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, III.iii.348)

Words before blows: is it so, countryman?
(Brutus, in Julius Caesar, V.i.20)

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.i.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.iii.39)
What's in a name?
(Hamlet, II.ii.58)

Foul words are but foul wind.
(Much Ado About Nothing, V.iii.6)

What is honour? A word. What is that word, Honour? Air. A trim reckoning!
(Henry IV, I, V.iii)

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.74)

Ill deeds are doubled with an evil word.
(The 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

1. Use plain words.
2. Use eloquent words.

But what care I for words? Yet words do dwell
When he that speaks them pleases those that hear.
(L. Loss Like It, III.ii.112)

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 V, II.iii.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 Nathaniel as
living long 'on the alms-basket of words' (Vi.36), and
Biron forswears to use 'taffeta phrases, silken terms
precise, three-piled hyperboles' (V.i.102).

Falstaff accuses Hal of using 'the most unsavoury
similes' (Henry IV, I, I.ii.79). Feste is Olivia's 'corrupter of
words' (Twelfth Night, III.i.54). Benedick describes
the newly love-struck Claudio, who 'was wont to
peck 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,
III.i.18). Claudio 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 VII.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 'hunchump' into the
language: 'I was never so hunchumped with words/ Since I first called my brother's father Dad.' (King
John, II.ii.483). In Troilus and Cressida (III.iii.253),
Ajax's strutting about in silence prompts Theoris to
comment: 'He's grown a very landish, 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 lovely first usage is 'nishchen. When
Coriolanus gets up to leave, rather than hear himself
praised. Brutus asks, 'Sir, I hope, My words disenchanted
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.iii.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, II.iii.35)

Or, worse, you might have to deal with Mistress
Quickly. She gives the Welsh parson, Hugh Evans
a real verbal hump after hearing him teach
young William Page the Latin pronouns hic, haec,
hom, 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.iii.59)

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

David Crystal OBE is the author of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of
Language and Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of
Wales, Bangor.