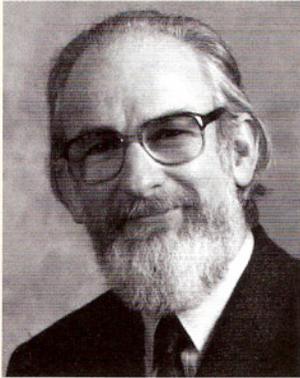


shakespeare's false friends



Some words in Shakespeare can lull you into a false sense of security. They look like modern words but can you be sure they meant the same then as now?

David Crystal explores one of these 'false friends'.

'False friends' are words in another language which look the same as those in your own, but which actually mean something different. For instance, *demandeur* in French looks as if it means 'demand', but it really means 'ask'. In this article I consider the word *naughty*.

If someone says 'Don't be naughty', what could the sentence possibly mean? Who might it be spoken to? Think about it for a moment, before reading on.

These days, the adjective has a remarkably narrow semantic range.

- You'd be likely to hear it used by an adult to admonish a child or animal, or by one child to another ('That's naughty, my mum says'): the sense is 'badly behaved'. When adults use it to each other, it takes on a playful or jocular tone: here the sense is 'improper'.
- Lecturers about to make a daring or unorthodox point might preface their remark by saying 'It's a bit naughty to say this, but ...'. Stand-up comics sometimes call a cheeky member of their audience 'naughty'. Chat-show hosts can call a guest who has made a bitchy point 'naughty'. A TV policeman may address a captured criminal: 'You've been a naughty boy, haven't you'. Here, the general sense is 'improper'.
- And, of course, there is the sense of 'sexually suggestive', ranging from risqué to outright obscene. 'They've cut out the naughty bits', 'Michael's said a naughty word'.

In all cases, the word gives the impression that the action is not especially grave, even when it is. So, when Gloucester describes Regan as a 'naughty lady' (*King Lear*, 3.7.37) or Leonato calls Borachio a 'naughty man' (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 5.1.284) our automatic impression is to think that these are mild, 'smack-hand' rebukes, playful or jocular. But such interpretations would be totally wrong.

In Shakespeare's day, *naughty* had a very serious range of senses. Its strongest meaning was 'wicked, evil, vile'. You'd probably notice that something was odd when you heard Shylock furiously addressing the prison officer who is taking Antonio to jail as a 'naughty gaoler' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.3.9). It seems hardly likely that a gaoler could be 'naughty'.

But it's not so easy to notice anything odd in contexts where a playful meaning would make sense, as when Falstaff (pretending to be King Henry) calls Prince Hal a 'naughty varlet' (*Henry IV Part 1*, 2.4.420) or Flavius calls a cobbler a 'naughty knave' (*Julius Caesar*, 1.1.15). It's very important to note, therefore, that nothing playful is intended here. Nor when Buckingham says to King Henry, 'A sort of naughty persons ... / Have practised dangerously against your state' (*Henry VI Part 2*, 2.1.162). These must be evil people.

Objects and concepts can also be seriously naughty. King Henry talks about Jesus living 'Upon this naughty earth' (*Henry VIII*, 5.1.138). There is a note of real moral impropriety when Elbow describes Mistress Overdone's

abode as 'a naughty house' (*Measure for Measure*, 2.1.74). Portia talks to Bassanio about 'these naughty times' (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.18). And there is Portia's famous description of a candle flame in the darkness: 'So shines a good deed in a naughty world' (*Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.91). All evil, also.

There is a further sense of *naughty*, which is just as strong. 'Tis a naughty night to swim in', says the Fool to Lear (*King Lear*, 3.4.106) – where the word means 'bad, nasty, horrible'. A similar sense applies when Lafew describes Parolles to the King as 'a naughty orator' (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 5.3.253). He isn't describing him as 'evil' here – just as 'bad, inferior, awful'.

Watch out for these strong senses in related words, too. The adverb, 'naughtily', is found in just one play: Cressida says to Troilus, 'You smile and mock me, as if I meant naughtily' – that is, 'wickedly, immorally'. (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4.2.37). And look out for *naught* – which is where naughty originally comes from, in the sense 'having naught', that is, being poor or needy. *Naught* also developed forceful meanings in the 16th century. 'A paramour is ... a thing of naught', says Flute in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (4.2.14) – by which he means 'a thing of great wickedness'. And the Nurse tells Juliet that men are 'All forsworn, all naught, all dissemblers' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.2.87), where she means 'bad, wicked'. 'You are naught', says Ophelia to Hamlet (*Hamlet*, 3.2.156) – she means he's being 'improper, offensive'. All a far cry from being a smack-hand tease.

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This article uses the database compiled for David and Ben Crystal's *Shakespeare's Words* (published in hardback by Penguin at £25; the paperback is due out in April 2003).



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A GLOSSARY &
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WITH A PREFACE BY
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narrow-prying | Neapolitan bone-ache

6 natural order, ungoverned state, way of the world [often personified] **MM** I.i.36 [Duke to Angelo] *Nature never lends / The smallest scruple of her excellence*; **AW** II.i.118; **Cor** IV.vii.35; **KL** I.ii.11; **MA** III.i.63; **TNK** IV.ii.7

7 function, capacity, role **Tim** IV.iii.45 [Timon alone, of gold] *I will make thee / Do thy right nature*; **AY** III.1.16

8 ☛ days of nature

naught, nought (*n.*) **1** nothing **Tem** I.ii.18 [Prospero to Miranda] *thee ... naught knowing / Of whence I am*; **AC** III.v.21; **AY** I.i.33; **1H4** I.ii.135; **2H6** III.i.307; **WT** II.i.177

2 wickedness, immorality, sinfulness **R3** I.i.99 [Richard to Brakenbury, of Mistress Shore] *He that doth naught with her ... / Were best he do it secretly*; **MND** IV.ii.14

3 ruin, disaster, catastrophe **AC** III.x.1 [Enobarbus alone] *Naught, naught, all naught!* [or: adjectival use]

naught, nought (*adj.*) **1** worthless, useless, of no value **AC** IV.xv.77 [Cleopatra to all] *All's but naught*; **AY** I.ii.63, III.ii.15; **H8** Epilogue.5; **Venus** 993

2 improper, offensive, naughty **KL** II.iv.129 [Lear to Regan, of Gonerill] *Thy sister's naught*; **Ham** III.ii.156

3 bad, wicked, sinful **RJ** III.ii.87 [Nurse to Juliet, of men] *All forsworn, all naught, all dissemblers*; **Cym** V.v.271; **Mac** IV.iii.224

4 lost, ruined, brought to nothing **Cor** III.i.230 [Menenius to Coriolanus] *Be gone, away! / All will be naught else*

5 damaging, harmful, hurtful **E3** I.i.169 [Prince Edward to all] *In great affairs 'tis naught to use delay*

naughtily (*adv.*) wickedly, immorally **TC** IV.ii.37 [Cressida to Troilus, of her last remark] *You smile and mock me, as if I meant naughtily*

naughty (*adj.*) **1** wicked, evil, vile **MV** V.i.91 [Portia to Nerissa, of a candle flame] *So shines a good deed in a naughty world*; **1H4** II.iv.420; **H8** V.i.138; **JC** I.i.15; **MA** V.i.284; **MM** II.i.74

2 bad, nasty, horrible **KL** III.iv.106 [Fool to Lear] *'tis a naughty night to swim in*; **AW** V.iii.253; **TC** IV.ii.32

nave (*n.*) **1** [of wheels] hub, pivot **2H4** II.iv.250 [Prince Henry to Poins, of Falstaff] *Would not this nave of a wheel have his ears cut off?* [pun: knave]; **Ham** II.ii.494

2 navel **Mac** I.ii.22 [Captain to King, of Macbeth killing Macdonwald] *he unseamed him from the nave to the chops*