Shakespeare and language: an introduction

Jonathan Hope

I TONGUE

In 'Shakespeare's talking animals', Terence Hawkes makes a fundamental claim about language and Shakespeare's work. The plays, he says, contain 'ideas *about* language' which we neglect 'because we are anaethetized to them by our own literacy' (Hawkes: p. 69, this volume). Nothing could be more important in seeking to understand Early Modern ideas about language and use of language than becoming aware of our own narcotic unawareness of them. We are used to historicizing Shakespeare in every respect except his language, and, as Hawkes implies, our ignorance is matched only by our ignorance of our ignorance. But I would go further than Hawkes: as I will try to show in this introduction, there are not only ideas about language we miss; there are usages of language we misinterpret because we mistake the nature of language in the Early Modern period.

From the point of view of linguistics, and taken as a product of human cognition, language can be assumed to be the same thing in all cultures, and at all times in attested human history. However, taken as a cultural entity, within literary or cultural criticism, language changes radically between the Early Modern period and our own – as radically as other cultural entities such as government, religion, and duty change. In the first part of this introduction, I will try to make language strange, to give an idea of its different cultural status in the Early Modern period; in the second, I will examine the curious reality our culture has bestowed on 'wordes', and what this does to our readings of Shakespeare.

I'd like to begin in an alehouse. Probably in London, probably some time in the late 1590s. Across from us, a man is sitting alone, writing. From where we are, I can't see what he's writing, but thanks to the various technologies associated with the written word – writing itself, pen-making, ink-making, paper-making, printing, book-making, libraries, book preservation – I will be able to eavesdrop on his thoughts one day four hundred years later, in

August 2003, in the Humanities 1 Reading Room of the British Library. Now, thanks to an additional set of technologies including computers and word processing packages, you can eavesdrop too:

I write this in an Alehouse, into which I am driuen by night, which would not giue me leaue to finde out an honester harbour. I am without any cōpany but Inke & Paper, & them I vse in stead of talking to my selfe . . . The first note here is to see how honestly euery place speakes, & how ill euery man liues. Not a Poste nor painted cloth in the house but cryes out, '*Feare God*,' and yet the Parson of the Town scarce keeps this Instruction. It is a straunge thing how men bely them selues; euery one speaks well & meanes naughtily (Allen 1946: 43)

The man is Sir William Cornwallis, and the words come from his *Essayes*, first published in two parts in 1600 and 1601. These particular words come from Essay 22, 'Of Alehouses', though, as often, this essay wanders from the topic suggested by its title, in this case to meditate on the mismatch between language and observed reality. I'll return later to Sir William's observations on language and the world (and especially his noisy posts and cloths), but let's consider the man for a moment.

As an English essayist, Cornwallis stands in the shadow of Francis Bacon. Cornwallis is less original, not as good a writer; but he is also more modest, less sententious, an early cultural critic with refreshingly catholic interests:

There is not that thing vppon the Earth, that well examined, yeelds not something worthie of knowledge (Allen 1946: 43)

And unlike George Orwell, who wrote a rather sour essay on pubs, Cornwallis comes across as someone it would be fun to sit and drink with. Now though, Cornwallis is on his own, able to avoid the embarrassment of talking to himself thanks to his possession of 'Inke & Paper'. It is worth reminding ourselves that to write away from the study in Cornwallis' time meant carrying equipment: a sealed bottle of ink, a pen, a knife, and paper – no biros or spiral notebooks here. In some respects, Sir William is like a modern-day laptop user: in order to write, he needs to lug around a chunk of technology. If his ink leaks, or his battery fails, we'll lose the essay. In other respects, however, Sir William is not at all like a laptop user. In 2004, laptops are all around us: the few people not paddling touch-sensitive mousepads are keying mobile phones – especially in pubs. Not only has the technology associated with traditional methods of writing become invisible to us, but the much newer technology of computers and mobile phones is so pervasive that even our irritations with it have become conventionalized. In 1600, however, only a tiny percentage of the population had access to the technology of writing, and to see someone sitting on his own in an

alehouse writing must have been a wonder. Perhaps we should imagine Sir William's equivalent in a 1960s pub off Carnaby Street, punching holes in pieces of cardboard while a mainframe hums on the back of a lorry parked outside.

In 1600, when Cornwallis wrote instead of 'talking to my selfe', writing was a specialized skill akin to that of an electrician or plasterer today. People employed someone else if they needed something written; writing was manual labour, and nobles thought it no shame to have a poor hand, if any. This unfamiliar status of writing is important, since it is indicative of a radical difference between 1600 and our own time. Our culture is characterized by literacy: reading and writing are skills we take for granted, and those who lack them are rare, stigmatized, and virtually excluded. Things were different in Shakespeare's London, where the highest estimates put adult male literacy at 50 per cent. Add females, and include the whole country rather than just the richest city, and the proportion of even minimally literate people must fall considerably. One consequence of the pervasiveness of literacy in our culture is that for many people, language *is* writing. Speech is often implicitly or explicitly not quite the real thing: a lazy, sloppy version of 'proper' language. This is a cultural conception rather than a scientific reality: modern linguists maintain the primacy of speech and the secondary nature of writing; but culturally, writing is predominant. There was no such cultural conception in Shakespeare's day. Muriel Bradbrook claims that English at the time was 'a tongue rather than a written language' (Bradbrook 1964: 129–41) and there is overwhelming evidence to support this. In the period 1500–1700, the word 'tongue' appears around 600 times in the titles of books, while 'language' features less than 200 times. Although 'language' gains ground after 1700, it is still possible in 1711 to find titles like *The Child's guide to the English tongue: or, a New Spelling Book*, where 'tongue' is used despite the book's overt concern with written language. By default, writing on language in the period assumes that 'language' is sound: even the written signs in Cornwallis' alehouse 'cry out'. This speech-based conception is partly due, no doubt, to the strength of the rhetorical tradition, predicated on spoken performance even if often applied to writing, but it is also a consequence of the generally dominant status of speech in the period. To claim that writing *was* language then would have been to make a metaphorical leap akin to asserting that someone's portrait *was* them.

Early Modern England was a culture in transit between orality and literacy – no longer a fully oral society in Walter Ong's terms, but still far removed from our own highly literate state. The finest linguistic work in

the period was done on the sounds of the language: orthoepists such as Robert Robinson (who gives an Early Modern pronunciation of 'Shakespeare') observed and recorded the phonetic reality of English at a time when grammarians robotically tried to force English syntactic structures into a Latin template.[1] Away from the specialized world of descriptive linguistics, we find evidence for a pervasive oral orientation to language even in the printing house: Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing* (1683–4) records how compositors worked orally in transferring from copy to print (Davis and Carter 1958: 204) and Philip Gaskell finds similarly oral practices in proof-reading (Gaskell 1972: 112). Finally, it is worth remembering that, in addition to oral practices characterizing the means of production of printed texts, oral distribution was arguably far more important than print for certain texts we encounter now only in printed form. As Gary Taylor notes, 'the largest print run for a book allowed by law was less than the number of spectators that could be accommodated for a single performance at the Globe' (Taylor 2004: 29).

II DIUERSITIE OF SOUNDS; CONFORMITIE IN LANGUAGE

Our literacy anaesthetizes us to the fundamentally oral nature of language, and the strangeness of writing; two aspects of language plain to Early Modern culture. At the same time, however, our literacy sensitizes us to something so pervasive in the Early Modern period that it seems virtually invisible to Early Modern speakers: linguistic variation.

For most modern readers, their first encounter with an unedited or facsimile Early Modern text is an encounter with variation run mad. The modern textual critic W. Speed Hill writes of editing a text whose printed original showed variation between three different forms of the letter 'c'. Speed Hill modernized (that is, standardized) the variation, claiming that there was

no gain in preserving it and a palpable gain in suppressing it: that is, the reduction of extraneous information (nonsignificant data, static) in the resulting text (Speed Hill 1993: 27)

Most of us will probably sympathize with Speed Hill's use of the term 'static' here. When we try to 'read' an Early Modern text, often all we can see are the apparently random shifts in 's' forms, and highly variable spelling (the word 'she' is spelled four different ways within four lines on one page of John Florio's *Florio His First Fruits* (1578)). However, these data are only 'static' for us because we have been sensitized to variation by our

cultural conception of language as a standardized, written thing which is characterized by its very lack of variation.

It is important at this point to stress the scientific inaccuracy of our cultural conception of language. Language in its natural state is not stable, and it is not self-evident that stability would be a good thing. Variation is not bad, and it does not inevitably make communication less precise or more difficult. Languages vary in terms of sound, vocabulary, and grammar. Any individual language will vary from place to place, over time, between classes and genders, from person to person, within the production of the same person between different contexts, and even in the same context. The 'same' English sound, in the same word, spoken by the same person, can have numerous different realizations even when the repetitions of the word are close together in time. Listen to the realizations of the /t/ in 'pretty' in the Sex Pistols' 'Pretty Vacant' for an example of this: they range from the conventionally expected [t], to a voiced dental flap closer to [d], to a glottal stop, to outright deletion. Unless we are trained to hear them by a phonetics or socio-linguistics course, we are unlikely to be conscious of these different realizations of sounds. They do not affect our understanding of the word, though they may give us social or geographical information about the speaker. Just as the original readers of Speed Hill's text were unfazed by the variation in letter forms, we can cope with a high level of variation in the spoken language without noticing it.

However, our sensitivity to variation changes radically when we are faced with written language: otherwise rational people (myself included) are exercised by variation in the use of apostrophes to mark plurals and possession; teachers spend time correcting, and schoolchildren spend time learning, entirely arbitrary conventions for spelling certain words; word processing packages dutifully put wavy green lines under all usages of 'which'; battles are fought over 'different to' and 'different than'. Why have we become so sensitive to variation in the written language? The answer lies in the development of standard written English, a process which can be traced over the period 1300–1800 (Wright 2000).

Languages standardize when they are written down and when the resultant texts are regularly circulated between dialect areas. When societies first become literate, scribes naturally follow their own pronunciation in spelling and their own dialect in choosing grammatical forms. With time, however, a drift towards identifying and using certain common forms occurs. Eventually, this drift produces a standard written language as the choices made by scribes coalesce (I use the term 'drift' deliberately here, since standardization is something that can happen without conscious intent on the part of those

writing documents). Standardization is thus the reduction of variation in a language, and it is an uncommon, and unnatural event. Uncommon and unnatural because it cannot take place until a language has been written down, and most languages in the world today, and an even greater majority of languages in history, have no written form.

The process of standardization was in its final stages in English by 1600. After that date, the amount of variation in English printed texts is low, and rapidly declines further. Then something strange happens. As the amount of variation in texts declines to negligible, the later seventeenth century sees a rise in the amount of complaint *about* variation in texts. Suddenly, writers on language are acutely aware of variation, and merciless in their condemnation of it – alternate spellings and grammatical forms, words seen as 'vulgar' – all are denounced and proscribed out of the written language. Dictionaries and grammars are published, regional accents are dismissed as 'uneducated': the whole apparatus of eighteenth and nineteenth-century prescriptivism is put in place, along with its central ideology: there is only one correct way of doing anything in language – everything else is wrong.

However we may disassociate ourselves from crude prescriptivism now (and not all do – see Sturrock 2003), we are its intellectual heirs, and our cultural assumptions about language derive from its demonstrably false account of language. The success of prescriptivism as an ideology can be traced throughout our response to written variation. We are conditioned to associate minute variations in spelling and orthography with absolute shifts in meaning: its/it's; affect/effect; program/programme; god/God; be/bee; catholic/Catholic. We describe the products of these orthographic conventions as 'different words', forgetting that they are orthographic representations of identical groups of phonemes. We have reified 'words' and 'meaning' and we associate meanings with particular spellings, and therefore the written language, in a way conceptually impossible in the Early Modern period.

I will return in the next section to the question of what a 'word' is, and how meanings can be associated with it, but now having characterized our own response to variation on the page, I want to consider the Early Modern response to variation in sound.

It seems to me that one of the most striking things about Shakespeare's treatment of language is the lack of comment on, or representation of, dialect. Mention *Henry V* and *Merry Wives*, and an exchange in *King Lear* and we have listed almost all of the available data. Elsewhere, there is no sustained examination of dialect. Why should this be? It cannot be

because people did not have regional dialects in the Early Modern period. Rather I think it is the opposite: everyone had one, so why comment on it? If everyone has a dialect, then variation is the element speakers swim in, not commented upon because there is no non-dialectal position from which to find dialectal variation strange. Only in our own age, thanks to prescriptivism, do we have such impossible concepts as 'accentless English'. Shakespeare's relative lack of overt comment on dialect is not because he is unaware of difference; it is because he, like most of his culture, is unaware of homogeneity.[2]

Of course, there are scenes in Shakespeare where accent and dialect are apparently objectified, identified as different. Perhaps significantly, most of the varieties identified in this way are national rather than regional (for example, in *Henry V* and *Merry Wives*), but Hal's baiting of the drawers in *2 Henry IV* does seem to rest on the assumption of a standard dialect from which the drawers deviate because of low social class. Even here though, we should be wary of transposing our post-prescriptivism attitudes. The drawer scene is notoriously puzzling and inconclusive, and it is at least possible that what is being glanced at is not the strangeness of the drawers' language, but the perversity of Hal's alienation from it. Note too, that Hal's satire is not directed against phonetic variation (though no doubt the drawers can be given egregious stage cockney accents if a director wishes), but against lexical and phrasal differences. Here I think we see one aspect of the Early Modern reading of variation which escapes us. They were not overly sensitive to geographical variation, but they were highly sensitive to social variation which, at a time when there is no non-regional upper class accent, is marked mainly by lexical variation, and the use of different modes of discourse. When Ben Jonson declared '*Language* most shewes a man; speake that I may see thee' (*Timber*), he did not mean that accent would allow him to place someone geographically and socially as today, but that use of words and decorum of construction would reveal the speaker's level of education and place in the Early Modern social hierarchy. Shakespeare's characters rarely comment on accent in our sense of regional accent, but they frequently comment on discourse as revealing a person's origins and status.

The two chapters in this collection which consider most directly the social nature of language use are those by Robert Wilcher and Lynne Magnusson. Wilcher's paper is deceptively low-key, identifying three types of comic double-act in a semi-structuralist approach: one involving two lower-class characters; one involving two upper-class characters; one with mixed-class participants. Although Wilcher focuses on the way these dualogues feed

into character and illuminate social relationship in the plays, he also very clearly shows that the different types of dualogue use words in contrasting ways. Two lower-class characters will quibble or 'mistake' the word, usually with one character wittily feeding off a stooge, and moving from static meaning to static meaning. Two upper-class characters will play more fluidly with meaning, riffing off each other or 'keeping the ball of wit in the air'. In mixed class dualogue, most often found when a licensed fool jests with a master or mistress, the quibbling has a more serious purpose, and the mistakings unfold some essential element of the situation, rather than simply illustrating the nimbleness of the fool. Wilcher identifies early examples of the fluid, playful type of dualogue between Proteus and Valentine (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*) and Katherine and Rosaline (*Love's Labour's Lost*), and his analysis matches a shift Jill Levenson identifies in the discourse types employed by Romeo and Mercutio as Mercutio welcomes Romeo back into what he views as 'the most accomplished kind of social discourse' (see p. 131):

now art thou sociable, now art thou *Romeo*: now art thou what thou art, by Art as well as by Nature (2.3.82–3)

If there are discourse types which signal social status more readily than accent for Early Modern speakers, what of the social statuses which pre-exist? Mercutio welcomes Romeo back into the realm of polite discourse because he knows Romeo belongs there – a lower-class character who attempts to play with meanings without the licence of the fool is likely to be dismissed as a saucy knave. Lynne Magnusson's paper is an attempt to chart the way social status licences speaking of a certain kind, and to trace the uncertainties of negotiating status and speech. Refreshingly drawing on Bourdieu rather than the more familiar Bakhtin, Magnusson makes the important point that language generally symbolizes or marks social role, rather than being constitutive of it, and that the degree of attention paid to speech depends on the 'symbolic capital' of the speaker, assigned in a complex, ever-shifting market place where 'linguistic ingenuity' is simply one factor (p. 214). Magnusson's approach seems to me to be particularly rewarding in the complex reading it allows of Othello's language, which is, as Magnusson says, characterized by 'some degree of tension' due to his ambivalent social position (p. 219). To move back to socio-linguistics from Bourdieu's sociology of speech, this is Othello as hypercorrector.[3]

Wilcher and Magnusson are both looking at the social implications of different discourse types, moving away from traditional literary-philological concerns with individual words or linguistic items to attempt

the characterization of larger stretches of text, and their work can be linked
to two developing areas, historical pragmatics (see Jucker 1995 and the
Journal of Historical Pragmatics) and historical socio-linguistics (Nevalainen
and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003). Muriel St Claire Byrne's paper represents a
very early example of historical socio-linguistics, taking the Lisle letters as a
corpus of written language held to be speech-like in some respect. Byrne's
approach is likely to strike most present-day linguists as overly impression-
istic and subjective, but her method is fundamentally the same as that of the
Helsinki corpus teams, who have sought to approach Early Modern spo-
ken forms via contrasting text-types (Rissanen et al. 1993) and non-literary
letters (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1996). Scholars such as Laura
Wright have sought grammatical forms characteristic of speech in depo-
sitions (Wright 1995), and her work can usefully be added to accounts of
the Senecan and Ciceronian models for prose (as given here by McDonald
p. 273) to broaden our sense of the models available for prose writing in the
period.

III WORDES

Writing in his alehouse, Cornwallis noted the potentially duplicitous
nature of language: 'It is a straunge thing how men bely them selues; euery
one speakes well & meanes naughtily.' He returns to this suspicion in a
later essay, 'Of Wordes':

I like no Relation so well as what mine eye telleth me; for there is in speech, as in
sumptuous building, many entries, landing places, and Lucomes commended more
for formalities sake then for conueniency; so 'ands' and 'ifs' and many sounding
wordes stuffe vp empty periods with winde (Allen 1946: 219)

(A 'lucome' is a skylight.) Lying behind this is a philosophy which considers
human language to be an inevitably imperfect and misleading representa-
tion of reality. The eye is taken to be a more direct route to the true nature
of things than the ear:

Naturally we carry matter better then wordes, in which nature telles vs she
vseth words but for an interpretour because our ignorance vnderstandes not her
Language, which puts vs to a great deale of paine and makes vs go a great way
about in our inquisition of knowledge (Allen 1946: 219)

The idea that there is a natural language which gives access to the truth
about the physical world is based on biblical accounts of Adam naming
the animals, 'each after his own kind', with the sense that Adam's names

somehow tapped into and expressed the essential reality of the things he named: that his chosen names were somehow non-arbitrary. The Tower of Babel myth explains how human languages subsequently became separated from this original language and lost their ability to give access to unmediated truth: in effect, how languages became arbitrary sounds. Such ideas resurfaced most influentially in the later seventeenth century when language philosophers such as John Wilkins attempted to reconstruct a 'universal language' which would allow natural philosophers to manipulate ideas about the world as effectively as mathematics allowed the manipulation of numerical concepts. Early Modern texts are full of disquisitions on the duplicitous tendencies of man's fallen language, and these chime with our own literary culture's sophisticated theoretical engagement with meaning. However, while the Babel myth acknowledges the fallen nature of human language, the Adamic myth asserts the possibility of conveying meaning reliably, and offers a much more optimistic view of language – a view that we are perhaps inoculated against by modern theory. Cornwallis provides an example of the Early Modern distrust of language, substituting a basic non-linguistic empiricism for its Babelonian cacophony, but religious and moral writers on language could interestingly complicate this rejection of language in favour of the world. *The Government of the Tongue* (second impression 1674) illustrates an alternative take on language, focusing on Adam and Eve as the first users of language:

tho there was this sympathy in their sublimer part which disposed them to the most intimate union; yet there was a cloud of flesh in the way which intercepted their mutual view, nay permitted no intelligence between them, other then by the mediation of some organ equally commensurate to soul and body. And to this purpose the infinite wisdom of God ordained Speech; which as it is a sound resulting from the modulation of the Air, has most affinity to the spirit, but as it is uttered by the Tongue, has immediate cognation with the body, and so is the fittest instrument to manage a commerce between the rational yet invisible powers of human souls clothed in flesh (A2r)

This elegant dissolution of the world/language dualism can be linked to the protestant emphasis on the word, but it also reveals a wider Early Modern optimism about the genuine power of language to convey real meanings and establish communicative links between people – something which Inga-Stina Ewbank emphasizes in her approach to *Hamlet* in this volume. As Ewbank shows, twentieth-century readings have been too quick to find disillusion with words and the possibility of meaning in the play, and it may be that the Early Modern view of language is more ambiguously rich and nuanced than our own, perhaps overly cynical one (pp. 151, 162–4).