

## Does Shakespeare's English need translating?

To modernize or not to modernize: that is the question. I'm talking about Shakespeare, of course, where every year or so someone makes a splash by saying that Shakespearian English is largely unintelligible and needs translation to make sense to a modern audience or reader. It's happened again this year, most recently in an article in a magazine called *Around the Globe*, a splendid periodical published by the London theatre, Shakespeare's Globe. The writer was arguing that the English language has changed so much since Shakespeare's time that he's now a foreign language to most people. So the best we can do is translate him into modern English - get a modern author to do it, like Tom Stoppard or Seamus Heaney.

Well, when this article appeared I thought I'd take a look at the question from a linguistic point of view. And Shakespeare was very much on my mind at the time, because my actor son Ben and I had just published a new glossary and language companion to the bard: it's called *Shakespeare's Words*, and it was published a few weeks ago. This was a two-pronged attack on the topic. I looked at the vocabulary from a linguist's point of view, and Ben looked at it from the theatrical angle. What we did was work our way through all the plays and poems, line by line, and every time we came across a word or phrase which presented even the slightest degree of difference in meaning or use from that found in Modern English, we highlighted it, worked out its meaning, and put it into a database. It took us quite a time to complete the job, as you can imagine - three years, in fact, and we ended up with about 50,000 words highlit. That may sound like a lot, but when you consider that there are nearly a million words in the whole of the Shakespeare canon, it's not as many as it seems. But more on that in a moment.

It was certainly time for a new glossary. The last big one - the one I used when I was studying Shakespeare at college - was compiled by the Victorian lexicographer, Charles Talbot Onions, and that was nearly a hundred years ago. Since then, times have changed. Take all the Latin words in Shakespeare, for instance - in Victorian times, educated people had studied Latin in school - not so today, so they need to be carefully glossed. Or take the words which have changed their meaning - like *Goths*. There are *Goths* in *Titus Andronicus*, referring to the South European Germanic tribe; but to a modern youngster, *Goths* are people with black eye make-up and a weird taste in music. And of course we mustn't forget that in the past century new plays have been added to the Shakespeare canon - most recently *Two Noble Kinsmen*, which had a production at the Globe a couple of years ago, and *King Edward III*, which is playing in Stratford this year.

If we use the data in our book, I think we can shed some light on the modernization question, which is usually debated with very few statistical facts on either side. And it *is* all a question of fact. Modernizers make their case by finding difficult examples like 'super-serviceable, finical rogue' - from *King Lear* - while people who *don't* believe Shakespeare needs modernizing use examples like, well, Hamlet's 'To be or not to be; that is the question'. To my mind, the question is very simple: how much of Shakespeare's language is like the *King Lear* example, and how much is like the *Hamlet*? If most of his words are genuinely difficult because the language has

changed, the modernizers win. If they aren't, their opponents do. So I've been doing some counting

The basic question is: how many words are there in Shakespeare which have changed their meaning between Elizabethan English and now? Notice I say 'changed their meaning'. Shakespeare uses plenty of words which haven't changed their meaning but are still difficult: Classical references are a good example. Do you remember in *Romeo and Juliet* the sentence which Paris uses to explain why he hasn't mentioned his feelings to the grieving Juliet: 'Venus smiles not in a house of tears'? Well, it make no sense until you know who Venus is. And she turns out to be the same goddess of love today as she was 400 years ago. In other words, this isn't a linguistic problem - it isn't a matter of language change. It's a matter of general educational knowledge. People ought to know who is the Greek goddess of love, just as they should know - what is the capital of Turkey or who is the prime minister of Russia.

So, back to the real question: how many words are there where there is a difficulty of understanding because of the way the language has changed between then and now? What proportion of Shakespeare's vocabulary is Elizabethan? 50%? 40%? 60%? Well, to work this out, the first thing you have to know is how many different words there are in Shakespeare as a whole. It's not as many as you might think, actually. Only just over 20,000, - that's assuming you count for instance *take*, *takest*, *takes*, *taking*, *taken*, and *took* as variant forms of the same word. 20,000. Not that many, really. Of course, Shakespeare did some pretty amazing things with those 20,000. Most modern English users have twice that many; but on the whole they don't do very many exciting things with them

When I looked at our glossary, I found only 3000 of these words presenting some sort of problem because of differences between the English of Shakespeare's time and today. That's only 15%. And even this figure is a bit excessive. The true figure is much lower, because that 3000 includes *every* word which is different, even those which are so slightly different that I don't think anyone would have a difficulty understanding them. When Horatio says to the sentries in *Hamlet*, 'But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill', there are several older words like that - *morn*, instead of *morning*, *yon* meaning *yonder*, *o'er* meaning *over*, *clad* meaning *clothed*. They form part of my 3000, but I don't think they pose a real problem of intelligibility. They don't need translation

Nor do a lot of the swear words, or insult language. I mean, take that scene in *King Lear* where Kent harangues Oswald as being 'a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue'. Now, you may not know what *finical* is, or several of the other words, but you jolly well know that Kent is not paying Oswald a compliment. The force of the words comes across well enough, even if you don't know the exact meaning. It's the same with modern English, actually. If I call you a 'blithering idiot', you know the strength of my feeling - but if I were to ask you what 'blithering' means, very few people would be able to answer (it literally means 'senselessly talkative').

So the really interesting question is: how many of the Elizabethan words pose a *true* difficulty of interpretation. And they turn out to be not so many at all. There are two types of candidate. First, there are words which are totally opaque - like *incarnadine*

and *finical*, where no amount of guessing will produce a correct interpretation. We've no idea what they mean without looking them up. That's why we need a glossary. There are several hundred of these. And second, there are words which look easy but which are seriously deceptive - the 'false friends', as they're called. They're words which deceive because you look at them and they seem familiar, so you think you know their meaning, but in fact they mean something else. You know the sort of thing - you see *bootless* and you think it means 'without boots', whereas in fact it means 'unsuccessful'. Or you see the word *ecstasy* and think it means 'delight' when in fact it means 'madness'. There are several hundred of those also

When you add them all up, I conclude that the case for modernization is supported by only a thousand or so words - between 5 and 10 per cent of Shakespeare's vocabulary. Turn this on its head. Modern English speakers already know about 90% of Shakespeare's words. Not a very strong case, it seems to me, for a general modernization policy

So, this is my answer to some of the claims made by the modernizers. They say, we need to modernize because language changes very fast. I say we don't, because it doesn't. English changed very rapidly between Chaucer's time around 1400 and Shakespeare's, so the case for translating Chaucer is quite strong. But the period between 1600 and the present day is one of the slow-moving periods of English linguistic change. So, when modernizers say, Shakespeare's language is losing its meaning, I don't think so. On my count, over 90% of the words used in Shakespeare's day have not lost its meaning. Employing a Tom Stoppard or a Seamus Heaney to translate the texts would be a waste of time, 90 per cent of the time.

And it would even more of a waste, really, because Shakespeare himself acts as our translator on many occasions. Actually I see no harm in translating those cases where a really difficult word becomes the focus of dramatic attention, and where there would be no poetic loss. In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Viola, disguised as Cesario, talks to Olivia about pity being akin to love. 'No, not a grise' she says, g r i s e. Many directors do actually replace *grise* by 'step' or 'bit', without anyone (bar a few scholars) noticing. But in *Othello*, the Duke says to Brabantio, 'Let me ... lay a sentence / Which as a grise or step may help these lovers / Into your favour'. A grise or step? That's Shakespeare doing his own translation.

So, for me: to modernize or not to modernize, there is no question. Rather than modernize Shakespeare, I think all our effort should be devoted to making people more fluent in 'Shakespearean'. If Shakespeare *were* a foreign language, we would solve the problem by devising appropriately graded syllabuses in Elizabethan English and writing carefully graded introductions, phrase books, and other materials - just as we would in the real foreign-language teaching world. Well I think that 10% or so should be dealt with in the same way. It's certainly an impediment, so let's deal with it, seeing it as an opportunity and a challenge to be overcome, not as a barrier to be evaded. Let's make the kids fluent in Shakespearean

But when did you see Shakespeare's language dealt with in this way? It's never been done. Rather most people continue to deal with difficult words as they bump into them in reading a play. They encounter an unfamiliar word in Act 1 Scene 1 of a play - say *bootless*, as in 'Tis bootless to complain' - look it up, work out that it means

‘unsuccessful’, and read on. By the time they encounter it again in Act III scene 2, or in a different play, they’ve forgotten what it meant the first time, and they have to look it up and work out the meaning all over again. And as *bootless* turns up 28 times in Shakespeare’s plays, that means 28 different look-up occasions. What a waste of time. Nobody could ever learn French like that, continually looking a word up every time they hear it. The obvious approach is to learn the meaning of *bootless* in advance, get it into the brain, and then every time you encounter it you know it. There aren’t that many words to be learned. Over a year or two, kids in school could easily learn all of them

That’s what I mean by ‘learning Shakespearian’. And that’s why Ben and I spent our three years compiling *Shakespeare's Words*, to provide people with the basic data they need in order to carry out this task. Once you’ve done it, the sense of achievement is tremendous, and yields a reward which is repeated every time you encounter one of Shakespeare’s plays.