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You would expect a chapter on language near the beginning of a volume on Shakespeare. After all, that is what you hear and see, as soon as you open a book or watch a play. But that first encounter is deceptive in its apparent ease and obviousness, for we all bring to the book and the theatre our own language; and therein lies the problem. Reading a text is a meeting of minds; and when the minds are separated by 400 years of linguistic change, we must expect some difficulties.

Sometimes the difficulties are immediately apparent: we see a word and have no idea what it means. Sometimes they are hidden: we see a word and, because it looks familiar, we *think* we know what it means. 'False friends', as words of this second type are called, are one of the biggest causes of error when learning a foreign language: we see *demande* in French and think it means 'demand', when actually it means 'ask'. And they are a major source of error in getting to grips with Shakespeare's language too. 'The Duke is humorous', we hear Le Beau say about Duke Frederick (*As You Like It*, 1.2.233) and wonder why such a jocular person should be treating Orlando so nastily; only when we learn that *humorous* in this context means 'moody, temperamental, capricious', does the line begin to make some sense.

The discrepancy between Shakespeare's intuitions about language and our own applies to all aspects of language. There are 'false friends' in pronunciation and grammar, too, as well as in the way characters talk to each other. Quite clearly all of this needs to be considered if we are to understand what is going on; and there are really only two ways of doing so. The traditional way is on a 'case by case' basis, using an editor's textual notes to identify the language problems as they turn up in a poem or play. Useful as this approach is, it has several limitations when it comes to developing an awareness of Shakespearian English. No edition has space to explain all the linguistic points, and some editions (because of the thematic approach they have chosen) may actually give very limited information. Also, because our study of individual plays and our theatre visits are usually separated by significant periods of time, it proves difficult to build up an intuition about what is normal in the language of the period in which Shakespeare was writing—Early Modern English.

The second approach offers a more systematic alternative, deriving as it does from the way we learn a foreign language. This is to place Early Modern English in the centre of our attention as early as possible, and try to develop a sense of what the norms of



At the opposite extreme, there are extracts such as the following, where the difficulty is evident. Friar Laurence is advising Juliet how to escape from her dilemma. It is a crucial part of the plot, with the mood urgent, so the language needs to be grasped quickly; but the unfamiliar words and phrasing can produce a dip in the level of comprehension just when we do not want it.

Take thou this vial, being then in bed,  
 And this distilling liquor drink thou off,  
 When presently through all thy veins shall run  
 A cold and drowsy humour; for no pulse  
 Shall keep his native progress, but surcease.

(4.1.93-7)

Every line has at least one word which needs some glossing, and the result is a temporary uncertainty—temporary, because later in the speech there are clearer passages which make it plain what is to happen.

And in this borrowed likeness of shrunk death  
 Thou shalt continue two-and-forty hours,  
 And then awake as from a pleasant sleep.

(4.1.104-6)

People who argue that Shakespeare is unintelligible and inaccessible tend to quote the difficult bits and ignore the easier ones. We should always read the whole of a speech before worrying about the difficulties found in a part of it.

The impression that Elizabethan English is a foreign language is of course reinforced when we find the difficult words used in the expression of a complex thought, or in an extended piece of figurative expression. The situation is not helped by changes in educational practice since Shakespeare's day. Few students now are familiar with the mythology of Classical Greece or Rome, so the use of such names as *Phoebus* and *Phaeton* increases the alien impression of the language. But this is an encyclopedic not a linguistic difficulty—a lack of knowledge of the world (as it existed in Classical times), rather than a lack of knowledge of how to talk about the world. 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' (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. And the same educational point applies to those parts of Shakespeare's text which are indeed in a foreign language—French, Latin, Spanish, and Italian, along with some mock-foreign expressions. In the days when most people learned French and Latin in school, those passages (such as the scenes in *Henry V* where a great deal of French is used) would have posed no problem. Today, they often do.

We should note a third type of difficulty, intermediate between these two extremes, where at one level we understand well enough, and at another level we do not. In

Kent's harangue of Oswald in *King Lear*, so much of the vocabulary is alien that a newcomer to Shakespeare's language can do no more than catch the drift.

A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking knave; a whoreson, glass-gazing, superserviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service . . .

(2.2.13-17)

But newcomers *do* catch the drift, very easily, as they will in all instances of insulting language. At the level of personal interaction, we sense that each of these phrases is demeaning in some way, and we appreciate the cumulative effect, even though at the level of vocabulary there is a lot we may not understand at all. The effect will be unavoidable when we see the speech performed on stage.

No-one would begin the task of learning to speak French by trying to understand passages of complex language first, and the same principle should apply to Shakespearean English. We need to work systematically, disentangling the types of difficulty we find there, so that we leave the really obscure issues (such as the phraseology of Elizabethan property law) until later, and deal with more everyday concerns earlier. When we do this, several major themes emerge.

## Old and new within Early Modern English

A crucial part of this perspective is to recognize that this period of the language—as all other periods—is not linguistically homogeneous. In Modern English we sense that some words are current, some old, and some new. People refer to the older usages as 'obsolete words' or 'archaisms', the new usages as 'coinages' or 'neologisms'. It is easy to spot an arriving usage, because its novelty is noticed and usually attracts some degree of comment. Usages which are becoming obsolete are rarely commented upon, and tend to pass away in dignified silence.

Early Modern English was a period of extraordinarily dynamic change. The consequences of the Renaissance were sweeping through the language, and causing not a little consternation among people unsure of how they should react to the thousands of new words being introduced, especially from Latin and Greek. There was a great deal of self-consciousness about usage, and the period is remarkable for its lexical inventiveness and experimentation, to which Shakespeare made his own major contribution.

From a modern perspective, it is difficult to develop an intuition about the archaisms and neologisms of the past; but they are always there. In Shakespeare several can be found in the introductory remarks of Gower to the various scenes in *Pericles*, where we find *iwis* ('indeed') and *hight* ('called'), as well as such older verb forms as *speken* ('speak') and *y-clad* ('clothed'). Other examples include *eyne* ('eyes'), *shoon* ('shoes'),

wight ('person'), and *eke* ('also'). All of these would have been considered old-fashioned or archaic by the Shakespearian audience. Several take us all the way back to Middle, or Medieval, English.

For neologisms, we are helped by the fact that some of Shakespeare's characters actually tell us that they are dealing with new words and usages. Biron describes the Spanish visitor to court, Don Armado, as 'A man of fire-new words' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 1.1.176), and Armado himself is well aware of the way language is needed to keep the classes apart: 'the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon' (5.1.75–76). In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio thinks of Tybalt in the same way:

The pox of such antic, lipping, affecting phantasims, these new tuners of accent! 'By Jesu, a very good blade, a very tall man, a very good whore'.

(2.3.25-7)

Evidently Mercutio is irritated by the use of *very* as an intensifying word with a positive adjective, a linguistic trend which was emerging at the end of the sixteenth century. Also coming into fashion at that time was *accommodate*, which makes Bardolph reflect (*Henry IV Part Two*, 3.2.70–3), the sexual sense of *occupy* ('fornicate') noticed by Doll Tearsheet in an earlier version of the same play, and various new senses of *humour* ('mood', 'whim') which are obsessively used by Nym in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and elsewhere.

That there was a level of style in which 'hard words' were the norm is plain from the many mistaken attempts at these words—malapropisms—put into the mouths of ordinary people, such as Mistress Quickly/Hostess, Dogberry, and various clowns. Lancelot says to Bassanio, 'the suit is impertinent to myself'—by which he means 'pertinent' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.2.122–3). Shakespeare seems not to have much liked pompous language, for several of his major characters poke fun at linguistic affectation—such as Hamlet at Osrick (*Hamlet*, 5. 2) or Kent at Oswald (*King Lear*, 2.2. 102), the latter 'going out of his dialect' in order to do so. A whole conversation can be summed up in a single parodic moment. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, after taking part in an erudite conversation with Armado and Nathaniel, the schoolteacher Holofernes turns to constable Anthony Dull:

HOLOFERNES: . . . Thou hast spoken no word all this while.

DULL: Nor understood none neither, sir.

(5.1.126-8)

## Language variety in Early Modern English

It is a commonplace that Shakespeare gives us a remarkable picture of the range of social situations in Elizabethan England. What is less often remarked is that each of these situations would have been linguistically distinctive. Just as today we have

scientific, advertising, and broadcasting English, so then there was legal, religious, and courtly English—to name just a few of the styles which are to be found. In addition to archaisms and neologisms, hard words and easy words, there is speech representing different degrees of formality, intimacy, social class, and regional origins. In short, we encounter in the plays most of the language *varieties* of Early Modern English.

Because we are totally reliant on the written language, apart from the occasional observation by a contemporary commentator, we shall never achieve a complete picture of the spoken stylistic variation of the past. But the plays quite often give us clues from the way in which characters are portrayed. We need to note, for example, that when Fluellen (in *Henry V*) and Evans (in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) are talking, utterances such as *how melancholies I am* are not normal Early Modern English, but a humorous representation of Welsh dialect speech. A distinctive pronunciation is seen in the spellings: *plless* for *bless* and *falorous* for *valorous*. And the famous stereotype of Welsh speech, *look you*, is also used—though whether it had any greater reality than now (Welsh people do not actually say *look you* very much) is a moot point. There is certainly a strong element of pastiche in the way these speakers persistently get their grammar wrong—*this is lunatics, a joyful resurrections*.

In these two plays we also hear hints of Scottish in Macmorris and Irish in Jamy, as well as foreign (French) accents in Caius and Katherine; disguised Edgar slips into West Country speech in *King Lear*. But regional variation is not as strongly represented in Shakespeare as social variation, especially distinctions in class. People may hide their faces but not their voices. Orlando, encountering disguised Rosalind in the forest, notices her speech: 'Your accent is something finer than you could purchase in so removed a dwelling' (*As You Like It*, 3.2.310–11). And Edmund notices the disguised Edgar's, 'thy tongue some say of breeding breathes' (*King Lear*, 5.3.142). Grammar and vocabulary is also affected. Prince Hal affirms to Poins, after drinking with the tavern staff, 'I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life' (*Henry IV Part One*, 2.5.15–17). The upper classes had their own language, too, full of 'holiday and lady terms', as Hotspur puts it (*Henry IV Part One*, 1.3.45).

Many of the markers of class difference are to be found in the way people address each other—the titles they use, their terms of endearment, their insults, and their oaths. It is important to keep a careful eye on the way such forms as *sirrah*, *wench*, *master*, and *gentle* are used, for they are a sensitive index of personal temperaments and relationships. Variations in swearing habits, for example, are identified by Hotspur:

HOTSPUR: Come, Kate, I'll have your song too.

LADY PERCY: Not mine, in good sooth.

HOTSPUR: Not yours, in good sooth! Heart, you swear like a comfit-maker's wife: 'Not you, in good sooth!' and 'As true as I live' and 'As God shall mend me!' and 'As sure as day!'

(*Henry IV Part One*, 3.1.241-6)

He prefers 'A good mouth-filling oath', with expressions like *in sooth* left 'To velvet-guards and Sunday citizens' (3.1.250–2).

## Manipulating Early Modern English rules

There is an intimate relationship between Early Modern English and Shakespeare. The more we understand the linguistic norms of his age, the more we will be able to appreciate his departures from these norms; at the same time, his linguistic ear is so sharp, and his character portrayal so wide-ranging, that much of what we know about the norms comes from the plays themselves. We therefore always need to focus on the interaction between these two dimensions. We should not try to study Early Modern English and *then* study Shakespeare. Rather, we should study Early Modern English alongside and through the medium of Shakespeare. Examining the way an author manipulates ('bends and breaks') linguistic rules gives us insights into the nature of the rules themselves.

At all times, we need to ask *why* rule-manipulation takes place. If language work is to be illuminating, we must go beyond 'feature-spotting'. To say, 'I spy an instance of neologism (metaphor, alliteration, etc.) in this line' is only a first step. We have to take a second step and ask: 'What is the neologism (metaphor, alliteration, etc.) doing there?' This is much more interesting, for it makes us reflect on the issue as it must have presented to Shakespeare himself. Why did he choose to do what he did? What effect would have been conveyed if he had made a different choice? It is always a matter of choice: to use or not to use a linguistic form—that is the crucial stylistic question.

This notion of choice lies behind the use of the label *pragmatic* for a stylistic approach which focuses on the reasons for an author's use of a linguistic form, and three examples follow—from grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation—to illustrate this perspective in operation.

### Grammar: thou vs. you

Social and attitudinal differences between people are so important that they affect some of a language's most frequently used forms, notably the pronouns *thou* and *you*. In Old English, *thou* was singular and *you* was plural. But during the thirteenth century, *you* began to be used as a polite form of the singular—probably because people copied the French manner of talking, where *vous* was used in that way. English then became like French, which has *tu* and *vous* both possible for singulars. So now there was a choice. The usual thing was for *you* to be used by inferiors to superiors—such as children to parents, or servants to masters; and *thou* to be used in return. But people would also use *thou* when they wanted special intimacy, such as when addressing God;

and *thou* was also normal 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* (or vice versa) in a conversation, it must mean something. The change will convey a different emotion or mood. The new meaning could be virtually anything—affection, anger, distance, sarcasm, playfulness. To say *thou* to someone could be an insult: in *Twelfth Night*, Toby Belch actually advises Andrew Aguecheek to put down his enemy by calling him *thou* a few times (3.2.37–8). The way in which characters switch from one pronoun to the other therefore acts as a barometer of their evolving attitudes and relationships.

We find an important illustration in the opening scene of *King Lear*, where the king sets about dividing his kingdom among his daughters. We would expect Lear to use *thou* to them, and they to use *you* in return, which is how the interaction begins:

GONERIL: Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter . . .

LEAR: Of all these bounds, even from this line to this . . .

We make thee lady. . . .

REGAN: I . . . find I am alone felicitate

In your dear highness' love. . . .

LEAR: To thee and thine hereditary ever

Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom.

But when Lear turns to his favourite daughter, he uses *you*:

LEAR: . . . what can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters?

(1.1.53-85)

Plainly, if *thou* is for 'ordinary' daughters, *you* is here being used as a special marker of affection. But when Cordelia does not reply in the way he was expecting, Lear abruptly changes back:

LEAR: But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA: Ay, good my lord.

. . .

LEAR: Let it be so! Thy truth, then, be thy dower!

(1.1.104-8)

Now the *thou* forms are now being used not as a marker of fatherly affection, but of anger.

## Vocabulary

The pragmatic approach makes us ask why an author has decided on a particular choice of language, and this is especially important in relation to vocabulary. Not all words present an author with a choice, of course. Many of Shakespeare's unfamiliar words are there simply because they reflect the culture of the time—for example, the vocabulary of clothing, body-armour, weapons, and sailing ships (*doublet* and



*hose, casque* and *gauntlet, halberd* and *pike, maintop* and *topgallant*). In such cases, once Shakespeare made a decision to talk about a particular subject area, the terms would automatically follow; a doublet is a *doublet*, and there an end. If we are to understand such words, all we can do is learn about the Elizabethan world.

However, most of the vocabulary we would think of as distinctively Shakespearian is not like this, but involves a choice between one word and another. The Chorus puts a question to the audience, at the very beginning of *Henry V*:

Can this cock-pit hold  
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

(Prologue, 11-14)

There are two distinctive words in the first sentence, both of which have their first uses assigned to Shakespeare by the *Oxford English Dictionary*—*cockpit*, in its sense of ‘theatre pit’, and *vasty*, meaning ‘vast’. *Cockpit* had been used before by other authors in other senses; but *vasty* is a new word, and probably (because we can see similarly constructed words elsewhere in the plays, such as *plumpy* and *brisky*) a Shakespearian creation. But why did Shakespeare find it necessary to invent a new word here? *Vast* already existed in the language, and indeed Shakespeare uses it himself, as in *Romeo and Juliet*: ‘that vast shore washed with the farthest sea’ (2. 1. 125). The answer has to lie in the value of the extra syllable to make the word suit the rhythm of the poetic line (the *metre*), which at this point in the speech is proceeding in a very regular manner, ten syllables at a time. (For more on metre, see Chapter 8.) To have written ‘The vast fields of France’ would have caused an unwelcome jerkiness in this steady progression.

Let us imagine the problem as it might have appeared to Shakespeare: we have a line beginning ‘The—fields of France’, and we need a two-beat adjective to fill the gap, expressive of great size. *Vast* is the obvious word, but it will not do, because it has only one syllable. So we need to think of other words in Early Modern English which might work. *Large, huge, and great* are available, but have the wrong rhythm—and are in any case hardly imaginative ways of capturing the enormity of the dramatic scene the Chorus is painting. *Immense* and *enormous* are also available; but the first of these has the strong syllable in the wrong place, and the second has too many syllables. *Massive* also exists—which does have the right rhythm, but unfortunately the wrong meaning, for it expresses the idea of concrete size upwards—as in a *massive building*—not the idea of a flat expanse. *Vast* seems to be the only word which has the right meaning, and to be sufficiently unusual (its first recorded usage is 1575) for it to have some poetic appeal. Adding an adjective-forming suffix, *-y*, is an attractive way of solving the metrical problem—and a perfectly acceptable one, in an era when the creation of new words was common practice, and when *-y* had previously been used in this way with many other words.

## Pronunciation: the importance of rhythm

Metrical demands were a major influence on vocabulary formation, and they also affected choices in grammar. In the present tense, for example, there were two endings still in use: *-th* and *-s*, as in *readeth* and *reads*, the *-th* often adding an extra syllable to the word. The *-th* form was dying out, though it was still routine in *doth* and *hath*; but with most verbs there was still a choice. So, what would lead Shakespeare to choose one form and not the other? One factor is that *-s* seems to have conveyed a more colloquial tone (it is the normal form in prose), whereas *-th* was more formal (it is often used in the 'official' language of stage directions). But that explanation will not do for the many cases in the poetry where we find both endings. Once again it is the presence or absence of the extra syllable which can motivate the choice—as in this example from *Henry VI Part Two*, where the usages are juxtaposed, and only the sequence as shown preserves the regular rhythmical beat:

For Suffolk, he that can do all in all  
 With her that hateth thee and hates us all . . .  
 (2.4.52-3)

The role of the extra syllable is seen in several types of construction. A parallel case with the past forms of verbs is seen in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the first usage has *-ed* as a separate syllable, and the second usage does not: 'Hence banished is banished from the world' (3.3.19). And a parallel case with adjectives is in *Henry IV Part One*:

Why, Harry, do I tell thee of my foes,  
 Which art my near'st and dearest enemy?  
 (3.2.122-3)

Here the elision of the *-e* in *-est* gives the required flexibility. The same reasoning can also explain why an adjective goes after the noun—as in this example from *Antony and Cleopatra*:

For he hath laid strange courtesies and great  
 Of late upon me  
 (2.2.162-3)

Here, 'strange and great courtesies' would not work.

All metrical patterns can be analysed from a pragmatic point of view. The aim is to find reasons for any differences in line length, changes in rhythm, or alterations in the way lines run together. The dramatic effect of even a brief pause can be considerable. In the following extract from *Macbeth*, Ross knows that Macduff's family has been killed, and he has to break the news. Faced with Macduff's direct questions, a pair of lies leap into his mouth. But there is a pause (conveyed by the missing metrical beat) before his second reply. We can almost hear his silent gulp.

MACDUFF:                               How does my wife?  
 ROSS: Why, well.  
 MACDUFF:           And all my children?  
 ROSS:                                       Well, too.  
   (4.3.177-8)

By contrast, the extra-long line which results from this intervention of Hotspur's, interrupting a sequence of regular ten-syllable lines, reinforces our impression of his impatient character, and in its urgency contrasts with the measured tones of Worcester's:

WORCESTER: Your son in Scotland being thus employed,  
               Shall secretly into the bosom creep  
               Of that same noble prelate well-beloved,  
               The Archbishop.  
 HOTSPUR:           Of York, is't not?  
 WORCESTER:                               True, who bears hard  
               His brother's death at Bristol, the Lord Scrope.  
   (*Henry IV Part One*, 1.3.261-5)

## Conclusion

People talk a lot about Shakespeare's 'linguistic legacy', saying that he was a major influence on the present-day English language, and citing as evidence his coining of new words (such as *assassination* and *courtship*) and idiomatic phrases (such as *salad days* and *cold comfort*). But when we add all of the coinages up, we do not get very large numbers. No-one has carried out a precise calculation; but the Shakespearian words that still exist in modern English can be counted in hundreds, not thousands, and there are only a few dozen popular idioms. Those who assert that huge numbers of words in modern English come from Shakespeare are seriously mistaken.

A 'counting words' approach to the assessment of Shakespeare's language is not enough, because it ignores his contribution to other domains of language use—such as grammar and pronunciation—and the way these domains creatively interact with vocabulary. It is in any case naive to think that quantity could ever be a guide to quality. The Shakespearian linguistic legacy is not in the number of words he used, but in the way he used them.

From Shakespeare we learn how it is possible to explore and exploit the resources of a language in original ways, displaying its range and variety in the service of the poetic imagination. In his best writing, we see how to make a language work so that it conveys the effects we want it to. Above all, Shakespeare shows us how to dare to do things with language. In a Shakespearian master-class, we would observe an object-lesson in the bending and breaking of rules.

## FURTHER READING

- Brook, G. L. *The Language of Shakespeare* (London: Deutsch, 1976). This book is a compilation of 450 descriptive observations about Shakespeare's language, grouped into eight broad thematic areas: vocabulary, syntax, accident, word-formation, features of pronunciation and writing, metre, rhetoric, and language varieties.
- Crystal, David and Ben Crystal. *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002). This book is an alphabetical compilation of the Early Modern English vocabulary found in Shakespeare, interspersed with a thematic treatment of selected language topics.
- Hulme, Hilda M. *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language* (London: Longmans, 1962). This book provides a further interpretation of some 200 of the more difficult items in Shakespeare, seen within the context of the language of his time.
- Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000). This is an investigation of the development of Shakespeare's language over time, considering the period around 1600 as pivotal, and illustrating the argument through the detailed analysis of critical passages.
- Quirk, Randolph. 'Shakespeare and the English language'. In R. Quirk, *The Linguist and the English Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974). This essay illustrates Shakespeare's personal use of English and his linguistic interests, seen against the backdrop of the language of his time.
- Ronberg, Gert. *A Way with Words: The Language of English Renaissance Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992). This is an introduction to Early Modern English illustrated from a wide range of authors of the period, but with copious illustration and analysis from Shakespeare.
- Salmon, V. and E. Burness (eds.). *Reader in the Language of Shakespearean Drama* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1987). This is an anthology of over thirty essays on aspects of Shakespearean dramatic language published in the twenty years between 1965 and 1985.
- Williams, Gordon. *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language* (London: Athlone, 1997). This is an alphabetical account of the sexually allusive words and phrases in Shakespeare, placed within their historical perspective.