

I 'You speak a language that I understand not': myths and realities

There is a story that, if you travel into the most isolated valleys of the Appalachian Mountains in eastern USA, you will find people who still speak the language of Shakespeare. They are said to be the descendants of those early settlers who left England for Virginia in 1606, when Shakespeare was age 42. Several settlers, it seems, moved inland and away from the larger centres of population. And there, the story goes, cut off from the changes in society and language which would take place in the seaboard cities, and rurally conservative by temperament, generation after generation carried on speaking the tongue that the pioneers brought with them.

The story varies a bit, depending on who is telling it. In some accounts, it is Roanoke Island, off the east coast of Virginia, where you will hear pure Shakespearean English – or 'Elizabethan English', as it is often put. In others, you do not have to leave the British Isles. Just turn off the main road in Northern Ireland, or in County Kerry, or in deepest Warwickshire, and there it will be, unchanged, unchanging.

Anyone who believes this has, as Thersites says of Agamemnon, 'not so much brain as ear-wax' (*Tro.* 5.1.49). It is a myth. Speech never stands still – not even between two generations, let alone the sixteen or so that separate the reigns of the first and second Queen Elizabeth. Listen to the speech of young and old people from the same part of a country, and you will hear all kinds of differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Wicked! It was the same in Shakespeare's day. He even refers at one point to language change taking place within a generation. Mercutio sneeringly describes the way Tybalt speaks: he calls him one of the 'new tuners of accent' (*Rom.* 2.4.29).

It is true that the language used in some parts of a country will change less rapidly than others. There is always a grain of truth inside

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a myth. Isolated communities will indeed be more conservative in the way they speak. But no community is so isolated that it is immune from contact with those who speak differently from themselves. And the evidence? All you need do is listen to the modern communities. In the BBC television series *The Story of English* (1988), the programme makers visited Roanoke. What we heard was regional, rural, but definitely modern American English. Not a *forsooth* in earshot. No *thous* or *goeths*. And the accent – as we will see in Chapter 6 – was some distance away from that used in the early 1600s.

The idea that the English of Shakespeare's time is rurally alive and well in modern times is a remarkably persistent myth. I hear someone come out with it, on the radio or in the press, every few months. It's a myth born of ignorance of the basic facts about the way language changes. And the chief problem in approaching the language of Shakespeare, to my mind, is that a whole spider's web of myths has grown up around it, which has to be brushed away to enable our eventual linguistic encounter to be with something real.

THE QUANTITY MYTH

'Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary of any English writer.' If I had a pound for every time I've heard someone say that, I'd have enough to buy a First Folio. He certainly had a wide-ranging vocabulary for his time, as we shall see, but – 'the largest of any English writer'? That certainly isn't the case. Any modern writer uses far more words than Shakespeare. Indeed, you, reader, if you are understanding all the words I use in this book, command more words than Shakespeare. The reason is the way English vocabulary has grown over the past 400 years.

It's never going to be possible to do precise calculations about how much vocabulary was in use during a particular historical period. The best we can do is count the words in whatever texts remain – and even that is not yet practicable (though it will become more so, one day, as texts increasingly achieve an electronic presence on the Internet). So we have to rely on 'best guesses'. And on that basis it is

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thought that there were about 150,000 different words in English by the end of the sixteenth century. Today, the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary* contains over 600,000 different words. There are simply far more words available to be used now, compared with Shakespeare's time.

So how many of these words do you and I use? You can work out the totals, approximately, by using a dictionary. Choose one with about 1,500 pages, such as the *Concise Oxford*: dictionaries of this size contain about 100,000 different headwords. (Headwords are the units in bold type, such as **cat**, **good**, **ask**, and **quick**, which appear at the beginning of a dictionary entry, or sometimes – as with **goodness** and **quickly** – within the entry.) If you go through a small sample of the pages, noting which words you can imagine yourself using, then work out the average number per page, and then multiply by the number of pages in the book, you will get a rough idea of your active vocabulary. Having done this with a few dozen people, over the years, I can say that most of us use at least 50,000 words. That is, we know at least half the words in the dictionary. Think about such clusters as *nation*, *national*, *nationally*, *nationhood*, *nationalize*, *nationalization*... It doesn't take long to build up an appreciable total.

The usual figure given for the size of Shakespeare's vocabulary is about 20,000 different words. Today we have over twice as many words at our command – and yet none of us are Shakespeares. The moral is plain. Quantity is not enough. It is not so much the number of words we have as what we *do* with those words that makes the difference between an ordinary and a brilliant use of language. Also critical is our ability to choose the most effective words from the language's wordstock to express our intentions. And, if the wordstock does not have the words we need, we have to be prepared to invent new ones to make good the deficiency, and to use old ones in unprecedented ways. Shakespeare, as we shall see in Chapter 7, is excellent at all this. More than anything else, he shows us how to be daring with language.

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Many commentators on Shakespeare's language nonetheless seem to be obsessed with quantity rather than creativity – probably because it is far easier to count than to analyse. But even the task of counting has some hidden complexities, so that we should never take someone's vocabulary estimate at its face value. We have to ask: 'What has the counter counted?' Take the estimate of '20,000 different words' above, and compare it with another widely cited Shakespearean estimate of '30,000 words'. Notice the phrasing. 'Different' words are those which differ in their dictionary meaning. *Cat*, *dog*, and *ask* have different dictionary meanings, as do *bear* ('animal') and *bear* ('carry'). But *cat* and *cats*, although they look different, do not have different dictionary meanings, nor do *ask*, *asks*, *asking*, and *asked*. These are simply different forms of the 'same' word, expressing different grammatical meanings, such as singular and plural or present and past tenses. If you count all of these forms separately, obviously you will get a much higher total than if you do not.

When someone talks about the number of words in Shakespeare, then, it is always important to know what kind of word they have been counting. People who say Shakespeare has 'about 20,000' words are grouping all the variants together. Those who say he has 'over 30,000' words are counting all the variant forms separately. The contrast is very noticeable in Shakespeare because the language of his time had more grammatical variants than exist today. We shall look at this in Chapter 8, but for the moment just consider *bear*, *bears*, *bearest*, *beareth*, *bearing*, *boar'st*, *bore*, and *born*, which are the variant forms of *bear* (ignoring spelling variants) in the First Folio. They count as 'one' under the first procedure, but as 'eight' under the second.

'About 20,000'. That 'about' is an important qualification, for there is quite a large variation surrounding this estimate. The figure is sometimes as low as around 18,000. A lot depends on which works you include as part of the canon. If you include, say, disputed or partially authored texts such as *King Edward III* and *Sir Thomas More*, your

total is going to be appreciably greater than if you do not. But even within the 'core' texts, there are problems in deciding what to count. There are five types of difficulty.

- We have to decide whether a word is a compound or not. When Kent calls Oswald a 'base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three suited, hundred pound, filthy worsted stocking knave' (*Lear*. 2.2.14), do we count this as twelve words (if all hyphens are omitted) or as eleven (if just *worsted-stocking* is hyphenated, as the Arden edition does) or as ten (if it is *filthy-worsted-stocking*, as the Penguin edition has it) or as nine (if *three-suited* and *hundred-pound* are separately hyphenated, as in Penguin) or as eight (if it is *three-suited-hundred-pound*, as in Arden)? (for the First Folio version, see p. 99).
- Do we include all editorial emendations, modernizations, and variants between Folio and Quarto texts (p. 23)? What exactly is being 'sledded' (*Ham*. 1.1.63) – *poleaxe* or *Polacks* or something else? Is it *aucient* or *ancient*? The total will grow if we include every variant.
- Do we include proper names? These are usually excluded in word-counting exercises, as they relate more to encyclopedic knowledge than to linguistic intuition. Just because I know the words *Hamburg* and *Frankfurt* does not mean that I can speak German! On the other hand, some proper names do have more general significance – as in modern English *Whitehall* (in the sense of 'the civil service'). This means that perhaps we should include such words as *Ethiop* ('person with a dark complexion') in our total.
- Do we include foreign words? Shakespeare uses 288 Latin word-forms, 310 French word-forms, and 36 Spanish or Italian word-forms (it is sometimes difficult to decide which language it is). When characters are definitely speaking a foreign language, the words might reasonably be excluded, but it is not always clear when something is foreign, as when the gravedigger says *argal*

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(= Latin *ergo*, 'therefore', *Ham.* 5.1.19) or Polonius says *videlicet* (= 'that is to say', *Ham.* 2.1.61). Are these better treated as loan words into English – much as we talk about 'a tour de force' or 'a je ne sais quoi' today?

- Do we include onomatopoeic 'words', as when Edgar shouts *seseey* (a hunting cry, *Lear.* 3.4.97) or Doll Tearsheet says (or should it be burps?) *hem* (*2H4.* 2.4.29).
- Do we include humorous forms, such as malapropisms? When Mistress Quickly says *allicholy* as a variant of *melancholy* (*Wiv.* 1.4.148), is this the 'same' word or a different one?

Depending on how we answer these questions, our Shakespearean total will vary by a thousand or so.

But 20,000 cannot be very far from the truth. And it will certainly do to focus our attention on the linguistic reality that it represents. For 20,000 *was* a large vocabulary, in its day. If we compare a work of a similar size to the Shakespearean canon, the contrast is striking. There are 884,647 words in the Riverside edition, according to Martin Spewack's *Concordance*; and there are around 880,000 words in the 1611 King James Bible. But if we exclude all the proper names in the latter, we find that the Bible uses only some 6,000 different words. It is of course a very different genre, and the translators deliberately cultivated a conservative style; but the contrast is nonetheless noteworthy. Shakespeare uses over three times as many words.

Why is Shakespeare's vocabulary so large? Partly because he wrote so much, but mainly because of what he wrote about. It is the difference between people, situations, and subject-matter which generates different kinds of vocabulary, and Shakespeare is acknowledged to be unmatched in the range of his characters, settings, and themes. Here is Montjoy the herald addressing King Harry (*H5.* 3.6.122).

Now we speak upon our cue and our voice is imperial. England shall repent his folly, see his weakness, and admire our sufferance. Bid him therefore consider of his ransom, which must proportion

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the losses we have borne, the subjects we have lost, the disgrace we have digested – which in weight to re-answer, his pettiness would bow under.

If you write only historical plays, your vocabulary is going to be focused on the kind of things that kings and princes talk about. Conversely, if you write only street-comedy, a very different kind of vocabulary is going to appear. Here is Doll Tearsheet haranguing Pistol (*1H4*. 2.4.119):

Away, you cutpurse rascal, you filthy bung, away! By this wine,
I'll thrust my knife in your mouldy chaps an you play the saucy
cuttle with me! Away, you bottle-ale rascal, you basket-hilt stale
juggler, you!

If you write love stories, that will motivate a further lexical domain. Here is Mercutio satirizing Romeo the lover (*Rom*. 2.1.9):

Cry but 'Ay me!' Pronounce but 'love' and 'dove'.
Speak to my gossip Venus one fair word,
One nickname for her purblind son and heir,
Young Adam Cupid, he that shot so trim
When King Cophetua loved the beggar maid.

And if you write about the most profound kinds of mental conflict, you will employ words that go well beyond the everyday. Here is one of Hamlet's reflections (*Ham*. 3.1.85):

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

If you do all of these, and more, inevitably you will end up with a lexical total that makes you stand out from your contemporaries.

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THE INVENTION MYTH

Part of this 'more' is the creation of new words, and this introduces another linguistic myth about Shakespeare – that he invented (the fraction varies enormously among accounts) a quarter, a third, a half ... of all the words in the English language. Even if we restrict the notion to 'the English language as spoken in Jacobethan times', such fractions are far from the truth – insofar as the truth can be established at all. For working out the linguistic facts in relation to word-creation is an even more difficult procedure than in the case of word-counting. Even today, with all the media and computer resources available to us, it is rare to find a word where we can say unequivocally that a particular person invented it. An exception is *blurb*, which we know was devised by the American author Gelett Burgess at a dinner party in New York in 1907. Very few words are like that.

In earlier periods, the only evidence we have to go on are the surviving texts, which allow us to establish the 'first recorded user' of a word. There is no greater collection of historical lexical usage than the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, and that is the usual source of information when someone tries to establish how many words a particular author introduced into the language. Thus no one has yet found an earlier use of *trippingly* than when Oberon uses it (*MND*. 5.2.26). But to say that the first recorded user actually invented the word is to take a leap into the dark. In some cases, it would be absurd to suggest that the first recorded user was the inventor: the earliest *OED* citation for the common oath *'sblood* ('God's blood') is when Falstaff uses it (*1H4*. 1.2.83). This is hardly an invention! Shakespeare is simply the first person we know to have written it down.

The first person *we know*. It is perfectly possible that someone else wrote *'sblood* before 1596 and the lexicographers have not yet come across it. Lexicography has its limitations: nobody can read everything or even have ready access to everything. And when compiling a historical dictionary, decisions have to be made about which texts to include. Shakespeare, of course, was a special target of the first

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OED editors: they went through his work with a toothcomb. As a result, there are rather more usages attributed to him than might have been the case if some of his contemporaries had been given the same treatment. Every now and then someone notices an earlier usage in a previously ignored text, and tells the *OED* editors about it. *Lonely* is a case in point. In the *OED* it is first recorded as 1607 (in *Cor.* 4.1.31); but there are numerous instances of this word appearing earlier, in both poetry and prose. To take just one example, Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke, talks about the 'lonely ghosts' in her *Tragedie of Antonie*, and that is 1592. As more texts come to be on the Internet, this kind of discovery will take place more often.

Of the 2,200 words in the *OED* whose first recorded use is in Shakespeare, about 1,700 are plausible Shakespearean inventions – words like *anthropophaginian*, *assassination*, *disproperty*, *incardinate*, *insultment*, *irregulous*, *outswear*, and *uncurse* – and about half of them stayed in the language. That is a remarkable total. No other writer of the time – or indeed since – comes anywhere near it. Even more remarkable is the fact that 1,700 is approaching 10 per cent of his known vocabulary.

When we talk of Shakespeare's influence on the English language, we should not be thinking solely of his invented words. There is a distinction to be made between 'inventing a word' and 'introducing a word into the language'. Many invented words have a very short life and never achieve a permanent place in English: there are several examples in the previous paragraph. Equally, many words and phrases which were not invented by a particular author entered the language because he or she used them: Shakespearean examples include dozens of idioms such as *to the manner born* and proverbial expressions such as *brevity is the soul of wit*, both of which owe their present-day status to their use in *Hamlet*.

At the same time, it is important not to over-rate what Shakespeare was doing. The age in which he wrote (in linguistics, technically called Early Modern English) was one of the most lexically inventive periods in the history of the language. The sixteenth century saw a huge expansion of vocabulary as scholarly writers tried to make

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good the deficiencies they perceived to exist in English. Thousands of words were taken from Latin and Greek, and new words created on the basis of the patterns found there. And as there was no dictionary in which these new words could be recorded – the first attempt at an English dictionary was not until Robert Cawdrey's short (2,521 head-words) *Table Alphabeticall* in 1604 – writers invented anew, in most cases unaware that someone else might have attempted the word before them. Modern English *discontented*, for example, is first recorded in 1548, but before it became the standard usage others had invented *discontentive* (1605), *discontenting* (1605), and *discontentful* (1615).

The interesting question, of course, is a more particular one – not 'why did Shakespeare invent words?' (for everyone did) but 'why did he invent one particular word rather than another?' When, in the Prologue to *Henry V*, the Chorus asks 'Can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France', we are presented with a coinage, *vasty*. Why did he invent this word when a perfectly satisfactory word, *vast*, already existed in the language – a word, moreover, which he used himself? We shall explore this and related questions in Chapter 5.

THE TRANSLATION MYTH

Claims about the supposed difficulty of Shakespeare's language are frequently made these days, especially in relation to the teaching of Shakespeare in schools. 'We need to translate him into modern English if he is to be understood' runs one assertion, and several texts are in print which try to do just that. In most cases, more is involved than translation: a better term would be 'simplification'. When long speeches are reduced to one or two basic points, or long words replaced by contemporary slang, it is not just the poetry of the lines which disappears; the nuances of thought go also. I am not the first to suggest that Romeo's lines, such as

With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls,
For stony limits cannot hold love out

(Rom. 2.1.108)