

# FIFTEEN EIGHTY FOUR

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# Speaking Shakespeare Today

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You can't speak English without speaking Shakespeare. Not only did he introduce several hundred words still used today (*assassination, beguiling, contaminated, domineering, excitement, fixture, go-between, hostile, ill-tempered, lack-lustre, monumental...*), he gave us dozens of idioms. If you stand with bated breath, say that love is blind, worry about green-eyed jealousy, think that truth will out, or admit you're a blinking idiot, you're speaking lines from *The Merchant of Venice*. If you feel you are to the manner born, notice some foul play, act in sorrow more than anger, and are cruel only to be kind, you are recalling *Hamlet*.

But Shakespeare has done more than this. In the creative way he used language, he shows each of us how to be creative ourselves. For instance, we can all become MPs – Masters of Parts of Speech. A big feature of English is the way a word can have different grammatical uses. *Round* can be a noun (*It's my round*), verb (*We rounded the corner*), adverb (*I turned round*), adjective (*a round shape*), or preposition (*round the corner*). Shakespeare shows how we can take this principle and use it to make new words and add dramatic effects. He especially likes to use nouns as verbs: Hamlet advises the travelling players not 'to mouth' their lines, and tells Claudius that he will 'nose' Polonius's dead body if it isn't soon discovered.

You'll find a classified list on the *Shakespeare's Words* website [www.shakespeareswords.com](http://www.shakespeareswords.com): click on Language Companion, then Topics, and then 'Functional Shift'. We do the same sort of thing today. I can eye you warily. You can leg it. I can text you.

Another big feature of English is its use of prefixes and suffixes. There are over 300 cases where Shakespeare is the first recorded user of a word beginning with *un-*. Some are everyday, such as *uncomfortable* and *unaware*; but some are unexpected

and vivid. Lady Macbeth calls on the spirits to *unsex* here – make her more like a man. And elsewhere he has characters tell others to *unshout*, *unspeak*, *uncurse*, and *unswear*. Once again, we do the same sort of thing today – *uncool*, *ungimmicky*, *untouristy*, *unfunny*, *unsorry*. On a social network, we might be *unfriended*. Virtually any word can be *un'd* – if we dare. That's what Shakespeare does: he teaches us how to dare in using language.

We see this daring in newspapers too. Journalists play with a single famous quotation to make an attention-grabbing headline. 'To be or not to be?' An article about whether people should pay for a particular service was headed: 'To pay or not to pay'. One about eating habits: 'To diet or not to diet'. One about going to war: 'To fight or not to fight'. My favourite TV adaptation is from Homer Simpson, who enters a bar and asks: 'Two beers or not two beers?' Titles motivate the same kind of media playfulness. 'Much Ado About Nothing'? In 2016 I have seen 'Much Ado About Shakespeare', 'Much Ado About the EU', and – from Cambridge University Press about their prize draw in April – 'Much Ado About Winning'. Shakespeare gives us all permission to play with language in this way.

Anyone can learn a great deal by exploring how Shakespeare uses the English language. A study of his techniques can develop our awareness of the language's expressive potential and boost our confidence as users. The point is even more powerful when thinking of teaching English as a foreign language. 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 us on our toes. It is unpredictable in its participation: in a group we never quite know who is going to talk next. It is interactive, and therefore unpredictable in the reactions we encounter. It requires us to read between the lines, as people bring their individual backgrounds, presuppositions, and assumptions to bear. When we 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 us 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. At the same time, of course, the more we study Shakespeare's language, the more we will increase our understanding and enjoyment of his plays as literature and theatre.