaching the analysis of discourse interaction in the plays. Examples include the choice between the pronouns *thou* and *you* and the choice between verse and prose.

THE CHOICE BETWEEN *thou* AND *you*

In Old English, *thou* (*thee, thine*, etc.) was singular and *you* was plural. But during the thirteenth century, *you* started to be used as a polite form of the singular – probably because people copied the French way of talking, where *vous* was used in that way. English then became like French, which has *tu* and *vous* both possible for singulars; and that allowed a choice. The norm was for *you* to be used by inferiors to superiors – such as children to parents, or servants to masters, and *thou* would be used in return. But *thou* was also used to express special intimacy, such as when addressing God. It was also used when the lower classes talked to each other. The upper classes used *you* to each other, as a rule, even when they were closely related.

So, when someone changes from *thou* to *you* in a conversation, or the other way round,

it conveys a different pragmatic force. It will express a change of attitude, or a new emotion or mood. As an illustration, we can observe the switching of pronouns as an index of Regan's state of mind when she tries to persuade Oswald to let her see Goneril's letter (*The Tragedy of King Lear*, 4.4.19-40). She begins with the expected *you*, but switches to *thee* when she tries to use her charm:

> REGAN
>   Why should she write to Edmond? Might not you
>   Transport her purposes by word? Belike—
>   Some things—I know not what. I'll love thee
>   much:
>   Let me unseal the letter.
> OSWALD   Madam, I had rather—
> REGAN
>   I know your lady does not love her husband.

Oswald's hesitation makes her return to *you* again, and she soon dismisses him in an abrupt short line with this pronoun; but when he responds enthusiastically to her next request she opts again for *thee*:

>   I pray desire her call her wisdom to her.
>   So, fare you well.
>   If you do chance to hear of that blind traitor,
>   Preferment falls on him that cuts him off.
> OSWALD
>   Would I could meet him, madam. I should show
>   What party I do follow.
> REGAN   Fare thee well.

Here we have *thee* being used as an index of warmth of feeling – quite the reverse of the insulting use of *thou* between nobles noted earlier. Similarly, *thou*-forms can be used as an index of intimacy, as when Graziano and Bassanio meet (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.2.170-90). They begin with the expected exchange of *you*:

> GRAZIANO
>   I have a suit to you.
> BASSANIO   You have obtained it.
> GRAZIANO
> You must not deny me. I must go with you to
>   Belmont.
> BASSANIO
>   Why then, you must.

But Bassanio then takes Graziano on one side and gives him some advice. The more intimate tone immediately motivates a pronoun switch: 'But hear thee, Graziano, Thou art too wild, too rude and bold of voice'. And he continues with *thou*-forms for the rest of his speech. When Graziano swears he will reform, the relationship returns to the normal public mode of address:

> BASSANIO Well, we shall see your bearing.

And they *you* each other for the rest of the scene.

THE CHOICE BETWEEN VERSE AND PROSE

Shakespeare's practice in using verse or prose varied greatly at different stages in his career. There are plays written almost entirely in verse (e.g. *Richard II*) and others almost entirely in prose (e.g. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), but most plays display a mixture of the two modes, with certain types of situation or character prompting one or the other. Verse – whether rhymed or unrhymed ('blank' verse) – is typically associated with a 'high style' of language, prose with a 'low style'. This is partly a matter of class distinction. High-status people, such as nobles and generals, tend to use the former; low-status people, such as clowns and tavern-frequenters, tend to use the latter (though in a 'verse play', such as *Richard II*, even the gardeners talk verse). Upper-class people also have an ability to accommodate to those of lower class, using prose, should occasion arise. 'I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life', says Prince Harry to Poins (*1 Henry IV*, 2.5.18–19). And lower-class people who move in court circles, such as messengers and guards, are able to use a poetic style when talking to their betters. This lower-class ability to accommodate upwards can take listeners by surprise. The riotous citizens at the beginning of *Coriolanus* all use prose, but when Menenius reasons with them, in elegant verse, the spokesman gradually slips into verse too – much to Menenius' amazement: 'Fore me, this fellow speaks!' (1.1.118).

The distinction between 'high' and 'low' style is also associated with subject matter. For example, expressions of romantic love are made in verse, regardless of the speaker's social class.

> If thou rememberest not the slightest folly
> That ever love did make thee run into,
> Thou hast not loved.
> Or if thou hast not sat as I do now,
> Wearing thy hearer in thy mistress' praise,
> Thou hast not loved.

This elegant plaint is from Silvius, a shepherd (*As You Like It*, 2.4.31–6), but it could have come from any princely lover. Conversely, 'low' subject matter, such as ribaldry, tends to motivate prose, even when spoken by upper-class people. When Hamlet meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (*Hamlet*, 2.2.226), they exchange a prose greeting, then the two visitors open the conversation at a formal, poetic level. But Hamlet brings them down to earth with a jocular comment, and the ribald follow-up confirms that the conversation is to stay in prose. (It is a widespread editorial practice to print prose lines immediately after the speaker's name, and verse lines beneath it. However, discrepancies between different editions show that the distinction is not always easy to draw.)

> HAMLET My ex'llent good friends. How dost thou,
> Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz—good lads, how
> do ye both?
> ROSENCRANTZ
> As the indifferent children of the earth.
> GUILDENSTERN
> Happy in that we are not over-happy,
> On Fortune's cap we are not the very button.
> HAMLET Nor the soles of her shoe?
> ROSENCRANTZ Neither, my lord.

> HAMLET Then you live about her waist, or in the
> middle of her favour?
> GUILDENSTERN Faith, her privates we.

In a play where the upper-class protagonists tend to speak prose, it takes moments of special drama to motivate a switch to verse, as in the scene when Claudio accuses Hero of being unfaithful (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 4.1). Beatrice uses nothing but prose in the first half of this play, but, left alone after overhearing the news that Benedick loves her, she expresses her newly heightened sensibilities in ten lines of rhyming verse (3.1.107–16). In *Othello* (1.3), the Duke of Venice speaks only verse in debating the question of Othello's love for Desdemona, but when he has to recount the affairs of state, he resorts to prose (1.3.220–7).

These norms explain only a proportion of the ways that verse and prose are used in the plays. There are many instances where people switch between one and the other, and when they do we must assume it is for a reason. Sane adults do not change their style randomly. For example, in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2.3.235–41), Benedick is tricked into thinking that Beatrice loves him, so when he next meets her he uses verse as a sign of the new relationship. Beatrice, however, at this point unaware of any such thing, rejects the stylistic overture, and her rebuttal forces Benedick to retreat into prose:

> BEATRICE Against my will I am sent to bid you come
> in to dinner.
> BENEDICK
> Fair Beatrice, I thank you for your pains.
> BEATRICE I took no more pains for those thanks than
> you would take pains to thank me. If it had been
> painful I would not have come.
> BENEDICK You take pleasure, then, in the message?

This is prose as put-down. And we see it again in the opening scene of *Timon of Athens* (1.1.179–91), where Timon and his flatterers have been engaged in a genteel conversation in verse about social and artistic matters. The arrival of the cynical Apemantus lowers the tone, and – anticipating trouble – the speakers switch into prose:

> TIMON   Look who comes here.
> Will you be chid?
> JEWELLER We will bear, with your lordship.
> MERCHANT He'll spare none.

Timon tries to maintain the high tone by addressing Apemantus in verse, and Apemantus shows he is capable of the high style by responding in kind; but his acerbic comments introduce a low tone which forces all to retreat into prose:

> TIMON
> Good morrow to thee, gentle Apemantus.
> APEMANTUS
> Till I be gentle, stay thou for thy good morrow—
> When thou art Timon's dog, and these knaves
> honest.
> TIMON
> Why dost thou call them knaves? Thou know'st
> them not.

> APEMANTUS Are they not Athenians?
> TIMON Yes.
> APEMANTUS Then I repent not.
> JEWELLER You know me, Apemantus?
> APEMANTUS
>   Thou know'st I do. I called thee by thy name.

The one-line poetic riposte to the jeweller, under the circumstances, has to be seen as a mocking adoption of the high style.

If verse is a sign of high style, then we will expect aspirants to power to use it to make their case, and disguised nobility to use it when their true character needs to appear. An example of the first is in *Contention*, where Jack Cade is claiming to be one of Mortimer's two sons, and thus the heir to the throne. He and his fellow rebels speak to each other in prose. When Stafford and his brother arrive, they show their social distance by addressing the rebels in verse. But Cade is playing his part well, and responds in verse, as would befit someone with breeding. His rhetoric is so impressive, indeed, that it even influences the Butcher, who responds uncharacteristically with a line of verse of his own (4.2.140–5):

> The elder of them, being put to nurse,
> Was by a beggar-woman stol'n away,
> And, ignorant of his birth and parentage,
> Became a bricklayer when he came to age.
> His son am I—deny it an you can.
> BUTCHER
> Nay 'tis too true—therefore he shall be king.

An example of disguised nobility is in *Pericles* (19.25 ff.), when governor Lysimachus arrives at a brothel with the intent of seducing Marina, whom he thinks to be a prostitute. The conversation between him, Marina, and the brothel-keepers is entirely in prose. Left alone with her, however, Lysimachus begins courteously in verse, and is taken aback when Marina shows she can respond in the same way, and moreover use the mode to powerful rhetorical effect. 'I did not think | Thou couldst have spoke so well', he says, as he repents of his intention. Marina knows the power of poetry, and uses it again later in the scene to persuade Boult to take her side.

The switch from verse to prose, or vice versa, can also give us insight into the state of mind of a speaker. In the case of Pandarus (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4.2.51–6), the switch to prose signals confusion. Aeneas calls on Pandarus early one morning, urgently needing to talk to Troilus, who has secretly spent the night with Cressida. The formal encounter and serious subject matter motivate verse. But Aeneas' directness catches Pandarus off-guard, who confusedly lapses into prose:

> AENEAS
>   Is not Prince Troilus here?
> PANDARUS   Here? What should he do here?
> AENEAS
>   Come, he is here, my lord. Do not deny him.
>   It doth import him much to speak with me.
> PANDARUS Is he here, say you? It's more than I know,
>   I'll be sworn. For my part, I came in late. What
>   should he do here?

Something similar happens to Polonius, when he gets confused (*Hamlet*, 2.1.49–51). He

has been giving Reynaldo a series of instructions in verse, but then he loses the track of what he is saying:

> And then, sir, does a this—a does—
> what was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to
> say something. Where did I leave?

And Reynaldo reminds him, in verse.

In the case of Benvolio and Mercutio, meeting in *Romeo and Juliet* (3.1.1–10), we have two very different states of mind signalled by the two modes. The temperate Benvolio begins in verse, but he cannot withstand the onslaught of Mercutio's prose:

> BENVOLIO
> I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire.
> The day is hot, the Capels are abroad,
> And if we meet we shall not scape a brawl,
> For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.
> MERCUTIO Thou art like one of these fellows that,
> when he enters the confines of a tavern, claps me
> his sword upon the table and says 'God send me no
> need of thee', and by the operation of the second
> cup, draws him on the drawer when indeed there is
> no need.
> BENVOLIO Am I like such a fellow?

And they continue in prose.

In another meeting, between Cassius and Brutus in *Julius Caesar* (4.2.80–8), the switching between verse and prose acts as a guide to the temperature of the interaction. They are accusing each other of various wrongs. For the most part they speak verse to each other; but when they are on the verge of losing their temper, they switch into prose:

> CASSIUS   Brutus, bay not me.
> I'll not endure it. You forget yourself
> To hedge me in. I am a soldier, I,
> Older in practice, abler than yourself
> To make conditions.
> BRUTUS Go to, you are not, Cassius.
> CASSIUS I am.
> BRUTUS I say you are not.
> CASSIUS
> Urge me no more, I shall forget myself.

And Cassius resumes in verse, until once again, Brutus drives him to explode into prose (4.2.112–18):

> CASSIUS
> When Caesar lived he durst not thus have moved
>   me.
> BRUTUS
> Peace, peace; you durst not so have tempted him.
> CASSIUS I durst not?
> BRUTUS No.
> CASSIUS What, durst not tempt him?

BRUTUS For your life you durst not.
CASSIUS
　Do not presume too much upon my love.

People were evidently very sensitive to these modality changes, and sometimes the text explicitly recognizes the contrasts involved. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the summit meeting between Caesar, Antony, and their advisors is carried on in formal verse. But when Enobarbus intervenes with a down-to-earth comment in prose, he receives a sharp rebuke from Antony: 'Thou art a soldier only. Speak no more' (2.2.112). And in *As You Like It*, Orlando arrives in the middle of a prose conversation in which Jaques is happily expounding his melancholy to Ganymede (aka Rosalind). Orlando addresses Ganymede with a line of verse, which immediately upsets Jaques: 'Nay then, God b'wi'you an you talk in blank verse' (4.1.29–30). And Jaques promptly leaves.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the area of language least subject to generalization. Unlike the grammar, prosody, and discourse patterns of a language, which are subject to general rules that can be learned thoroughly in a relatively short period of time, the learning of vocabulary is largely ad hoc and of indefinite duration. By contrast with the few hundred points of pronunciation, grammar, and discourse structure which we need to consider when dealing with Shakespeare's language, the number of points of vocabulary run into several thousands. As a result, most books do little more than provide an alphabetical glossary of the items which pose a difficulty of comprehension.

The question of the size of Shakespeare's vocabulary, and its impact on the development of the English language, has always captured popular imagination, but at the cost of distracting readers from more important aspects of his lexical creativity. It is never the number of words that makes an author, but how those words are used. Because of Shakespeare's literary and dramatic brilliance, it is usually assumed that his vocabulary must have been vast, and that his lexical innovations had a major and permanent effect on the language. In fact, it transpires that the number of words in his lexicon (ignoring variations of the kind described below) was somewhere between 17,000 and 20,000 – quite small by present-day standards, though probably much larger than his contemporaries. And the number of his lexical innovations, insofar as these can be identified reliably, are probably no more than 1,700, less than half of which have remained in the language. No other author matches these impressive figures, but they nonetheless provide only a small element of the overall size of the English lexicon, which even in Early Modern English times was around 150,000.

The uncertainty in the personal total arises because it is not easy to say what should be counted. Much depends on the selection of texts and the amount of text recognized (as the present edition illustrates with *King Lear* and *Hamlet*), as well as on editorial policy towards such matters as hyphenation. In Kent's harangue of Oswald (*The Tragedy of King Lear*), for example, the number of words varies depending on which compounds the editors recognize. In this extract (2.2.13–17), *The Complete Works* identifies 20; by comparison, the First Folio shows 22:

Complete Works: a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave . . .

First Folio: a base, proud, shallow, beggerly, three-suited-hundred pound, filthy woosted stocking knaue, a Lilly-liuered, action-taking, whoreson, glasse-gazing super-seruiceable finicall Rogue, one Trunke-inheriting slaue . . .

Other editions reach different totals: one allows a three-element compound word (*filthy-worsted-stocking*, Penguin); another a four-element (*three-suited-hundred-pound*, Arden).

The number of words in a person's lexicon refers to the items which would appear as headwords in a dictionary, once grammatical, metrical, and orthographic variations are discounted. For example, in the First Folio we find the following forms: *take, takes, taketh, taking, tak'n, taken, tak'st, tak't, took, took'st, tooke, tookst*. It would be absurd to think of these as 'twelve words' showing us twelve aspects of Shakespeare's lexical creativity. They are simply twelve forms of the *same* word, 'take'. And there are several other types of word which we would want to exclude when deciding on the size of Shakespeare's vocabulary. It is usual to exclude proper names from a count (*Benvolio, Eastcheap*), unless they have a more general significance (*Ethiop*). People usually exclude the foreign words (from Latin, French, etc.), though there are problems in deciding what to do with the franglais used in *Henry V*. Word counters wonder what to do, also, with onomatopoeic words (e.g. *sa, sese*) and humorous forms: should we count malapropisms separately or as variants of their supposed targets (e.g. *allicholly* as a variant of *melancholy*)? If we include everything, we shall approach 20,000; if we do not, we shall look for the lower figure, around 17,000.

How many of these words have gone out of use or changed their meaning between Early Modern English and today? A recent glossary which aims at comprehensiveness, *Shakespeare's Words* (Crystal and Crystal, 2002), contains 13,626 headwords which fall into this category – roughly three-quarters of Shakespeare's total word-stock. But this does not mean that three-quarters of the words in *The Complete Works* represent Early Modern English, for many of these older words are used only once or twice in the canon. If we perform an alternative calculation – not the number of different words (the word *types*), but the number of instances of each word (the word *tokens*), we end up with a rather different figure. According to Marvin Spevack's concordance, there are nearly 885,000 word tokens in the canon – and this total would increase to over 900,000 with the addition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The 13,626 word types in the glossary are actually represented by some 50,000 word tokens – and 50,000 is only 5 per cent of 900,000. This is why the likelihood of encountering an Early Modern English word in reading a play or a poem is actually quite small. Most of the words in use then are still in use today, with no change in meaning.

The attention of glossary-writers and text editors has always focused on the 'different words', but it is important to note that they do not all pose the same kind of difficulty. At one extreme, there are many words which hardly need any gloss at all:

* words such as *oft, perchance, sup, morrow, visage, pate, knave, wench*, and *morn*, which are still used today in special contexts, such as poetry or comic archaism, or which still have some regional use (e.g. *aye* 'always');

* words where a difference has arisen solely because of the demands of the metre, such as *vasty* instead of *vast* ('The vasty fields of France', *Henry V*, Prologue 12), and other such uses of the -*y* suffix, such as *steepy* and *plumpy*;

* words where the formal difference is too small to obscure the meaning, such as *affright* ('frighten'), *afeard* ('afraid'), *scape* ('escape'), *ope* ('open'), *down-trod* ('down-trodden'), and *dog-weary* ('dog-tired');

* words whose elements are familiar but the combination is not, such as *bedazzle*,

dismasked, *unpeople*, *rareness*, and *smilingly*, and such phrasal verbs as *press down* ('overburden'), *speak with* ('speak to'), and *shove by* ('push aside');

- idioms and compounds whose meaning is transparent, such as *what cheer?*, *go your ways*, *high-minded*, and *folly-fallen*.

We might also include in this category most of the cases of *conversion* – where a word belonging to one part of speech is used as a different part of speech. Most often, a common noun is used as a verb, as in '*grace* me no grace, nor *uncle* me no uncle' (*Richard II*, 2.3.86), but there are several other possibilities, which Shakespeare exploits so much that lexical conversion has become one of the trademarks of his style:

> She Phoebes me
>> (*As You Like It*, 4.3.40)

> Thou losest *here*, a better *where* to find
>> (*The Tragedy of King Lear*, 1.1.261)

> they . . . from their own misdeeds *askance* their eyes
>> (*Lucrece*, l. 636–7)

> what man | *Thirds* his own worth
>> (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, 1.2.95–6)

In such cases, although the grammar is strikingly different, the lexical meaning is not.

At the other extreme, there are words where it is not possible to deduce from their form what they might mean – such as *finical*, *fardel*, *grece*, and *incony*. There are around a thousand such items in Shakespeare, and in these cases we have no alternative but to learn them as we would new words in a foreign language. An alphabetical glossary of synonyms is not the best way of carrying out this task, however, as that arrangement does not display the words in context, and its A-to-Z structure does not allow the reader to develop a sense of the semantic interrelationships involved. It is essential to see the words in their semantic context, for this can help comprehension in a number of ways. Shakespeare sometimes provides the help himself. In *Othello*, when the Duke says to Brabanzio (1.3.198–200):

> Let me speak like yourself, and lay a sentence
> Which, as a grece or step, may help these lovers
> Into your favour

we can guess what *grece* means ('step, degree') by relying on the following noun. And in *Twelfth Night*, when Sir Toby says to Maria: 'Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip, and become thy bondslave?' (2.5.183–4), we may have no idea what *tray-trip* is, but the linguistic association (or *collocation*) with *play* shows that it must be some kind of game. Collocations always provide major clues to meaning.

An A-to-Z approach provides no clues about the meaning relationships between words: *aunt* is at one end of the alphabet and *uncle* at the other. A more beneficial approach to Shakespearian vocabulary is to learn the new words in the way that young children do when they acquire a language. Words are never learned randomly, or alphabetically, but always in context and in pairs or small groups. In this way, meanings reinforce and illuminate each other, in such ways as the following:

- words of opposite meaning (*antonyms*): *best/meanest*, *mine/countermine*, *ayward/nayward*, *curbed/uncurbed*;

- words of included meaning (*hyponyms*), expressing the notion that 'an X is a kind of Y': *bass viol—viol*, *boot-hose—hose*; *mortar-piece/murdering-piece—piece*; *grave-/well-/ill-beseeming—beseeming*; *half-blown/unblown—blown*;

- words of the same or very similar meaning (*synonyms*): *advantage/vantage*, *argal/argo*, *compter/counter*, *coz/cousin* (these words sometimes convey a stylistic contrast, such as informal vs. formal);

- words of intensifying meaning: *lusty/over-lusty*, *pleached/thick-pleached*, *force/force perforce*, *rash/heady-rash*, *amazed/all-amazed*.

In many cases, it is sensible to group words into *semantic fields*, such as 'clothing', 'weapons', or 'money', so that we can more clearly see the relationships between them. Under the last heading, for example, we can distinguish between domestic coins (such as *pennies*) and foreign coins (such as *ducats*), and within the former to relate items in terms of their increasing value: *obolus*, *halfpence*, *three farthings*, *penny*, *twopence*, *threepence*, *groat*, *sixpence*, *tester/testril*, *shilling*, *noble*, *angel*, *royal*, *pound*. That is how we learn a monetary system today, and it is how we can approach the one we find in Shakespeare.

In between the extremes of lexical familiarity and unfamiliarity, we find the majority of Shakespeare's difficult words – difficult not because they are different in form from the vocabulary we know today but because they have changed their meaning. In many cases, the meaning change is very slight (*intent* 'intention'; *glass* 'looking-glass') or has little consequence. When Jack Cade says 'I have eat no meat these five days, yet come thou and thy five men, an if I do not leave you all as dead as a doornail I pray God I may never eat grass more' (*Contention*, 4.9.37–40), *meat* is here being used in the general sense of 'food' – but if we were to interpret it in the modern, restricted sense of 'flesh meat', the effect would not be greatly different. By contrast, there are several hundred cases where the meaning has changed so much that it would be highly misleading to read in the modern sense. These are the 'false friends' (*faux amis*) of comparative semantics – words in a language which seem familiar but are not (as between French and English, where *demander* means 'ask', and *demand* is translated by *requérir*). False friends in Shakespeare include *naughty* ('wicked'), *heavy* ('sorrowful'), *humorous* ('moody'), *sad* ('serious'), *ecstasy* ('madness'), *owe* ('own'), *merely* ('totally'), and *envious* ('malicious'). In such cases, we need to pay careful attention to the context, which we must always allow to overrule the intrusion of the irrelevant modern meaning. We can see this operating, for example, in *The Tragedy of King Lear* (5.1.5–7):

> REGAN
> Our sister's man is certainly miscarried.
> EDMOND
> 'Tis to be doubted, madam.
> REGAN   Now, sweet lord,
> You know the goodness I intend upon you.

If we were to read in the modern meaning of *doubt*, it would suggest that Edmond is disagreeing with Regan – but as the context suggests this is not the case, we need a different meaning of *doubt* – 'fear'.

Finally, as with grammar, we must be prepared to see the demands of metre altering word forms. The choice between *vantage* and *advantage*, *scape* and *escape*, *shrew* and *beshrew* and many other such alternatives can be solely due to the location of the word in the line. Sometimes we can even see the alternative forms juxtaposed, as when both *oft* and *often* appear in *Julius Caesar* (3.1.115–19):

BRUTUS
How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
That now on Pompey's basis lies along,
No worthier than the dust!
CASSIUS   So oft as that shall be,
So often shall the knot of us be called
The men that gave their country liberty.

Names can be altered too. At one point in *Pericles*, narrator Gower refers to Pericles' counsellor with his full name:

In Helicanus may you well descry
A figure of truth.

(22.114–15)

At another, he shortens it:

Good Helicane that stayed at home,
Not to eat honey like a drone.

(5.17–18)

Such metrically induced alternations rarely have any semantic or pragmatic consequence.

The examples in this essay show that in order to develop our understanding of Shakespeare's use of language we need to work through a three-stage process:

- we first notice a linguistic feature – something which strikes us as particularly interesting, effective, unusual, or problematic (often because it differs from what we would expect in Modern English);
- we then have to describe the feature, in order to talk about it and to classify it as a feature of a particular type; the more precisely we are able to do this, by developing an awarenesss of phonetic, grammatical, and other terminology, the more we will be able to reach clear and statable conclusions;
- we have to explain why the feature is there.

It is the last stage which is the most important, and which is still surprisingly neglected. It is never enough, as has often happened in approaches to Shakespeare's language, simply to identify and describe an interesting feature – such as a particular metrical pattern, piece of alliteration, word order, or literary allusion – and proceed no further. We must also try to explain its role – its meaning and effect – in the context in which it appears, and that is why this essay has paid so much attention to seeing his language within a semantic and pragmatic perspective.

It is, of course, by no means the whole story. Language in turn must be placed within a wider literary, dramatic, historical, psychological, and social frame of reference. We must also expect there to be many occasions when meaning and effect cannot be precisely determined. There will always be a range of interpretive possibilities in the language that offer the individual reader, actor, director, or playgoer a personal choice. But the linguistic stage in our study of Shakespeare should never be minimized or neglected, for it is an essential step in increasing our insight into his dramatic and poetic artistry.