Those tricksy words

In the fifth of a series of articles on words invented by Shakespeare (*Williamisms*), David Crystal considers words about words.

When we investigate Shakespeare's creative use of language, the word word itself turns out to inspire all kinds of fresh and imaginative expressions – and even, at times, some new vocabulary.

To begin with, characters often reflect on the difference between words and actions or thoughts:

> Talkers are no good doers.
> (Murderer, in *Richard III*, I.iii.348)
> Words before blows: is it so, countryman?
> (Brutus, in *Julius Caesar*, V.i.29)
> Words without thoughts never to heaven go.
> (Claudius, in *Hamlet*, III.iii.97)
> Words pay no debts; give her deeds
> (Pandarus, in *Troilus and Cressida*, III.ii.53)

For Richard III, Juliet, Beatrice, Falstaff, and Flavius, words are just mouthfuls of air which people hide behind or which distract their attention from life's realities:

> Conscience is but a word that cowards use.
> (*Richard III*, V.vi.39)

Illustration Belle Mellor

> What's in a name?
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.i.80)
> Foul words is but foul wind.
> (*Much Ado About Nothing*, V.iii.47)
> What is honour? A word. What is that word, Honour? Air. A trim reckoning!
> (*Henry IV:1*, V.i.133)
> The world is but a word.
> (*Timon of Athens*, II.ii.149)

But for Biron, Luciana, and Bolingbroke, words have powerful possibilities:

> Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief.
> (*Love's Labour's Lost*, V.ii.745)
> Ill deeds is doubled with an evil word.
> (*Comedy of Errors*, III.ii.20)
> How long a time lies in one little word!
> (*Richard II*, I.iii.206)

There is a conflict between these two views, which Phoebe senses:

> But what care I for words? Yet words do dwell When he that speaks them pleases those that hear.
> (*As You Like It*, III.v.112)

If so much hangs on how we think of words, we would expect Shakespeare's 'words for talking about words' to be themselves imaginative. And so they are.

Lorenzo talks about the way Lancelot Gobbo manages to survive through using the occasional 'tricksy word' (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.v.60). Henry tells Suffolk not to hide his poison with 'sugared words' (*Henry VI:2*, III.ii.45). Armado is described as 'a man of fire-new words', with 'a mint of phrases in his brain' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, I.i.175,162). In the same play Costard describes Holofernes and Nathanial as living long 'on the alms-basket of words' (V.i.36), and Biron forswears to use 'taffeta phrases, silken terms precise, three-piled hyperboles (V.ii.402).

Falstaff accuses Hal of using 'the most unsavoury similes' (*Henry IV:1*, I.ii.79). Feste is Olivia's 'corrupter of words' (*Twelfth Night*, III.i.34). Benedick describes the newly love-struck Claudio, who 'was wont to speak plain and to the purpose' as having 'turned orthography. His words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes' (*Much Ado About Nothing*, II.iii.18). Claudius compares his deed to his 'most painted word' (*Hamlet*, III.i.53), and when Hamlet defeats Osrick at his own verbal game, Horatio comments (in a second quarto addition to the First Folio, at V.ii.107), 'His purse is empty already; all's golden words are spent'.

But did Shakespeare use any new words, in addressing the subject of language? There were a few. The Bastard, reacting to the bold words from the citizens of Angers, introduces *bethump* into the language: 'I was never so bethumped with words/ Since I first called my brother's father Dad.' (*King John*, II.i.463). In *Troilus and Cressida* (III.iii.255), Ajax's strutting about in silence prompts Thersites to comment: 'He's grown a very landfish, languageless, a monster.' This is the first use of languageless recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* – and the only instance cited for nearly 250 years after. A similarly lonely first usage is *disbench*. When Coriolanus gets up to leave, rather than hear himself praised, Brutus asks, 'Sir, I hope/ My words disbenched you not?' (*Coriolanus*, II.ii.70). Its next citation is 1874.

But the original usage which delights me most, given my occupation, is *linguist*. The first *OED* citation is in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (IV.i.53). The Second Outlaw is offering Valentine the captaincy of the outlaw band, and asks him 'Have you the tongues?' When Valentine says he has, thanks to travelling a lot while young, the First Outlaw is delighted: 'and by your own report/ A linguist, and man of such perfection/As we do in our quality much want.' What a plug for the profession! (Linguistics, I mean, not outlawry.)

Mind you, showing that you have a knowledge of grammar isn't always a wise move. It can get you killed, as the unfortunate Lord Saye discovers when he encounters Jack Cade and his rebels:

> It will be proved to thy face that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and a verb and such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear.
> (*Henry VI:2*, IV.vii.35)

Or, worse, you might have to deal with Mistress Quickly. She gives the Welsh parson, Hugh Evans a real verbal bethumping after hearing him teach young William Page the Latin pronouns *hic*, *haec*, *hoc*, and *horum*:

> You do ill to teach the child such words. He teaches him to hick and hack, which they'll do fast enough of themselves, and to call 'whorum'. Fie upon you!
> (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV.i.59)

It's a tricksy, dangerous life, being a linguist.

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