6.15 Plenary: Shakespeare and ELT

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Enter certain Outlaws

First Outlaw:	Fellows, stand fast; I see a passenger.
Second Outlaw:	If there be ten, shrink not, but down with 'em.
Third Outlaw:	Stand, sir, and throw us that you have about ye;
	If not, we'll make you sit, and rifle you.
Speed:	Sir, we are undone; these are the villains
	That all the travellers do fear so much.
Valentine:	My friends –
First Outlaw:	That's not so, sir; we are your enemies.
Second Outlaw:	Peace! We'll hear him.

And the Outlaws do listen to Valentine, one of the two gentlemen from Verona, who has been waylaid in the forest (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV.i). And he is so persuasive that, instead of being robbed and killed, the outlaws decide to make him their general. Why? The First Outlaw explains:

... seeing as you are beautified
With goodly shape, and by your own report
A linguist, and a man of such perfection
As we do in our quality much want

Of goodly shape? Such perfection?

However, the reason I choose this example to open this lecture is not because of its perceptive description of my person, but because of the word *linguist*. Here it is used in the sense of 'someone skilled in the use of languages', and the *Oxford English Dictionary* records that Shakespeare is the first writer known to have used the word in that sense. (Its sense as 'a student of language' comes fifty years later.) *Linguist* is actually one of about 1700 words whose first use is recorded by the *OED* as being in Shakespeare, and about 800 of these have stayed in the language. Shakespeare is the greatest of word inventors. 800 permanent additions to English. No other writer did so well. Most of us would be delighted if we added just one!

But does literary word invention justify having a keynote lecture on Shakespeare at an ELT Conference? Well, it is one of the reasons, as we will see. But it is not the only reason. I want to argue that it is time to bring Shakespeare back where he belongs – at the heart of ELT. He was actually there, once upon a time. In earlier centuries he was one of the reasons that people wanted to learn English in the first place, and many people did learn their English purely by reading his texts. Is it just rumour that the original meaning of the acronym ESP was English for Shakespearian Purposes? On one of my tours abroad, as recently as the 1980s, I actually met an old gentleman who had learned English in this way – and his speech was full of verilies and forsooths. He spoke beautifully, and with a stunning, metrical, stress-timed rhythm.

ELT needs to reconsider its relationship to Shakespeare – from a linguistic, as distinct from a literary or theatrical point of view. In the last five years there has been a general renewal of interest in the language used by Shakespeare – a major step was a book by the literary critic Frank Kermode, called *Shakespeare's Language*, which appeared in 2000. Before that, for some decades, we had a Shakespeare industry which focused on Shakespeare's life and times, investigating such matters as his religion, his sexuality, and his politics. The theatrical setting in which his plays were staged was another major theme, attracting special attention when Shakespeare's Globe was reconstructed on London's South Bank in 1997. And several new editions of the plays brought fresh dimensions of literary criticism. But language was really rather neglected. We were still using some very old reference books. For example, C.T. Onions' *Shakespeare Glossary* was still the standard dictionary, even though it was nearly a century old; Abbott's *Shakespeare Grammar* dated from the 1870s. Then, suddenly, a new mood. Norman Blake published his *Grammar of Shakespeare's Language* at the end of 2001. The voice coach Patsy Rodenburg published her *Speaking Shakespeare* in 2002. There have been new specialist dictionaries of Shakespeare's legal language and of his sexual language. And my son Ben and I published our own new glossary, *Shakespeare's Words*, in June 2002. The outcome of all this fresh interest has been a plethora of fresh findings and insights, several of which I believe are highly relevant for ELT.

The new mood has helped to bring language and literature closer together, and this is so important. I am a great believer in the interdependence of these two domains, and hate the divide which so often operates in teaching institutions, when the language and literature departments show no interest in each other. If I were in charge of the world, I would pass a law which would integrate language and literary divisions everywhere. The essential unity of the subject, English, is well summarized by the poet and novelist Robert Graves, who once said:

A poet must master the rules of English grammar before he attempts to bend or break them.

That is what poets do: they bend and break the language's rules to achieve their effects. But we can generalize: it is not just poets, but dramatists, novelists, and all creative writers who need to master the rules of not just grammar, but phonology, semantics and discourse, before they bend and break them. Literary critics, too, need to master the rules of English before they can explain how it is that creative writers bend and break them. And teachers need to do the same, if they want to explain to their students what is going on when people – everyone, not just authors – use language creatively.

First, though, we have to get rid of a misconception, a myth. There is a widespread belief, especially among non-native speakers, that Shakespearean English is a totally different language from Modern English. Some people have even argued that he needs to be translated into Modern English before we can understand him. The language of his time is often called Elizabethan English, which reinforces the myth that it is very different. A better label is Early Modern English, which stresses the continuity between then and now. There is far more in common between Shakespeare's English and ours than differentiates them. Shakespeare needs translation? You be the judge, with this example. Romeo has just met Juliet, and they've had a first conversation together, she on the balcony, he in the garden below (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.ii). They say goodnight, and she goes in, then comes out again.

Juliet:	Romeo!
	What o'clock tomorrow
	Shall I send to thee?
Romeo:	By the hour of nine.
Juliet:	I will not fail. 'Tis twenty year till then.
	I have forgot why I did call thee back.
Romeo:	Let me stand here till thou remember it.
Juliet:	I shall forget, to have thee still stand there,
	Remembering how I love thy company.
Romeo:	And I'll still stay, to have thee still forget,
	Forgetting any other home but this.
Juliet:	'Tis almost morning. I would have thee gone.

Because she knows he's in for it if her kinsmen catch him there. Now that piece of dialogue isn't exactly like Modern English, even though I bet you understood all of it. The word *still* is slightly different, because it's being used in the sense of 'always' – and some of the phrasing feels slightly old-fashioned. We'd say these days *What time? By nine*. Then there's the phrase, *twenty year*, not *twenty years* – but this is something you'll still hear in local dialects in many parts of the country. *I have forgot* is also slightly different, but that too is something you'll still hear in regional dialects. And of course they say *thou* and *thee* to each other, but most of you will already know what's going on there, because you have a similar distinction in your own languages.

Much of Shakespeare is just like this. How much? Well, when Ben and I were compiling *Shakespeare's Words*, we did some counting. Our database contains some 46,000 occurrences of words in all the plays and poems which are different in some way between

Shakespeare's day and now. That sounds like a lot, but there are 930,000 words in the entire canon of 39 plays, so it's actually only 5 per cent. Only 5 per cent of the time are you going to encounter a word which is different in form or meaning from what exists today – and a similar figure also applies to the grammatical differences. The reason why people think of Shakespeare's language as difficult is because they remember the passages where several of these unfamiliar words cluster together. Such passages do require special study, indeed. Some of the sentences are quite long, too, requiring that we take special care with them. And word order variations caused by the rhythm of the poetic line can also interfere with comprehension. But on the whole, the language is the same, and we can use our Modern English intuitions to follow what is going on well enough.

That 5 per cent must not be underestimated, of course: we get so much more out of the plays when we master the different word-forms and meanings, and especially when we avoid being misled by those instances where the word has changed its meaning but not its form. In particular, you have to watch out for the false friends (*faux amis*). ELT teachers know all about these, because whatever your linguistic background is, there will be instances of English words which resemble a word in your own language and make you think that because the word looks the same it therefore means the same. French *demander* makes French learners think that Modern English *demand* means 'ask', whereas of course it means something rather different. There are several hundred false friends in Early Modern English too. Here is one – *bootless*. It sounds as if it means 'without boots', and indeed it could mean that in Shakespeare's time, but the more common meaning of *bootless* was 'useless, pointless, unsuccessful'. The word comes from an older form *boot*, which is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'good' or 'use' (our word *better* comes from the same root). So if you say that something was *bootless*, it means it wasn't very successful. Here's Miranda, at the beginning of *The Tempest* (I.ii), responding eagerly to her father, Prospero, who has decided to tell her, at long last, something about her background:

> You have often
> Begun to tell me what I am, but stopped,
> And left me to a bootless inquisition,
> Concluding, 'Stay: not yet.'

A bootless inquisition? She doesn't mean she was asking questions without any shoes on. She means that there was no point in asking, because Prospero wasn't going to tell her. *Bootless* turns up about 20 times in the plays – so it's worthwhile using a bit of mental energy to remember its meaning. And once you've got it, then you'll not miss the joke that the rebellious nobleman Harry Hotspur makes in *Henry IV Part One* (III.i). The Welsh prince, Glendower, is boasting about how he's beaten the king, Henry Bolingbroke, more than once.

Glendower: Three times hath Henry Bolingbroke made head
                       Against my power, thrice from the banks of Wye
                       And sandy-bottomed Severn have I sent him
                       Bootless home, and weather-beaten back.
Hotspur: Home without boots, and in foul weather too!
                       How scapes he agues, in the devil's name!

[How does he get away without fevers, agues, says Hotspur, if he's in bare feet!]

Knowing about false friends will help you improve your understanding of Shakespeare; but that is not what this lecture is about. I am talking today about how to enlist Shakespeare to help improve your understanding and use of English. And the answer lies in appreciating the way he bends and breaks the rules. For it turns out that what *he* does, we need to do too – in everyday conversation. To see this, let us consider the nature of conversation, for a moment. Conversation in a foreign language. This is actually a highly dramatic enterprise. It is an exercise in acting, to begin with. We adopt a new persona as we attempt to mimic the behaviour of our target speakers. Something happens to my shoulders when I begin to speak French. They take on a life of their own. I adopt a new articulatory setting, with lips more ready to round. But there is also the drama inherent in the act of speaking and listening. Does anyone ever forget that first dramatic moment when you tried out your foreign language on a real foreigner and it actually worked? Such daring! In my play about endangered languages, *Living On*, the British Council officer, Miranda, remembers how it was for her:

> We went on one of those – exchange trips? To – where was it? – place in Brittany, near – oh, I don't know, it doesn't matter – and we'd been there a day or two and none of us had spoken a word of French, of course – it was just a school trip to the seaside, as far as we were concerned. Anyway, I'd bought some postcards to send home, and I went out of the hall where we were staying to the end of the drive where there was a postbox – on my own. And just as I got to the postbox this car stopped by me and a woman wound down the window and asked me, I'll never forget it, 'Monsieur Robinson?', she said – that was our teacher's name – 'Monsieur Robinson, il est arrivé?' – and I thought God I understand that, so I said 'Oui', and then I plucked up all the courage I'd got and said 'Il est dans la maison', and the woman gave me a big smile and said 'Merci' and off she went, and I stood there by the postbox absolutely scared stiff – thrilled to bits. I'd done it. I'd actually spoken to someone in their language and they'd understood me. I felt really excited. All that slop about some verbs going with *avoir* and some with *être*, and here was someone who was actually doing it, without thinking twice about it – and not a teacher either. And I understood her. I felt really French.

Conversation has been called an art, a game, an experiment, a rite, and many other things, but I see it chiefly as a drama. But a special kind of drama. The British writer and caricaturist Max Beerbohm put it like this: 'Improvisation is the essence of good talk'. And improvisation, like jazz or acting, is the most exciting form of behaviour, especially for the foreign learner. It is moreover a drama which never ends, because the language to be learned is always so much greater than the language which has been learned. In its own small way, each time we try out a newly learned word in a foreign language, it is a mini-drama. Each time we dare to do something with the language that we have never heard a native speaker do before, it is a mini-drama. And the biggest mini-drama of all, as we become advanced in our linguistic ability, is when we dare to bend and break the rules of the language we are learning – thereby showing, of course, that we have mastered them. We have become, in a word, creative, in our L2.

Now in one fundamental respect all native-speakers of English are the same as

Shakespeare, or any English-language creative writer: we have all learned the same basic set of rules. When writers of great imagination and daring exploit the language, moving it in fresh directions, they are relying on the same psycholinguistic processes of language learning as the rest of us. They were not great writers at age 4 or 14. They went through the normal stages of language acquisition as any child would. At least, I assume so. To be honest, I do not know what is the magical point at which an 'ordinary person' becomes 'an author'. I do not know whether those destined to become authors actually learn their mother tongue faster than others or in a different way. Are they linguistically precocious? Not according to some of the biographies, when a famous author's teacher is tracked down and expresses surprise that his/her protégé turned out so well. I wonder what the teachers at Stratford school would have said about Shakespeare? I have actually recently discovered a fragment of a school report about Shakespeare, written by his teacher in 1571, when the lad was seven:

> Some small improvement this term. Needs to work on his handwriting. Still talking in class a lot. Frivolous attitude. Seems to have an unhealthy interest in ghosts, witches and daggers.

A forgery, do I hear you say? But 'frivolous attitude' is certainly how a straightlaced, Latin-minded Elizabethan teacher would have viewed any child who dared to do something outside the normal rules of the language. And this is what Shakespeare does, above all others. He teaches us how to dare, in using language.

And he does this in two main ways. The first way is that he shows us how to make grammar work in the service of meaning. Grammar is never an end in itself, even though generations of grammarians try to persuade us that it is. It is there to help us understand words, which by themselves convey very little. If I take a word and use it by itself, we can get very little from it. For example:

> charge

We can make very little of this. Is this *charge* in the sense of money, crime, attack, electricity, explosion, or one of the other meanings of this word? We don't know until we give it some grammar – which means putting the word into a sentence – such as:

> Your order will be sent free of charge.
> Leave the battery on charge.

That is what sentences do: they literally 'make' sense. That is what sentences are for – to resolve the ambiguities in the meaning of words.

How does Shakespeare show us grammar working in the service of meaning? Chiefly, by putting us in control of the notion of part of speech, or word class. People are sometimes scared of word classes, thinking that there is some magical sign within a word which tells you what part of speech it should be. But that is not how it works. A word becomes a particular word class when we use it in a particular way. If you ask, 'What part of speech is *round*?', the only answer is: 'It depends' – on how you use it. Put it after an article, and it becomes a noun:

> It's my round (to buy the drinks).

Put it after the word *to* and it becomes a verb:

> The yacht managed to round the buoy.

Put it after a verb and it becomes an adverb:

> The wheels went round and round.

Put it in front of a noun and it becomes an adjective:

> The pixies lived in a little round house.

And put it in front of a noun phrase and it becomes a preposition:

> We live round the corner.

These examples are all familiar, because the various uses of *round* have been in English a long time. There is nothing particularly dramatic about them. But what we see in Shakespeare is new word classes being formed in a particularly dynamic – almost improvisatory – way. One of his chief stratagems is to make a new word by taking an old word and changing its word class. In particular, he would take a noun and use it as a verb. Virtually any noun could be used in this way. Take the parts of the body. *Ear, eye, lip, nose, mouth, knee, foot.* Shakespeare verbs them all. And more abstract nouns too – such as *scandal* and *word*. You'll hear many like that in Shakespeare. Here's Hamlet, telling a group of actors how to utter their lines (*Hamlet*, III.ii):

> Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.
> But if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town crier spoke
> my lines.

Shakespeare is one of the first to use the word *mouth* in this way, to mean 'declaim' or 'utter pompously'. Then, a little later on, after Hamlet has killed Polonius, there's another one (IV.ii).

Claudius: Where is Polonius?
Hamlet: In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i'th' other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

The conversion is *nose* this time – a rather more evocative description than the everyday word *smell*, it seems to me.

Some of these conversions are now a regular part of the language. I can eye you warily. You can leg it. Nobody has ever shifted words round like Shakespeare did. Ben and I had to devote a whole three pages to cover all the different kinds of examples when we compiled *Shakespeare's Words*. Linguists call this kind of thing *functional shift* or *conversion* – one word class is being 'converted' into another. It's not something that happens in all languages, by any means, because their inflectional endings get in the way. But it's a very common process in English, and we all do it. Here are two recent examples:

> Our spend this year is going to be down ten per cent. (*spend* as a noun)
> I'll text you later. (*text* as a verb)

And in the drama of everyday interaction, people are shifting word classes all the time, as this little boy found out from his mother at bedtime:

Boy: But I'm hungry. Why can't I have another biscuit?
Mother: I'll biscuit you if you don't get off to bed straight away!

Biscuit used as a verb.

Shakespeare is the doyen of functional shifters. And he is also pretty high up in the league of affixers too. This is the second way in which he shows us how to be creative: by doing interesting things with prefixes and suffixes. Adding an affix has always been the most important method of English word formation. We take a word, such as *nation*, and build up a whole family of words by adding bits at the beginning and end. *National, nationalize, nationalization, denationalization, antidenationalization*. And this is the commonest way in which Shakespeare makes up new words of his own. He loved to create and use words beginning with *un-*, for instance. Here are seven in one sentence. It is from the pedantic schoolteacher Holofernes, in *Love's Labour's Lost* (IV.ii), who is complaining about the way Constable Dull has misunderstood Latin. He describes Dull's manner as an

undressed, unpolished, uneducated, unpruned, untrained, or, rather, unlettered, or, ratherest, unconfirmed fashion.

There are actually 314 instances in the *Oxford English Dictionary* where Shakespeare is the first citation for a *un-* usage. Most of them are adjectives (e.g. *uncomfortable, uncompassionate, unearthly, uneducated*), and there are a few adverbs (e.g. *unaware, unheedfully*) and nouns (e.g. *an undeserver*), but there are no fewer than 62 instances where the prefix has been added to an already existing verb. These are the really interesting ones, because some of them are so vividly dramatic. Here's one from towards the end of *Coriolanus* (V.v). Imagine the scene. The Roman Senators are calling everyone to welcome back to the city Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia, and her companions. Coriolanus (who's called Martius in this quotation) had been about to attack Rome, and the ladies have succeeded in persuading him not to, much to the delight of the citizens:

Senator: Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!
               Call all your tribes together, praise the gods,
               And make triumphant fires; strew flowers before them.
               Unshout the noise that banished Martius,
               Repeal him with the welcome of his mother,
               Cry 'Welcome, ladies, welcome!'

And so they do, shouting welcome together. But notice the unusual nature of the word *unshout*. You can't actually unshout. Once you've shouted, you've done it. It doesn't literally remove the shouting that had earlier in the play sent Coriolanus into banishment. To *unshout the noise that banished Martius* is physically impossible. This is a new shouting. *Unshout* is a figure of speech here, and a highly effective one. And there are several other verbs like it. From *speak* Shakespeare makes *unspeak*, *swear* → *unswear, curse* → *uncurse*, and many more.

So what does Shakespeare's use of *un-* teach us? Again, it's an exercise in being daring. Interesting and novel *un-* usages permeate Modern English, too. We had *unban*

in the 1960s, referring to the removing of a prohibition – in the case of South Africa, initially. In the 1980s we had *unbundle*, referring to the way a company can be split into parts. Then there was that interesting cluster from the middle decades of the century, including *unputdownable*, *unswitchoffable*, and *unwearoutable*. Here are some of the ones that the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls 'recent formations':

unbombed, unbugged, un-Chinese, unchoosy, un-Christmassy, uncool, unfunny, unfussed, ungay, ungimmicky, unhip, unpolicemanlike, unsorry, untouristy, unyoung

To take just one of these: *unyoung*. This is a perfect example of the Shakespearian method in daily practice. We already have *young* and *old* as opposites. Why should we need something else? The answer is because whoever invented it first – and the new form may have been created many times, by different people in different places – wanted to express an additional nuance of meaning. The opposite of *young* is *old*, but there are some contexts when people find the contrast awkward. For instance, if someone said, on a particularly bad morning, 'I'm feeling old', but wanted to avoid using the word *old*, they might well opt for 'I'm feeling distinctly unyoung today'. And that is how I have heard the term used. It often goes along with two other *un-* uses, as part of a rhetorical, political 'group of three'. *Unyoung, uncolored, unpoor*, is the title of a book by Colin Morris; and I've also come across *unyoung, unblack, and unpoor* and *unhip, unyoung, and unliberal* in political magazines, referring to the 'silent majority'.

It is all a matter of semantic motivation. I have also heard *unold* – though not with reference to people. That usage referred to a car, in a second-hand car showroom, when someone was commenting on how nice its bodywork was. 'Looks really unold, it does,' he said. I have heard *ungreen* – referring to a coat of green paint which was disliked – 'Would you ungreen it?', meaning, replace it by some other colour. And the other day I came across *unbig*, in a health journal: 'There is still a strong tendency to make the facility appear as 'unbig' a hospital as possible,' said the writer. At least that writer had the grace to use inverted commas.

These are nonce usages – words invented on the spur of the moment to make a point – 'for the nonce', as they used to say in Shakespeare's time. They are not part of the language – at least, not yet. They are certainly breaking the rules. *Un-* is routinely used to negate subjective and evaluative judgements and attitudes (as in *unaware, unattractive, unbecoming*) but traditionally never with adjectives of size and colour, or with those many monosyllabic, Anglo-Saxon words which have long had their own opposites in English – we do not usually need to say (unless we live in an Orwellian world) *ungood, undeep, unstrong, unwide*, and so on. But opposites are very black-and-white, as it were, and when we want to express shades of grey, and think of opposites as being at two ends of a scale, then new words often need to be invented. You can see how it works if you think of *young* and *old* in this way, as in the diagram. If *young* takes up the left half of the scale and *old* the right half, then 'not young' and 'not old' fall somewhere in the middle.

young ————————————not young — not old ————————————— old

Notice that 'not young' does not mean 'old' – it is the lowest point on a scale of youngness, but it has not yet entered into the scale of oldness. That is why it appeals.

If these nonce usages catch on, they will creep into dictionaries – first the big native-speaker dictionaries. Already all these words are mentioned by the *OED*, and some have usages from older centuries. *Unold*, in fact, turns up in a quotation from 1440! Some of the words will eventually get into the EFL dictionaries – I have noticed *uncool* and *unfunny* in the new edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, for example. But getting into the dictionary is not what we learn from Shakespeare. My point is that we must be prepared to encounter these words, in the drama of conversational interaction, and what he teaches us is not to be scared of them – and not to be scared to use them ourselves when we find ourselves in a context where the usage cries out to be used. Be daring!

Shakespeare teaches us how to dare with language. He shows us how to be linguistically creative. But even if we do not dare to dare, there is no getting away from him in ELT. Because of his status in the history of English literature, elements of his writing have become part of the communal consciousness of native-speakers, and thus part of the linguistic intuitions which foreign learners are trying to emulate. I am not here talking about a knowledge of the plays and poems – who Hamlet is, or what happened to him. Nor am I talking about learning texts off by heart – the quotations syndrome beloved of pedants and actors. I am, rather, referring to the use made by English speakers of such quotations. They allude to them, in language play, and you need to be aware of them, to get the point. Here are some examples, which make use of *To be or not to be*, all from newspaper headlines. *To pay or not to pay* comes from the periodical *The New Statesman* – the article was about having to pay to get in to see a tennis match. *To copy or not to copy* was an article on photocopying in schools. *To breed or not to breed* headed one on population control. And so we could go on:

To script or not to script
To clone or not to clone
To diet or not to diet
To fight or not to fight

That last one just before the Iraq War. And a Web search would bring to light hundreds more. It seems to me that the point at which you jump from simply referring to the quotation, as Shakespeare used it, to the point where you manipulate it to suit your purposes, is a real jump in linguistic sophistication.

Another example which has travelled down the ages takes a famous line from *Richard II* (II.iii), when Henry Bolingbroke tries to explain his actions directly to the Duke of York instead of using Lord Berkeley as a messenger:

Bolingbroke: I shall not need transport my words by you.
Here comes his grace in person. – My noble uncle! (*he kneels*)
York: Show me thy humble heart, and not thy knee,
Whose duty is deceivable and false.
Bolingbroke: My gracious uncle –
York: Tut, tut, grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle.

This is another example of word-class conversion – two examples, in fact, with both *grace* and *uncle* being used as verbs. But the construction seems to have captured the public imagination. We find Shakespeare using it elsewhere.

Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds

says Old Capulet, in *Romeo and Juliet.*

Virgin me no virgins

says a character in *A New Way To Pay Old Debts*, a play by Philip Massinger – one of Shakespeare's contemporaries.

Vow me no vows

says a character in *Wit Without Money*, a play by Beaumont and Fletcher, a few years later. And the usage threads its way through later English literature:

Petition me no petitions.

That turns up in the eighteenth century, in Henry Fielding's novel, *Tom Thumb.*

Diamond me no diamonds.

That one is from the Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. And it continues to be used today. There's actually a Web site collection of poetry called

Poem Me No Poems.

And in 2001 a new punk rock group was formed, called:

But Me No Buts.

On their Web site, the group try to explain where their name came from.

Our name comes from a line that i read in a book i have long since forgotten (possibly by Clive Barker)

No, it was Shakespeare actually.

It is remarkable, actually, just how much Shakespeare has infiltrated our language, when it comes to matters of idiom and style. Most people aren't aware of the extent of his contribution, in fact. There are over a hundred present-day idioms and semi-proverbial expressions deriving from Shakespeare. To illustrate them, I give you an extract from my forthcoming thriller, *The Murderer of Venice*, which will be given a staged reading by IATEFL in 2011, in which the entire dialogue is dependent on Shakespearian expressions which have entered the English language. This is from Act 5 Scene 18, when a descendant of Constable Dull reveals who dunnit. I will interpolate the play sources. I know it will reduce the poetic quality and the dramatic impact, but you will have to put up with that. Here he is talking to a journalist about the chief constable:

Policeman: Our lord and master (*All's Well That Ends Well*) has seen better days (*As You Like It*). Says he hasn't slept a wink (*Cymbeline*). Found a woman's body in his office last night, he did.

Journalist: A murder?

Policeman: Without a doubt, foul play (*Hamlet*). Dead as a door-nail (*Henry VI*). Horrible sight it was. Beggared all description (*Antony and Cleopatra*). Really set my teeth on edge (*Henry IV*).

Journalist: Any theories about who dunnit?

Policeman: Well I thought it was early days (*Troilus and Cressida*), but as good luck would have it (*Merry Wives of Windsor*), we got the murderer – caught him myself, as a matter of fact.

Journalist: Really?

Policeman: Oh yes. When you hear it, you'll laugh yourself into stitches (*Twelfth Night*). You might say it was a foregone conclusion (*Othello*).

Journalist: Why, who was it?

Policeman: The chief constable himself.

Journalist: I don't believe it.

Policeman: Oh yes we got him, at one fell swoop (*Macbeth*). I said to him, the game is up (*Cymbeline*). Tell truth and shame the devil (*Henry IV*). Well, to give the devil his due (*Henry V*), he knits his brows (*Henry VI*), says ah, what the dickens (*Merry Wives*), I'd better make a virtue out of necessity (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*), I see you have hoist me with my own petard (*Hamlet*). Well, I just stood there, with bated breath (*The Merchant of Venice*). Why did you do it, I asks him? There was neither rhyme nor reason, he says (*As You Like It*), I've been in such a pickle (*The Tempest*), I'm a blinking idiot (*Merchant*), playing fast and loose (*King John*), living in a fool's paradise (*Romeo and Juliet*), wanting too much of a good thing (*As You Like It*). The more fool you, I says (*The Taming of the Shrew*). Surely you know, in the end, truth will out? (*Merchant*) Then he breaks down. All his excuses just melt into thin air (*Tempest*). Love is blind, he says (*Merchant*). That's my downfall – green-eyed jealousy (*Merchant*). She was a tower of strength to me (*Richard III*). I had to be cruel only to be kind (*Hamlet*). It was more in sorrow than in anger (*Hamlet*).

Journalist: Sounds as if he was more sinned against than sinning (*Lear*).

(I like to spread the good lines around my characters.)

Policeman: Be that as it may (*Henry VI*), he was a devil incarnate (*Titus Andronicus*). He didn't fool me. He knows how to keep a good tongue in his head (*Tempest*). I was having none of that. Good riddance, I says (*Troilus*). I don't stand on ceremony (*Julius Caesar*), don't like all that pomp and circumstance (*Othello*). I've been dancing attendance here for too long, I says (*Richard III*), I'm not budging an inch, I says (*Shrew*). You've made us all a laughing-stock, I says (*Merry Wives*), that's the be-all and end-all of it (*Macbeth*). I hope he stays in jail till the crack of doom (*Macbeth*).

Journalist: Jolly good show.

Policeman: Well fair play (*Troilus*), I am to the manner born, as you might say.

And with that Hamletian observation we leave our play within a lecture – I could have gone on, with another forty or so expressions available to me, but brevity, as you know, is the soul of wit.

Now I list all these idioms to show you just how much Shakespeare is part of the English language, without people realizing it. Few native speakers would be aware that these idioms actually first appear in the plays mentioned. They have become totally integrated into the language. So you have to distinguish these from a rather different

kind of example – cases where writers consciously allude in a headline or slogan to some words from a play. Take *As You Like It*. I have seen this play-title in all kinds of unusual contexts. For example at the top of a newspaper cooking review:

An Old English custard recipe – just as you like it.

It is also the name of an organization which deals in photographic restoration, and another which deals in the dry cleaning of clothes. And a theatre review of a Shakespeare play which the reviewer felt was particularly authentic was headed:

As Shakespeare Liked It.

I've also been collecting examples of unusual uses of *All's Well that Ends Well*. I have several examples where it heads a sports report, for instance, referring to someone winning at the last minute. And it was used in a Spanish ELT Centre to introduce a course on English suffixes. As a third example, *Much Ado About Nothing* is just waiting to be exploited. I have seen it introduce items about milk, ballroom dancing, cats – anything where there is some controversy involved. *Much Ado About Pluto* referred to new discoveries which were causing controversy among astronomers. *Much a'do about Nagoya*, though, was a Japanese tourist Website. It was cleverly different, because there was an apostrophe after the *a* of *ado* – 'Much to do About Nagoya'.

There isn't space to go into all the ways Shakespeare is creative with words, by bending and breaking rules, but there is one further kind of example which is very important, and that is in relation to the use of collocations. Let's take the word *auspicious*, which means 'showing that something is likely to be successful'. I choose it because Shakespeare is the first recorded user of this word, according to the *OED*. Which words are most likely to go with *auspicious* in English? A Google Web-search brought to light the following collocations:

times – *day, night, Monday, Tuesday, etc., date, period, month, year*
entities (often in a feng-shui or similar context) – *coin, animal, ornament, sign, symbol, motif, reading, name, yoga*
locations – *latitude, direction*

However, no dictionary, as far as I know, would collocate *auspicious* with the following words. The reading of a book might have a very successful outcome for you, but we do not usually say: *That's a very auspicious book* or *That's an auspicious bottle of wine*. The operative word is 'usually', of course. One of the things a poet does is break the normal rules of collocation. Shakespeare does it all the time. Let me leave *auspicious* for a moment, and take an example from *Hamlet*, where Hamlet is talking to his friend Horatio (III.ii.58), and praising him for his qualities. Horatio gets embarrassed and asks him to stop:

Horatio: O my dear lord –
Hamlet: Nay, do not think I flatter.
For what advancement may I hope from thee,
That no revenue hast but thy good spirits
To feed and clothe thee? Why should the poor be flattered?
No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,
And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee
Where thrift may follow fawning.

In two lines we get three striking collocations: the *candied tongue* – the sweet-talking speaker; *absurd pomp* – the complete reverse of the usual collocations for pomp; and the vivid *pregnant hinges* – *pregnant* here means 'well-disposed, ready'. Shakespeare is evidently a great collocational rule-breaker. So, how does he handle *auspicious*? Does he restrict it to the usual suspects? Of course not. He uses the word on five occasions. Two of them are fairly standard. We have an 'auspicious star' in *The Tempest* (I.ii.183), and in *The Winter's Tale* (IV.iv.52) the heroine Perdita addresses the goddess Fortune with these words:

O Lady Fortune,
Stand you auspicious!

But in *All's Well That Ends Well* (III.iii.8), the Duke tells Bertram to go to war on his behalf, with fortune to guide him, and we get something a little less usual, to modern ears:

Duke: Then go thou forth,
        And fortune play upon thy prosperous helm
        As thy auspicious mistress!

A similar usage turns up in *King Lear* (II.i.39). And the remaining example is a *Hamlet* usage, early in the play (I.ii.11), when King Claudius is telling his courtiers how he has married Hamlet's mother:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our Queen,
Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

I imagine, given the freshness of the word *auspicious*, that each of these collocations would have made an impact on the audience of the time. *Auspicious* had no collocations yet, because the word was so new. Collocations take a while to be established in people's minds. But one thing is plain: Shakespeare was avoiding the older collocations. We can see this if we look at the other adjectives which were being used with these nouns around that time. The adjectives which are found in *OED* quotations, pre-Shakespeare, for *mistress* are *low, worthy, special, absolute, great* (twice), *noble, sovereign*, and *sweet* – all rather literal and predictable. Those for *fortune* – not very many (this word tended to be used as a solitary noun) – are *good* (twice), *fair, evil, extreme*, and *great* – again, not a very imaginative set. *Auspicious* does seem to be a somewhat more imaginative collocation for these words.

So, once again, Shakespeare seems to be telling us to be daring, if we want to show we are in control of the language we are learning. Be daring with collocations, this time. And if we look around, in Modern English, we can see examples of it happening. A quick Web trawl brought to light two titles:

Welcome to Auspicious Electrical Engineering Co Ltd

And, in relation to the TV series *Star Trek*:

the *Auspicious*-class Transwarp Research Platform

But in everyday chat, I have heard several nonce collocations, some very Shakespearian in character.

You have a very auspicious face

That was said by someone at a singles night.

That was a highly auspicious paper

That was said by a student, referring to an exam. And I thought I would try out *auspicious bottle of wine* once at a party. As the bottle was produced, at the beginning of the meal, I said, 'That's an auspicious bottle of wine'. The host didn't even blink. In fact, I think he took it as a compliment.[1]

Whatever else we are up to, in ELT, it is teaching conversation. There is no other function of language that matches it. And conversation, outside literature, is the most creative linguistic thing we ever do. It is unpredictable in its subject matter, and keeps you on your toes. It is unpredictable in its participation: in a group you never quite know who is going to talk next. It is interactive, and therefore unpredictable in the reactions you encounter. It requires us to read between the lines, as people bring their individual backgrounds, presuppositions and assumptions to bear. When you participate in a multi-party conversation, it is a bit like watching a play, with the difference that at any point someone might turn to you and say 'What do you think?' It is a play in which we are all leading characters. Conversation is, in a word, a dramatic situation, and I believe the best kind of person we can get guidance from, to explore how we should behave in it, is a dramatist. Not just Shakespeare, of course, but he is the obvious choice to focus the argument, and especially today, seeing as it is his birthday. I have been arguing that we can learn a great deal, as ELT teachers, from the way Shakespeare operates with the English language. A study of his linguistic techniques, in such areas as functional shift, affixation, idiomatic allusiveness and collocation, can add to our awareness of the language's expressive potential and increase our confidence as users. At the same time, of course, the more we study Shakespeare from a linguistic point of view, the more we will increase our understanding and enjoyment of the plays as literature and theatre.

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[1] Editor's note: For further examples of these types of linguistic creativity, see Jim Scrivener's contribution to the 'Joy' discussion on pp. 181–182.