



PART III

LANGUAGE

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TO UNDERSTAND LANGUAGE, the most complex of all human behaviors, involves taking into account a large number of variables, each of which plays a part in what we cumulatively call a person's style. This chapter aims to provide a model or road map that identifies the main variables and explains their interaction, illustrating each through a recognized point of Shakespearean usage. The examples aim only to illustrate the possibilities and suggest directions. It will be apparent that, when it comes to language, there is plenty of scope for original investigation. However, before exploring Shakespeare's use of language, we need to be aware of the factors that make generalizing about its character so difficult.

GENERALIZATION AMID DIVERSITY

A summary statement about "Shakespeare's style" is not possible, for several reasons:

First, writing over a twenty-year period, Shakespeare presents us with an evolving style, as illustrated, for example, by his maturing metrical technique. In his early writing, we find a verse line in which major grammatical constructions often coincide with line boundaries, as in this clause-per-line sequence from *Henry VI, Part 3*:

Now, Richard, I am with thee here alone.  
This is the hand that stabbed thy father York,  
And this the hand that slew thy brother Rutland,  
And here's the heart that triumphs in their death  
And cheers these hands that slew thy sire and brother  
To execute the like upon thyself.  
(3H6 2.4.5-10)

By contrast, in his later writing, we find many verse lines in which there is no simple correspondence between metrical and grammatical units, as in these grammatically diverse lines from *The Winter's Tale*:

Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I  
Play too; but so disgraced a part, whose issue  
Will hiss me to my grave. Contempt and clamour  
Will be my knell. Go play, boy, play. There have been,  
Or I am much deceived, cuckolds ere now ...  
(WT 1.2.198-202)

Whatever generalizations we might wish to make about Shakespeare's verse technique in his early years, these will be of only limited relevance in relation to the late plays. Several aspects of his language illustrate similar issues of stylistic development.

Second, writing so widely about the human condition, Shakespeare presents us with varieties of English that reflect a remarkable diversity of characters and social situations, from court to gutter. On the one hand, we have the diplomatic sweetness of an Osric or a Rosencrantz:

Both your majesties  
Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,  
Put your dread pleasures more into command  
Than to entreaty.  
(Ham. 2.2.26-29)

On the other, we have the streetwise directness of a Mistress Quickly or a Doll Tearsheet: "I'll tell you what, you thin man in a censer: I will have you as soundly swung for this, you bluebottle rogue, you filthy famished correctioner" (2H4 5.4.16-18). Whatever generalizations we might wish to make about the language of the former, these will not comfortably apply when we examine the language of the latter.

Third, writing across comic, tragic, and historical genres, Shakespeare presents us with types of discourses that express the demands of different kinds of intentions, social interactions, and states of mind. At one extreme, there is the colloquial prose in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* of Lance talking about his dog: "He had not been there - bless the mark - a pissing-while but all the chamber smelled



him. 'Out with the dog,' says one. 'What cur is that?' says another" (*TGV* 4.4.15-17).

At the other extreme, we have the meditative verse of Richard II talking about his imprisonment:

I have been studying how I may compare  
This kingdom where I live unto the world,  
And for because the world is populous  
And here is not a creature but myself  
I cannot do it.

(*R2* 5.5.1-5)

Individuals vary their discourse, too: whatever generalizations we might wish to make about the language of Prince Harry talking to his father, these will have little application when we observe the way he talks to Falstaff.

Fourth, writing with a sensitive ear for the phonaesthetics of English, and with a penchant for wordplay, Shakespeare presents us with many kinds of linguistic creativity, illustrated by phonetic idiosyncrasy, phonological effects such as alliteration and rhyme, neologisms, puns, and risqué jokes. On the one hand, we have the deviant sounds and jerky rhythm of a Frenchman "abusing the King's English" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: "By Gar, me dank you vor dat. By Gar, I love you, and I shall procure-a you de good guest: de earl, de knight, de lords, de gentlemen, my patients" (*Wiv.* 2.3.72-74). On the other hand, we have the subtly structured regularities, pointed to by alliteration and rhyme, that characterize the opening of sonnet 71:

No longer mourn for me when I am dead  
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell  
Give warning to the world that I am fled  
From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell.

(*Son.* 71.1-4)

A particular feature can convey very different effects. Whatever generalizations we might wish to make about the effect of Hamlet's emotionally explosive alliteration in "bloody, bawdy villain" (*Ham.* 2.2.532), these will not explain Pyramus/Bottom's mock-heroic "gracious, golden, glittering gleams" (*MND* 5.1.258).

Fifth, writing in the period known as Early Modern English, Shakespeare uses language in which several words, pronunciations, and grammatical contrasts differ from what we are familiar with today. We no longer routinely distinguish between *thou* and *you*, for example, and even when we do (as in religious services) we do not share Elizabethan intuitions about the range of effects these pronouns conveyed. One use of *thou* is plainly an insult, as in Toby Belch's advice to Sir Andrew about how to challenge Cesario in *Twelfth Night*: "Taunt him with the licence of ink. If thou 'thou'st' him some thrice, it shall not be amiss . . ." (*TN* 3.2.34-35). Another is plainly affectionate, as in Celia's gentle chiding of Rosalind in *As You Like It*: "I pray thee, Rosalind, sweet my coz, be merry" (*AYLI* 1.2.1).

Switching between *thou* and *you* is always significant, and needs to be carefully analyzed. The situation is complicated by the fact that many features of Early Modern English (including the use of *thou/you*) were undergoing change at the time. Even Shakespeare's characters sometimes noticed. Whatever generalizations we might wish to make about Mercutio's use of language, they evidently will not apply to Tybalt, whose fashionable pronunciation and grammar is such a source of irritation in *Romeo and Juliet*: "The pox of such antic, lispings, affecting phantasies, these new tuners of accent! 'By Jesu, a very good blade, a very tall man, a very good whore'" (*Rom.* 2.4.25-26).

The intensifying use of *very* before an adjective was a relatively recent development in English, but it is probably Tybalt's accent rather than the word that so much annoys Mercutio, who actually used *very* himself a few seconds earlier.

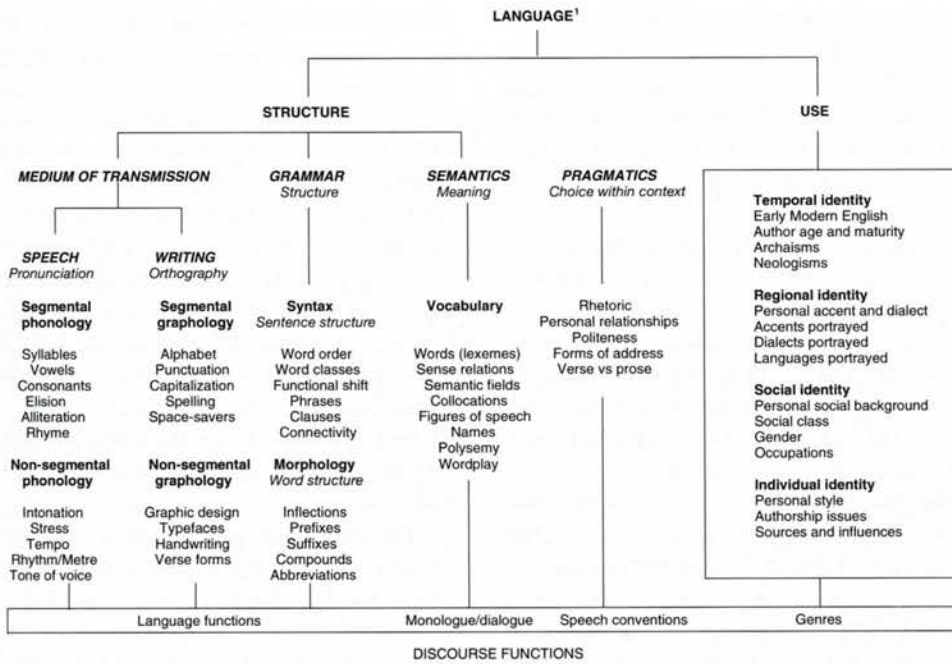
#### STRUCTURE, USE, AND PRAGMATICS

A widely used model of language begins by introducing the complementary dimensions of *structure* and *use* (see Figure 28). The distinction is familiar to anyone who has acquired a foreign language: learning the sounds, grammar, and vocabulary is one task; learning how to put those features to appropriate and effective use in real situations is another. Both dimensions are essential for efficient language learning. Words and sentences should never be taught without considering the situations in which they might be used, and a situation (such as "going to the market") should never be introduced without an awareness of the words and sentences that are most likely to be used there. Structure and use are two sides of a coin, and the arrow in the diagram is there to remind us of their interdependence.

The same principle applies to Shakespearean language study, which traditionally has kept structure and use apart. On the one hand, we see many studies focusing on features of linguistic structure, such as alliteration, rhyme, meter, and word order. On the other hand, we see many studies focusing on the way language has been used to identify themes, create atmosphere, display mood, express character, and so on. Few are the studies that bring the two dimensions together, and my vision of the future of Shakespearean linguistics is one in which this happens routinely.

It is a vision in which observations about structure are complemented by considerations about use: Why is rhyme used in that passage? What function does alliteration serve in that stanza? What is the purpose of that short metrical line? Correspondingly, in this vision, observations about use are complemented by considerations about structure: What features of language express a particular mental state (e.g., Leontes's jealous obsession)? What linguistic idiosyncrasies identify characters (e.g., the





28. Diagram of complementary structure and use. Courtesy of Ton Hoenselaars.

extravert Pistol)? How are differences of social status expressed through the use of terms of address? And also, how well do these features do the job we think they are intended to do?

This last point is especially important and has become the focus of a recently developed branch of linguistics known as *pragmatics*. Pragmatics is the study of the choices we make when we use language and of the factors governing those choices. It always asks “why?” Why does a character use *thou* as opposed to *you*? Why is there a short metrical line at a particular point in a speech? Why is a certain word felt to be so effective? In each case, Shakespeare has made a choice, and the best way to understand why he made that choice is to explore the alternatives. What would have been the effect if the character had used *you* at that point in the play? What effect would have been lost if that line had been longer? What other words were available in the language that he might have chosen?

A great deal can be gained from mentally rewriting Shakespearean lines – not to make them easier to understand but to develop our sense of why they work the way they do. Of all the elements in a model of Shakespearean language, pragmatics is the most critical, because without it we are left with a disassociation between structure and use. A pragmatic perspective forces us to relate the two dimensions. That is why in the figure there is a line joining pragmatics to the structure/use axis.

In Shakespearean pragmatics, the language used by the characters is analyzed to establish their communicative intentions, the nature of their relationship, and the effects particular usages have on their onstage listeners. It also explores the effects the language has on us, the audience/

readers, especially taking into account the differences in theatrical practices and audience expectations between Early Modern English and Modern English. It is in this part of the diagram that we would “locate” a study of the language used in soliloquy, for example, or of controversial ethnic and gender issues such as the interaction with Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* or with Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Points of detail would include terms of address in general (such as the choice between *thou* and *you* referred to earlier) and the use of kinship terms.

To take this example further, most Shakespearean kinship terms look the same as their modern counterparts, the exceptions being *grandam*, *grandsire*, and *stepdame*, with *sire* and *dam* being a contemptuous way of referring to a father or mother, as in Queen Margaret’s insult to Richard: “thou art neither like thy sire nor dam” (3H6 2.2.135). The familiar terms have a wider range of application: *brother*, *sister*, *mother*, *father*, *son*, and *daughter* include in-laws and step-siblings, and *cousin* (or *coz*) is very much more inclusive, being used for virtually any relative beyond the immediate family and often as a term of affection between socially equal people who are not relatives at all, such as monarchs of different countries. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Theseus calls Pirithous *cousin*, though they are nothing more than long-standing comrades (TNK 1.1.222).

Also under the pragmatics heading would be the choice made between verse and prose when characters interact. Although some plays are written entirely in verse (e.g., *Richard II*) and some almost entirely in prose (e.g., *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), most display a mixture of the two, with the social situation or the nature of the



interaction prompting one or the other. Verse is characteristic of a "high style" of language used by high-status people, prose with a "low style," though upper-class people have the ability to accommodate those of lower class, using prose as occasion demands. Prince Hal is well aware of his ability in this respect: "I can drink with any tinker in his own language" (*1H4* 2.5.15).

Lower-class people who move in court circles, or who talk to upper-class people, can sometimes accommodate in the other direction – an expected ability in the case of a court messenger but totally unexpected, it would seem, in the case of a rioting citizen, judging by the reaction of Menenius in *Coriolanus* when addressed in verse: "Fore me, this fellow speaks!" (*Cor.* 1.1.103). Switching from verse to prose or vice versa can signal the varying temperature of a relationship, and this, too, is sometimes explicitly acknowledged by the characters. In *As You Like It*, Orlando arrives in the middle of a prose conversation in which Jaques is discussing his melancholy with Ganymede/Rosalind. Orlando addresses Ganymede as a lover with a line of verse, which immediately makes Jaques take his leave:

ORLANDO: Good day and happiness, dear Rosalind.

JAQUES: Nay then God b'wi'you an you talk in  
blank verse.

ROSALIND: Farewell, Monsieur Traveller.

(*AYLI* 4.1.23–26)

It is important to bear a pragmatic perspective in mind whichever area of language one is investigating; otherwise, language study can degenerate into mechanical feature-spotting ("there are six instances of alliteration in that stanza"), and the associated terminology can become an end in itself ("the line consists of three spondees followed by a dactyl"). Pragmatics prioritizes the identification and explanation of effect. If we make words alliterate, in English, the effect is noticeable because English is not a language that makes routine use of repeated initial consonants. Why, then, should anyone wish to alliterate? There are two answers. One is phonetic: the repeated sounds appeal to our phonaesthetic sense. The other is phonological: the repeated sounds foster semantic links, the unexpected similarity of sound suggesting or reinforcing a relationship of sense. Both functions can be seen in these lines from sonnet 67. Nature is said to be bankrupt, because the youth who is the subject of the poem has received all her wealth of human beauty:

Why should poor beauty indirectly seek  
Roses of shadow, since his rose is true?  
Why should he live, now nature bankrupt is,  
Beggared of blood to blush through lively veins?

(*Son.* 67.7–10)

The alliteration first suggests a semantic association between *beauty* and *bankrupt*, and then maintains,

through the reiterated /b/s, the dramatic force of the bankruptcy image while adding an extra semantic association between *blood* and *blushing*.

Introductions to language move in various directions, as they explore the domains included in Figure 28. Some "start at the left," as was typical of mid-twentieth-century approaches to language study, which introduced phonology before moving on to morphology and other areas of language structure. Others "start at the right," as was typical of the various "communicative" approaches to language teaching of the 1960s and later, which began by identifying the various social and rhetorical situations in which language is used. Evidently, there is no "right" way. Many roads lead us into the study of language, and which one we take will depend on our background, purpose, and taste.

The important point is that, wherever we do start, we end up covering all the variables, which is the aim of the present chapter. Any study of Shakespeare's language that aims at completeness must take into account all the domains identified in Figure 28. The sections of this introduction that follow therefore illustrate what is involved under each heading. The question "What does this word / sentence / line / scene ... mean?" is probably the most commonly asked, which is why this account begins with semantics, the study of meaning, and devotes the most space to it.

## SEMANTICS

Much of semantics is taken up with the study of *vocabulary* – a domain that, because of its size (in Shakespeare, approaching 20,000 different lexical units – more technically, *lexemes*; less technically, *words*), is least subject to generalization. It is usually presented in glossary or dictionary form, which has the merit of easy lookup but the demerit of distancing us from the sense relationships between the words. In alphabetically organized works, words are arbitrarily separated that need to be related: *mines*, for example, is some distance away from *countermines* (see *H5* 3.3.3ff.).

In a thesaurus, words that belong to the same semantic field *are* placed together, but they do not have definitions, and no indication is given of how they relate to each other. We lack a sense of the different degrees of insult among the words in the "strumpet" field, for instance – *baggage*, *drab*, *harlot*, *stale*, *whore*, and over fifty more (listed in Spevack). Studies of the semantic structure of Shakespeare's vocabulary (or, more generally, of Early Modern English) are few and far between, largely owing to the difficulty of accessing the primary historical data. The recent publication of *The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Kay et al.) will greatly facilitate this kind of study.

The following topics illustrate the nature of semantic investigations into Shakespeare's language.



### Sense relations

The semantic links between words are defined by such notions as sameness of meaning (*synonymy*), opposite-ness of meaning (*antonymy*), and included meaning (*hyponymy*). We need to work on a case-by-case basis to establish these relationships and to determine whether the semantic connection between a pair of words is the same as in Modern English. For example, the adjectives *heavy* and *light* are opposites in Early Modern English, but only for some of their meanings. When *light* means "promiscuous" (as in "light wenches," *LLL* 4.3.361), the opposite is not *heavy*. When *heavy* means "weary" (as in "heavy ploughman," *MND* 5.1.354), the opposite is not *light*. But when *heavy* means "sorrowful" (as in "my heavy son," *Rom.* 1.1.128), the opposite is indeed *light* meaning "merry" (as in "light joy," *Luc.* 1434). This is why it is appropriate for Romeo to add this pairing to his oxymoronic outburst: "O brawling love, loving hate ... heavy lightness, serious vanity ..." (*Rom.* 1.1.167).

### Collocations

The sequential associations between words, known as *collocations*, can be easily tested in Modern English by a "fill in the blank" kind of test: someone is *green with*\_\_\_\_? Most people will say *envy*, or *jealousy*, and it is a clear sign of linguistic innovation when someone creates an effect by departing from the expected associations: *green with delight*. Shakespeare regularly departs from conventional collocations. We find *green* collocating with the expected *holly*, *plants*, and *leaves*, as it does today, but also with *wit*, *virginity*, and *melancholy*. What is difficult to establish is the distinction between norm and innovation in Early Modern English.

Taking this last example and restricting it to adjective collocations, Shakespeare describes *melancholy* as *deep*, *sullen*, *surlly*, *dull*, *sour*, *cloudy*, *thick*, *profound*, *unmanly*, *true*, *good*, *rude*, *curst*, *tragic*, *villainous*, *sable-coloured*, *high-proof*, and *dull-eyed* (surprisingly, in view of the association of melancholy with black bile, never as *black*). But it is not at all clear which (if any) of these would have been everyday Early Modern English collocations and which would have been perceived as imaginative creations. Only a corpus investigation of the period could suggest an answer to this question, and such corpora are still very restricted in scope: a preliminary search of the Michigan Early Modern English Corpus found twenty-eight instances of *melancholy*, with only two instances accompanied by an adjective (*hypocondriacal*, *desperate*), the first from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), the second from much later (1640). Burton uses the term hundreds of times in his book but hardly ever with an accompanying adjective. Perhaps the true Shakespearean innovation was to assign attributes of any kind to *melancholy*.

### Semantic fields

Words do not exist as isolated units but, through sense relations and collocations, form *semantic fields*, which express domains of experience, such as furniture, fruit, money, clothing, and vehicles. It is always illuminating to see how the meaning and use of a word are affected by being part of a field. In Modern English, the root *operate*, for example, is used in very different ways in the fields of medicine and telephony. In the former, we can have *operations*; in the latter, *operators*. But surgeons are not *operators*, and telephonists do not perform *operations*. In a Shakespearean context, it is always illuminating to see how sets of words define the structure of a semantic field, and how we need to adapt this structure to explain the way these words are used.

The field of money, for example, can be seen as comprising three main lexical sets: English coins, foreign coins, and terms notionally expressing tiny amounts. Although a money system is in reality a gradually increasing scale of values, the dramatic use of money terms contrasts small-value terms with large-value terms. On the one hand, we have the *obolus* found in Falstaff's pocket (*1H4* 2.4.524) and other relatively small values: *halfpence*, *three farthings*, *penny*, *twopence*, *threepence*, *groat*, *sixpence* (also called a *tester* or *testril*), and *shilling*. On the other hand, we have the gold coins of high value, the *angel*, *noble*, *royal*, *Harry ten shillings*, and *pound*. References to foreign coins (*cardecues*, *chequins*, *crowns*, *crusados*, *deniers*, *doits*, *dollars*, *drachmas*, *ducats*, *guilders*, *marks*, *solidares*, and *talents*) are usually notional, suggesting large or small amounts rather than precise values. Some, such as *denier* and *doit*, are used only with reference to trivial amounts, as are such expressions as "some eightpenny matter" (*1H4* 3.3.84) and "forty pence" (*H8* 2.3.89). The semantic exploration of the money field is straightforward, for it uses a single organizational principle (a scale of value) and there are only some thirty terms represented in Shakespeare's works. More problematic would be the structural description of a field such as plants, which has over a hundred terms in the works and a variety of types and functions (decorative, medicinal, mythological, edible, etc.).

### Figures of speech

Figures of speech, in all their traditional variety (metaphor, simile, metonymy, personification, etc.), form an important part – some would say the most important part – of semantic description, and have provided the motivation for innumerable studies of Shakespeare's language. As with other semantic topics, we need to evaluate the novelty and effect of figurative language in terms of its period, insofar as we can, while bearing in mind differences with the present day.

Many similes, for example, seem not to have changed at all in the past 400 years. We still talk about something being *hard as steel*, *soft as silk*, and *black as ink*. But we have



for the most part lost the immediacy of recognition that is required by such images as *soft as wax*, *swift as quicksilver*, and *black as jet*, and Shakespeare is able to make assumptions about the general knowledge of his playgoers that cannot be made today: *black as Acheron*, *chaste as Diana*. Most of these expressions would probably have had widespread use in Elizabethan England, in much the same way as we would not today claim any special poetic insight behind such expressions as *black as coal*. On the other hand, we sense something different underlying *swift as a shadow*, *brief as lightning*, *small as a wand*, *hard as the palm of a ploughman*, and *soft as the sinews of a newborn babe*. And when we encounter *swift as lead* (LLL 3.1.55), we have the clearest possible indication that Shakespeare was well aware of the semantic impact of figurative expression, allowing Mote to defeat his master, Don Armado:

ARMADO: The way is but short. Away!

MOTE: As swift as lead, sir.

ARMADO: The meaning, pretty ingenious? Is not lead a metal, heavy, dull, and slow?

MOTE: Minime, honest master; or rather, master, no.

ARMADO: I say lead is slow

MOTE: You are too swift, sir, to say so.

Is that lead slow which is fired from a gun?

ARMADO: Sweet smoke of rhetoric!

(LLL 3.1.45–52)

#### *Encyclopedic awareness*

Knowledge of the world is not strictly part of language (being able to talk about Paris and Nice does not mean we can speak French), but it interacts with semantics in several ways (once we know about the White House, we can use it as a synonym for the US government). The more we know about classical myths and legends (as with Acheron and Diana in our earlier example), sixteenth-century global geography, and Elizabethan London, the more we will understand what is going on in the plays and poems. The encyclopedic reference may be critical for the plot, as with “the ides of March” (JC 1.2.18), or provide character background, as with Justice Shallow’s mention of “Clement’s Inn” (2H4 3.2.12), or it may add descriptive detail. When the English fleet is described as “with silken streamers the young Phoebus fanning” (3H5 3.0.6), the vividness of the scene will be enhanced by an awareness that Phoebus is the sun god (and not, say, the god of war). In the British dictionary tradition, it is not usual to include proper names in the word list, but any Shakespearean glossary will benefit from including the names of people, mythical beings, places, and named times (such as Michaelmas).

#### *Names*

The study of Shakespeare’s use of proper names also falls within semantics, in a branch of the subject called *onomastics*, with its divisions of *anthroponymy* (personal names) and *toponymy* (place-names). Here, a pragmatic

perspective is illuminating: why are people named in the way they are? For most of his “serious” characters, the names have a simple identifying function, taken from history (Henry V, Gloucester) or the classics (Chiron, Portia), or they are standard Romance or British first names (Antonio, Juliet, Ralph, Alice) or surnames (Montague, Aragon, Evans, Page).

But it is a different story with the names given to the English-nationality minor characters who are comic, ridiculous, or in some way inferior. There are some forty of these figures in the plays, and their names provide great scope for wordplay. Most do duty as common adjectives or nouns in the language, so they are really puns that form a character note: dissolute or foolish gentlemen (Falstaff, Belch, Aguecheek, Froth); clergymen, schoolmasters, justices and their associates (Martext, Pinch, Shallow, Silence, Slender); sergeants and constables (Snare, Fang, Dull, Elbow, Dogberry, Verges); locals (Quince, Bottom, Flute, Snout, Snug, Starveling, Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble, Bullcalf, Nym, Poin, Peto, Pistol, Bardolph); ladies of the town (Quickly, Tearsheet, Overdone); clowns, jesters, and other servants (Mote, Costard, Feste, Touchstone, Simple, Rugby, Speed, Launce, Gobbo, Thump, and Pompey). The sonic resonance of these names is very much part of their effect and has changed little between then and now. Nearly half are monosyllables that pack an onomatopoeic punch. All the names with two syllables have a strong stress on the first element – a contrast with most of the foreign names in the plays (Antonio, etc.). And there are only three longer names in the list, all of them also initial stressed – Aguecheek, Dogberry, and Overdone. The list provides a marked contrast with the typically multisyllabic appellations of the serious characters, who live in such realms as Italy, France, and Athens. Other lines of onomastic inquiry are explored elsewhere (Maguire).

#### *Polysemy*

Scientific words aside, most words in a language have more than one meaning – they are *polysemic* – and this allows authors an opportunity to say several things at once. Usually, the potential polysemy is resolved by context: the “furniture” sense of *table* is eliminated when we read the sentence *The figures in the table don’t add up*. If context allows more than one meaning, we call a sentence *ambiguous* when we are required to make a choice between meanings but are unable to do so, and advocates of clear writing advise us to avoid such ambiguity.

Literature, by contrast, privileges multiple meanings and presents Shakespeare editors with special challenges when they use historical lexicology, most often the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), in an attempt to identify the various possible layers of meaning in the Early Modern English use of a word and decide which ones apply in individual cases. For example, when Ferdinand says he has eyed many a lady “with best regard”



(*Temp.* 3.1.40), does he mean “look” or “affection,” or both? When in the same play Stephano calls Caliban a “brave monster” (*Temp.* 2.2.162), does he mean “bold,” “excellent,” “impudent,” or “worthy” (all possible Early Modern English senses), or some combination of these taken either literally or sarcastically? These provide the meat of many an editorial note and motivate specialist glossaries (e.g., Williams).

The importance of an Early Modern English semantic perspective is well illustrated by semantic errors made in productions of the plays. When Malvolio opens the letter supposedly written by Olivia (*TN* 2.5.119), he reads the instruction, “If this fall into thy hands, revolve.” Most directors and actors pander to the modern meaning: the actor looks puzzled, affectedly turns around in a circle, and the audience laughs. But “revolve” did not mean “perform a circular motion” in Shakespeare’s day; that sense came a century later – the *OED* cites a first usage of 1713. For Shakespeare, the primary meaning was “consider, ponder,” as clearly seen when Belarius tells his sons to “revolve what tales I have told you” (*Cym.* 3.3.14). Malvolio is simply being told: “think very carefully about what this letter contains.” It wouldn’t have made a Globe audience laugh at all. In such cases, historical semantics impacts on dramaturgy.

### Wordplay

When multiple meanings are drawn to our attention for ludic purposes, we talk about *wordplay*. A pun, for example, will only work if we recognize its competing senses, so here, too, it is essential to be aware of what senses were available in Early Modern English. Several of Shakespeare’s puns have survived the transition to Modern English. We can easily appreciate the pun when Dromio of Syracuse tells Adriana that her husband has been arrested by an officer:

ADRIANA: What, is he arrested? Tell me at whose suit.  
 DROMIO: I know not at whose suit he is arrested well;  
 But is in a suit of buff which ’rested him, that can I tell.  
 (*Err.* 4.2.43–45)

The double meaning of *suit* is still with us.

By contrast, some historical semantic distance separates us from the pun when, in the midst of battle, Falstaff offers Prince Hal a case supposedly containing a pistol, saying “There’s that will sack a city” (*1H4* 5.3.51). The case turns out to contain a bottle of sack – a term that seems to have died out in English during the late eighteenth century. Wordplay becomes even more opaque when puns are further obscured by phonological distance. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites mocks Ajax to Achilles with the words “for whomsoever you take him to be, he is Ajax” (*Tro.* 2.1.56–57) – a mock that modern audiences fail to appreciate. But in original pronunciation (as discussed later) it would have raised a huge laugh among the groundlings,

because in Shakespeare’s time the name was pronounced like “a jakes” – and a jakes was the word for a pisshouse.

The wordplay category also includes semantic errors, consciously introduced by the dramatist but unconsciously articulated by the character. They are usually called *Malapropisms*, after the character in Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, but they could just as properly be called Dogberryisms, in view of such examples as “You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit men for the constable of the watch . . . you shall comprehend all vagrom men” (*Ado* 3.3.19–21). However, several other Shakespearean characters, such as Mistress Quickly, could just as easily compete for the title.

### GRAMMAR

Words by themselves, as we have already noted, can have more than one meaning, and we need to look at the context to decide which meaning is to be selected on a particular occasion. Context, however, is expressed through sentences, parts of sentences, and sequences of sentences, and all of this is the subject matter of grammar. The analysis and terminology we encounter in a grammar book (subjects, predicates, clauses, phrases, tenses, moods, and so on) is not there as an end in itself but as a guide to how the language has developed to enable us to express what we want to say.

English grammar offers us several thousand means (often called *rules*) through which we can express our thoughts – the many variations of word order, the different word classes (or parts of speech), the ways in which sentences are connected, the processes of word formation, and the various word endings that signal such distinctions as singular and plural. Grammars organize this information in a variety of ways, but most recognize a basic distinction between the structure of words (*morphology*, earlier known as *accidence*) and the structure of sentences (*syntax*), and this is represented in Figure 28.

### SYNTAX

It is typical in studies of Shakespeare’s grammar to draw attention to the grammatical changes that have taken place since Early Modern English, and this is especially important when we encounter syntactic patterns that have no Modern English counterpart. For example, when we observe the following exchange from *The Taming of the Shrew*, we need to be aware of a construction that has virtually disappeared in Modern English. Petruccio and Grumio have arrived at Hortensio’s house:

PETRUCHIO: Villain, I say, knock me here soundly.  
 GRUMIO: Knock you here, sir? Why, sir, what am I,  
 sir, that I should knock you here, sir.  
 PETRUCHIO: Villain, I say, knock me at this gate,  
 And rap me well or I’ll knock your knave’s pate.



GRUMIO: My master is grown quarrelsome. I should  
knock you first,  
And then I know after who comes by the worst.  
(*Shr.* 1.2.8–14)

Petrucchio means “Knock on the door for me,” using the *ethical dative* – a construction where a pronoun expresses the personal interest of the speaker. Grumio, however, interprets it to mean (as it would in Modern English) “hit me.” The fact that Shakespeare can make the joke at all suggests that the usage was already dying out in his time.

There are several other syntactic differences between Early Modern English and Modern English, such as the ways in which negation was expressed, as illustrated by “why speak not you?” and “she not denies it” (*Ado* 4.1.57, *Ado* 4.1.166). They are described in detail in Blake (2002). However, most of the time, Early Modern English syntax corresponds to that found in Modern English, as can be observed from virtually any prose passage. Here is Falstaff complaining in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*:

Nay, you shall hear, Master Brooke, what I have suffered to bring this woman to evil, for your good. Being thus crammed in the basket, a couple of Ford’s knaves, his hinds, were called forth by their mistress, to carry me, in the name of foul clothes, to Datchet Lane. They took me on their shoulders, met the jealous knave their master in the door, who asked them once or twice what they had in their basket. I quaked for fear lest the lunatic knave would have searched it, but fate, ordaining he should be a cuckold, held his hand. (*Wiv.* 3.5.77–85)

This passage illustrates many features of syntactic structure, and the point to note is that all of them might be found in a present-day play.

The impression that Early Modern English syntax is radically different from that of Modern English comes not from the prose passages but from the verse, where the constraints of meter regularly motivate deviant word orders, as in this example from *Romeo and Juliet*, where Queen Mab gallops

O’er ladies’ lips, who straight on kisses dream,  
Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues  
Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are.  
(*Rom.* 1.4.74–76)

The prose equivalents would be “dream on kisses,” “plagues with blisters,” and “are tainted with sweetmeats.”

A line such as “Free speech, and fearless, I to thee allow” (*R2* 1.1.123) simultaneously breaks three normal word-order rules: the direct object (*free speech*) appears at the front; the indirect object (*to thee*) comes before the verb; and an adjective is coordinated after the noun (*and fearless*). The normal order would be: “I allow to thee free and fearless speech.” Such deviations from the norm place pressure on our immediacy of comprehension, but again, it should be noted, there is nothing intrinsically

Shakespearean about them. Anyone working within a metrical system will find it necessary to introduce such deviations from time to time: “Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills” (*Empson*, 79).

A much-remarked feature of Shakespearean grammar is his penchant for *functional shift* (or *conversion*) – the syntactic process through which one word class is changed into another. All four of the content word classes – noun, verb, adjective, adverb – are converted in this way, as can be seen in “Petruchio is Kated” (illustrating the commonest type, noun to verb, *Shr.* 3.2.234), “he coyed” (adjective to verb, *Cor.* 5.1.6), “an impair thought” (verb to adjective, *Tro.* 4.5.103), and “a better where to find” (adverb to noun, *Lear* 1.1.256). One of the creative reasons for functional shift is to find a more vivid way of expressing an everyday notion, as when *lip* is used as a verb to replace the everyday *kiss*. Another, of course, is to offer an author a succinct alternative metrical solution: “Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness” (*Ant.* 5.2.219).

## MORPHOLOGY

Morphological difference between Early Modern English and Modern English is more noticeable than syntactic variation because the items affected are more frequent. We do not need to read far before we encounter archaic verb forms (e.g., *hath*, *heareth*, *didst*, *art*, *wilt*), pronouns (*ye*, *thou* and its variants), nouns (e.g., *beefs*, *musics*, *gallowses*), and adjective forms (e.g., *more better*, *most poorest*, *honester*, *lyingest*). Once again, though, we must not overemphasize the differences: the vast majority of word endings (*inflections*) in Shakespeare are the same as in Modern English and convey no special import. But when we are presented with a contrast, we do need to look for an explanation.

For example, the availability of both *-eth* and *-s* as a third-person singular verb ending provided the option of an extra syllable, and thus an easy solution to a metrical problem: “Who wanteth food and will not say he wants it” (*Per.* 1.4.11). On the other hand, it is by no means clear why we have two verb forms in this stage direction: “Enter Douglas; he fighteth with Falstaff, who falls down as if he were dead” (*1H4* 5.4.76). Is this an example of free variation? Or is there some sort of aspectual difference (such as the *-eth* here expressing duration)?

A different branch of morphology deals with the way words build up an internal structure through the use of prefixes and suffixes, and by using such processes as compounding (e.g., “three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave,” *Lear* 2.2.14–15) and abbreviation (e.g., *ob* for *obolus*). An example of word formation using prefixes is Shakespeare’s use of *un-*. There are 314 instances in the *OED* where he is the first citation for an *un-* usage. Most of them are adjectives (e.g., *uncomfortable*, *uneducated*), and there are a few adverbs (e.g., *unaware*, *unheedfully*) and nouns (e.g., *an undeserver*), but



there are sixty-two instances where the prefix has been added to an already existing verb, and these are among his most dramatic coinages, as in these two examples from *Richard II*: "Again uncurse their souls" (R2 3.2.137), "My death's sad tale may yet undeaf his ear" (R2 2.1.16).

An example of suffixation is *-ship*, used with twenty-six different words, eight of them being first recorded instances in the *OED*: *attorneyship*, *bachelorship*, *courtship*, *foxship*, *hostess-ship*, *Moorship*, *rectorship*, *spectatorship*. *Foxship*, for example, is used by Volumnia in *Coriolanus* as part of her putdown of Sicinius:

Was not a man my father? Hadst thou foxship  
To banish him that struck more blows for Rome  
Than thou hast spoken words?

(*Cor* 4.2.20–22)

She is accusing him of low cunning, slyness – the supposed qualities of a fox, and it is the suffix *-ship* that does it. We are familiar with *lordship*, *kingship*, *craftsmanship*, and many other words that express the state or quality of something, but the suffix is usually attached to humans or human behavior, or notions that affect humans, such as *hardship*. We don't say *dogship* or *catship* unless we are giving someone a mock title. *Foxship* is a subtler usage.

#### MEDIUM OF TRANSMISSION

We are faced with a reversal of priorities when we consider the relationship between the mediums of speech and writing. Today, it is routine to encounter the plays and poems first through the written medium, and special efforts have to be made to ensure that the auditory experience is not lost (e.g., taking school groups on a theater outing); in Early Modern English, it would have been normal to encounter them first through the spoken medium – and for most people, it would have been their only encounter, owing to widespread illiteracy and (for those who could read) the cost of purchasing published copies. The study of the Early Modern English sound system, using the apparatus of phonetics, is thus an important aim of modern Shakespearean language study, for it enables us to appreciate more closely a vocal style that (at least according to one contemporary observer) went "trippingly upon the tongue" (*Ham.* 3.2.2) and it brings to light rhymes, puns, and other effects that have been lost to modern ears as a result of the inevitability of language change. The study is of more than academic interest, as illustrated by the productions of plays and the rendition of poems in "original pronunciation" in the early 2000s, notably by Shakespeare's Globe in London (described in Crystal).

#### SPEECH

The sound system of a language, and its study, are known as *phonology*, usefully divided into two dimensions. Under the heading of *segmental phonology* are studied the vowel

and consonant segments that make up a sound system and the processes these segments undergo – their combination into syllables, their omission in connected speech (*elision*), and their artistic manipulation for aesthetic, semantic, or pragmatic effect (as seen in alliteration, assonance, and rhyme). Under the heading of *nonsegmental phonology* are studied those aspects of pronunciation that extend over syllables and longer stretches of connected speech, chiefly the features of intonation, stress, tempo, and rhythm (in linguistics, cumulatively referred to as *prosody*, a term that includes the properties of everyday speech – in effect, prose – as well as the study of stress and rhythm in versification).

The prosodic features of an earlier state of a language are notoriously difficult to study, the evidence being limited to what can be deduced from the metrical structure of verse, the observations of contemporary writers on poetry and rhetoric, and the occasional remarks of characters in the plays (such as Page's description of Nym as "a drawling-affecting rogue" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* [*Wiv.* 2.1.117]). The segmental features are easier to establish, thanks to a multiplicity of rhymes and puns in the plays and poems, and an increasingly systematic and phonetically aware exposition by writers throughout the Early Modern English period of the way sounds were being reflected in spellings.

As an example of this phonetic awareness, we can cite Ben Jonson in his *English Grammar* (1640), at the beginning of which he briefly describes the pronunciation of English vowels and consonants. This is what he says about letter O: "It naturally soundeth . . . [i]n the short time more flat, and akin to *u*; as *cosen*, *dosen*, *mother*, *brother*, *love*, *prove*." And in another section, he brings together *love*, *glove*, and *move*. This is the kind of evidence we need to support a reading of lines in which the rhymes do not work in Modern English but do in Early Modern English. In the *Sonnets*, *love* is made to rhyme with *prove*, *move*, and related words (such as *remove*) nineteen times. According to Jonson, these would have rhymed perfectly. This does not exclude the existence of other pronunciations in other accents, of course, and *prove*, for example, is said to have a long vowel in some sources. Evidently, there was a great deal of variation.

The possibility of poetic eye-rhymes also needs to be considered – though this is a less likely explanation at a time when spelling was in such turmoil. Poets need to be able to rely on a standardized spelling system if they want their eye-rhymes to be confidently appreciated, and such a system was a long way off. The more likely explanation is that sound changes since 1600 have distanced the language from us – a distance that reduces greatly when we hear a reading that, as far as the evidence of historical phonology allows, approximates the Early Modern English pronunciation. It is no small matter. In nearly two-thirds of the *Sonnets* (96), there are rhymes that do not work in present-day pronunciation.



## WRITING

The writing system available in Early Modern English, and the use made of it by scribes, typesetters, and the author himself, is a well-ploughed domain of Shakespearean language study, with major contributions coming from historical typography and paleography. Therefore it needs little exposition here other than to identify the kinds of topics that come together. The study of the writing system of a language is called *graphology*, and – as with phonology – it proves useful to distinguish two dimensions.

Under the heading of *segmental graphology* are studied the segments that make up a writing system – the letters (uppercase and lowercase), punctuation marks, and other symbols (e.g., abbreviatory conventions such as &), organized into words and larger grammatical units through the conventions of spelling and capitalization. Under the heading of *nonsegmental graphology* are studied the broader properties of the written text – its graphic design as displayed through the layout of text on a page (to show dialogue changes, verse line breaks, stanza divisions, etc.) and the function of distinctive typefaces (e.g., italics in stage directions and proper names). The properties of handwriting also fall under this heading, and prove of special interest when questions of authorship are raised (as in the case of “Hand D” in *The Booke of Sir Thomas More*). (See Chapter 131, “Manuscripts Containing Texts by Shakespeare.”)

## VARIATIONS IN USE

When we study the structure of Shakespearean English, we are aiming to make statements about the way pronunciation, orthography, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics combine to express everything we encounter in plays and poems, such as the telling of stories, the exploration of themes, the creation of atmosphere, the identification of characters, the development of relationships, and the expression of emotions. But this is not done by using a single structural system. The structure of language varies depending on the situation in which it is used. And an important dimension of language study is to describe these changes and explain their communicative role. Several types of variations are recognized.

## VARIATION IN TIME

This chapter has already recognized the two major dimensions of linguistic change over time: long-term change, as illustrated by the differences between Early Modern English and Modern English, and short-term change, as illustrated by the way language changes over a lifetime, from child acquisition to senescence. In addition, the plays and poems can introduce temporal variation in the form of usage from earlier states of the language (*archaisms*) or words that have never been used in the language before (*neologisms*).

The locus classicus for archaisms in Shakespeare is *Pericles*, where we find Gower using a range of old words (e.g., *iwis* meaning “indeed,” *hight* meaning “called”) and verb forms (e.g., *speken* for “speak” and *yklad* for “clothed”), but we also find them in several other contexts, such as Ophelia’s *shoon* (“shoes”), Holofernes’s *yclept* (“called”), and Flute’s *eke* (“also”).

Neologisms are of two kinds. There are words that were coming into English at the time Shakespeare was writing or were becoming fashionable; a character sometimes comments on their novelty or unfamiliarity, as when Shallow and Bardolph reflect on *accommodate* (2H4 3.2.68), and Don Armado is described by Berowne as “a man of fire-new words” (LLL 1.1.176). And there are words coined by Shakespeare himself to meet a dramatic or poetic (especially metrical) need. Some 1,800 words in the *OED* have their first recorded use in Shakespeare, and many of these are plausible inventions, such as *anthropophaginian*, *disproperty*, *vasty*, and *uncurse*. This figure is likely to be reduced as more systematic searches of sixteenth-century Early Modern English texts take place online.

## VARIATION IN PLACE AND SOCIETY

Geographical origin can be shown in the way people speak – through their distinctive pronunciation (*accent*), their grammar and vocabulary (*dialect*), or their use of other languages. Shakespeare uses all three methods, though not with any frequency. We find stereotypical representations of Welsh, Scots, Irish, and French speech alongside English in *Henry V*, Welsh and mock-French in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and rural English speech (used by disguised Edgar) in *King Lear*. It should be noted that utterances such as *how melancholies I am* are not normal Early Modern English but a humorous representation of (in this case) Welsh dialect speech. There is a strong element of pastiche in the way speakers persistently get their grammar wrong (e.g., *this is lunatics, a joyful resurrections*).

When Shakespeare uses the term *dialect*, it is not with regional variation chiefly in mind. There are three instances: Claudio refers to Isabella’s “prone and speechless dialect” (MM 1.2.164), Kent shows he can “go out of my dialect” by speaking in a higher rhetorical vein (*Lear* 2.2.99), and the lover complains about her seducer: “he had the dialect and different skill” (LC 125). In these cases, the intention seems to be to identify personal, social, or rhetorical variation. The same point applies to Shakespeare’s use of the term *accent*, which is sometimes given a regional sense (as with “accents of the Scot” (*King Edward III* 2.1.30) but usually makes reference to personal style (as when Sir Toby advises Sir Andrew to adopt “a swaggering accent sharply twanged off,” TN 3.4.151) or social background (as when Orlando, encountering disguised Rosalind in the forest, notices her speech: “Your accent is something finer, then you could purchase in so removed a dwelling,” AYLI 3.3.286).



Regional variation is not as strongly represented in Shakespeare as social variation, which is especially seen in portrayals of occupation and class. Several plays represent the vocabulary of doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, and other occupations, either literally or figuratively. Legal language, for example, is seen in the explicitness of Hamlet ("may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?" *Ham.* 5.1.83–85) and in the legal allusiveness of the First Citizen in the opening lines of *Coriolanus* ("Before we *proceed* any further, hear me speak.... You are all *resolved* rather to die than to famish?" *Cor.* 1.1.1–3>, emphasis added). The upper classes had their own vocabulary, too, a point often commented on by characters. Hotspur is cynical about "holiday and lady terms" (*1H4* 1.3.45), and Don Armado knows language can keep the classes apart: "the posteriors of the day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon" (*LLL* 5.1.72–73). We never see Shakespeare being scornful of regional dialects, but there are several indications of his attitude toward those who use their social status to speak in ways ordinary people do not understand. "Thou hast spoken no words all this while," says Holofernes to Dull, following an exaggerated lexical exchange with Don Armado (*LLL* 5.1.120–122). "Nor understood none neither," replies Dull.

#### INDIVIDUAL VARIATION

The features of use reviewed so far in this chapter are all shared features in the sense that they identify the linguistic character of a group of people, whether identified by time (period, age), location (region, country), or place in society (occupation, class). But these groups are made up of individuals, each of whom has a personal linguistic identity. It is under this heading that we would study those features of language that we hazard to be uniquely Shakespearean, and the range of influences that made it what it was (such as his use of historical sources or biblical references). These have been the stuff of editorial notes for generations, so they need no illustration here.

Similarly familiar is the long-standing exploration of Shakespeare's style using quantitative techniques (*stylo-metrics*) to establish issues of collaboration in individual plays and to investigate the general question of authorship. Here we are entering a new era of investigation. Quantitative studies in the past have been generally inconclusive owing to the lack of a sufficiently broad Early Modern English corpus to represent authorial norms, and the difficulty of incorporating all relevant (grammatical and lexical) variables into the investigation. With the development of large databases of the period, better linguistic descriptions, and sophisticated search techniques capable of handling a multiplicity of criteria, we can expect significant progress in defining Shakespeare's stylistic identity in the coming years.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCOURSE

I began this chapter with the comment that language is the most complex of all human behaviors, and it is plain from even a brief exploration of the dimensions represented in Figure 28 that the number of variables is so large that no one could possibly take them all into account in a single study. Shakespeare used an Early Modern English system of over forty vowels and consonants, represented by an alphabet of over twenty letters, combined into over 300 types of syllables, which in further combination generated a lexicon of around 20,000 words, used in over 3,000 morphological variants and syntactic patterns, identified in writing by over a dozen punctuation marks and associated symbols, and articulated in speech by an uncertain (but large) number of prosodic features and tones of voice.

As a consequence, studies of Shakespearean language are typically "bottom-up," beginning with individual features, such as the *thou/you* contrast, and exploring its use in some or all of the canon. It is therefore important to emphasize the need for a complementary linguistically motivated "top-down" approach, where we begin with a literary or dramatic unit and explore the interaction among the language features it contains. The notion of *discourse* in Figure 28 represents this orientation. I am using the term to refer to the linguistically informed analysis of a functional unit of connected speech or writing, such as a scene-setting monologue (e.g., the Chorus in *Henry V*) or dialogue (e.g., the Induction in *The Taming of the Shrew*). In a literary/theatrical context, these units would most obviously include genres (e.g., comedies, histories), themes (e.g., jealousy, ambition), and dramatic conventions (e.g., soliloquies, asides), as well as individual plays and poems, and significant functional units within them (e.g., acts, scenes, epilogues, stanzas). It is under the heading of *discourse* that the interests of literary criticism, theater studies, and linguistics most fruitfully coincide.

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