Illustration Belle Mellor

'Shakespeare seems to have had a penchant for using *un-* in interesting ways', I said in my last piece. I had, you might recall, spent a happy day trawling through the *Oxford English Dictionary* looking for examples of un- usages where he is the first citation – *Williamisms*. I found a surprisingly large number, over 300, all clamouring for immediate attention. Maybe if I devoted a second article to them, I ruminated, they might leave me alone for a while.

Un- coinages fascinate me so much because they are a fine example of the way a creative linguistic mind extends the language. Coining fire-new items such as *unspeak* and *unshout*, discussed last time, illustrate the process very well, because they are not everyday notions and they vividly express a dramatic point. But there is interest even in commonplace coinages, such as *unlock* and *untie*, as they show how Shakespeare

exploits a new verb, pushing it in more than one direction.

Take *unlock*, which means, basically, to use a key to undo the lock of some physical entity, such as a door, a gate, or a trunk. It's known in English from the end of the 14th century. But it soon developed other senses, and two of them are Williamisms. One is the sense of *unlock* meaning 'physically undo by using force': its first recorded use is Hector encountering Troilus, and informing him that he will 'frush' [= smash] his armour, 'and unlock the rivets all' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 5.6.29). The other is the sense 'bring to light' or 'display': this is found in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Arragon wants a key to 'unlock my fortunes here' (2.9.52). One word, but used by Shakespeare in two very different ways.

This kind of sense extension is not just found with verbs. Adjectives are also a rich domain. Many modern

Un- finished

David Crystal

adjectives contain a sense whose first attested usage is Shakespearean – *unhelpful, unfledged, unmusical, unstringed, unpremeditated...* – and quite often more than one sense is involved. Let's look at *unfledged*. *Fledge* is from the same root as *fly*, and during the Middle Ages it emerged as an adjective describing the state of birds whose feathers were fully developed. During the second half of the 16th century it began to be used as a verb, referring to the 'acquiring of feathers'. Shakespeare early on saw the potential for development: if birds grow feathers, then why not an analogous process in humans? The usage in *2 Henry IV*, when Falstaff describes the Prince as one 'whose chin is not yet fledge' (1.2.20) is a Williamism.

There are occasional uses of *unfledge* as a verb from the end of the 16th century, but the adjectival use, *unfledged*, is very largely Shakespearean. Of its four senses in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, he is cited first for three of them. There is the literal sense shown in *Cymbeline* (3.3.27): Guiderius describes the life-style of himself and his brother in ornithological terms; they do not yet have enough feathers to fly:

> we poor unfledged,
> Have never winged from view o'th' nest.

From birds, Shakespeare then applies the word to people, and develops the sense of 'immature' or 'inexperienced'. *Hamlet* (1.3.65) is the first example here, when Polonius advises Laertes:

> Do not dull thy palm with entertainmnent
> Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage
> [or 'comrade', in the First Folio].

And from there, it is a short step to the sense 'characteristic of youth', seen first in *The Winter's Tale* (1.2.78), when Polixenes says to Hermione:

> In those unfledged days was my wife a girl.

Unhallowed is another example of extracting the potential meaning from a word. Its sense of 'not consecrated' goes back to Anglo-Saxon times, but by the end of the 16th century it was beginning to be applied to 'unholy' or 'wicked' actions, people, things, and places. Shakespeare is the first citation for its use with reference to a location, in *Titus Andronicus*: Titus' son, Martius, fallen into a pit, cries for help to get him out of 'this unhallowed and bloodstained hole' (2.2.210). Then, in the same play, he applies it to people: another son, Lucius, describes Aaron as an 'inhuman dog, unhallowed slave' (5.3.14).

We see this kind of 'multiple invention' quite often. There are many examples where Shakespeare seems to be trying out a word in a number of different ways. Sometimes he coins a new word, as in the case of *unfledged*; sometimes he takes an already existing word, as in the case of *unhallowed*. Either way, we see the range of meanings in English being significantly extended.

Here is a selection of double *un-* usages, all of which are of the *unfledged* type – a new coinage being used to express two new meanings. *Unfirm* is first used in its sense of 'of a loose consistency' when Paris arrives in the churchyard, and finds the ground 'loose, unfirm, with digging up of graves' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.6). In its sense of 'unsteady' or 'flighty' it is first found in *Twelfth Night*, when Orsino describes men's fancies as 'giddy and unfirm' (2.4.33). *Unsounded*, meaning 'unfathomed' is first used literally, with reference to seas, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (3.2.81), when Proteus talks about leviathans forsaking 'unsounded deeps'; and then it turns up in a figurative sense, when Suffolk describes Gloucester as 'unsounded yet and full of deep deceit' (*2 Henry VI*, 3.1.57). *Uncurrent* begins life referring to money not in circulation, in *Twelfth Night*, when Sebastian talks about his 'uncurrent pay' (3.3.16); a decade later, it appears in *The Winter's Tale* (3.3.49), referring now to an abstract notion, when Hermione talks of her 'encounter so uncurrent'. Here the sense is 'not commonly accepted or recognized'.

Examples of this kind tell us something important about how to think of linguistic creativity. People often see inventiveness in a language as just a matter of creating new words. But it is much more than this. It is also a matter of creating new senses from existing words. Shakespeare, evidently, does both – and the latter much more commonly than the former, judging by the citations in the *OED*. It is this readiness to engage in semantic exploration which is so characteristic of the vocabulary found in the plays – and it is an impression which would remain, even if future historical lexicological research were to find (as is likely) examples of prior *un-* usage not yet recorded in the dictionary.

A prefix like *un-* brings to light a linguistic microworld whose study – though by no means finished – adds another small piece to the vast Shakespearian jigsaw. Holofernes, at least, would approve (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 4.2.16), notwithstanding what he would consider to be its 'undressed, unpolished, uneducated, unpruned, untrained, or, rather, unlettered, or, ratherest, unconfirmed fashion'.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor and the author of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language. His next book, *Language and the Internet*, is published by Cambridge University Press later this year.