David Crystal explores the novel vocabulary of Henry IV.

Lexical explosions

One of his usages seems to have left a lasting impression. In 4.1.94, Hotspur talks dismissively about Prince Hal:

Where is his son,
The nimble-footed madcap Prince of Wales
And his comrades that daffed the world aside
And bid it pass?

Daff is a variant form of doff, which in turn is a collapsed version of do off. It’s a solid, mouth-filling northern form, meaning ‘put off’ or ‘thrust aside’, and Shakespeare seems to have had a liking for it. All but one of the Early Modern English citations in the OED are his. It turns up again in Antony and Cleopatra, for example, when Cleopatra helps Antony don his armour, and Antony says ‘He that unbucks this, till we do please / To daff it for our repose, shall hear a storm’. Then there’s a gap of over 200 years before the word is spotted again — in Keats, one of several 19th-century authors for whom the thought of ‘daffing the world aside’ evidently held great appeal.

I wasn’t expecting Hotspur to be so prominent, when I first explored this play. I was expecting more neologisms to be in the street language of Falstaff and his cronies. But the few items that they do come out with are interesting. The OED hasn’t yet found any earlier instances of Falstaff’s use of Latin words in an English context: at one point he compares Bardolph’s face to ‘a death’s head, or a memento mori’ (3.3.30); at another he says ‘vere signum’ (2.1.249), ‘behold the evidence’, pointing to the way his sword has been hacked about. Gadshill uses a piece of Latin too (2.1.96): ‘homo is a common name for all men’. That hasn’t yet been found in an earlier English sentence. The examples reflect the pervasive nature of Latin words in the culture of the time. Even robbers used them.

Then there’s Falstaff’s piece of explosive wordplay during the robbery: ‘You are grandjurors, are ye? We’ll jure ye’ (2.2.90) meaning ‘when we’re through with you, you’ll have good reason to sit on a jury’. This is a favourite linguistic trick of Shakespeare’s — turning a person’s name into a verb. We see it, for example, in Coriolanus, when Menenius talks about being ‘fidusused’ (from Aufidius, 2.1.125), and in Henry V (4.4.29), when Pistol says, of the captured Monsieur Le Fer, he will ‘fer him’.

Falstaff’s other neologisms are an interesting mix:
I am as melancholy as... a lugged bear (1.2.740) [pulled by its ears]
There is nothing but rogosity to be found in villainous man (2.4.121)
Call you that backing of your friends? (2.4.145)
a thousand blue-caps more (2.4.350) [i.e. Scots, wearing a blue head-dress]
I do not like that paying back (3.3.177)
Do I not dwindle (3.3.2)
ostlers trade-fallen (4.2.28) [bankrupt]
The two most interesting ones, to my mind, are backing and paying back. Here we see Falstaff turning verbs into nouns — actions into states. This makes a nice contrast with Hotspur, whose neologistic vocabulary is highly active in character.
There are some highly effective neologisms in Henry IV Part 1, such as Vernon’s description of Prince Hal, ‘He made a blushing cital of himself’ (5.2.62, ‘recital’), and some of Hal’s own coinages:
    thou art uncotted (2.2.38) [deprived of a horse]
since the old days of goodman Adam to the pupil age of this present twelve o’clock at midnight (2.4.93)
greasy tallow catch (2.4.224) [tub of tallow]
And Shakespeare seemed to be in an im- mood. There are only five instances in the plays of this form of the prefix (a variant of in- used before words beginning with b, m, and p) being used to make up a new verb, and four of them are in Henry IV Part 1 (the other one, impede, is in Macbeth). We find Poins telling his associates that they have cases of buckram ‘to immask our noted outward garments’ (1.2.178). King Henry at the beginning of the play announces to everyone that ‘We are impressed and engaged to fight’ (1.1.21) and at the end angrily tells Worcester that insurrection never lacked ‘Such water-colours to impaint his cause’ (5.1.80). And Hotspur tells Blunt that there ‘be impawned / Some surety for a safe return again’. Hotspur again. Im/-in- in this sort of use is a very dynamic prefix, typically expressing onward motion, sometimes of a quite intensive kind. I’m not surprised to see them in a play full of such explosive relationships.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and the author with Ben Crystal of Shakespeare’s Words (and its accompanying website www.shakespeareswords.com). His latest book on Shakespeare is Think on My Words: Exploring Shakespeare’s Language.