**LANGUAGE**

Shakespeare's life, from 1564 to 1616, straddles the middle years of what linguistic historians call the Early Modern English period.  This version of English is conventionally dated from 1450 to 1700, and, as the name implies, is structurally very close to Modern (or Present-day) English (usually dated from 1700 onwards).  The major differences are the lack of a generally recognised written standard (though one was rapidly developing), and the presence in both speech and writing of a high degree of variation.  Shakespeare was born in the West Midlands dialect area, a conservative region relative to London, and this may explain the frequent finding in linguistic studies that he is more likely to use older grammatical forms than his contemporaries.  This linguistic conservatism, coupled with the variation inherent in Early Modern English, gave Shakespeare a wide variety of formal and stylistic resources to draw on in his writing.

We should note that Shakespeare was born into a society sometimes ashamed of its language.  English lacked the cultural status of Latin or Greek, and was even held by some to be inferior to the more developed European vernaculars such as Italian, Spanish and French (Andrew Boorde wrote that English was 'base' in comparison to these languages in his *The first boke of the Introduction of knowledge* – c. 1550).  Some commentators were uncomfortable with the 'mixed' nature of the English vocabulary and argued, unsuccessfully, against the importation of 'foreign' words.  The status of English rose steadily during Shakespeare's lifetime, however.  Religious and political factors worked in favour of English against the continental and classical languages, which were associated with Catholicism.  Although education was dominated by Latin, humanist educators produced a series of important pedagogic texts in English (for example,

Thomas Wilson's *Logique* of 1552 and *Rhetorique* of 1553, and Richard Mulcaster's *The First part of the Elementarie* - 1582).

The unstandardised nature of Early Modern English meant that regional variation was unstigmatised and unremarkable, and there are relatively few depictions of regional accent in Shakespeare, and Early Modern drama in general.[1] *National* varieties of English are certainly present: for example the Welsh, Scots and Irish captains in *Henry V*, and depictions of French English (and English French) in the same play; *The Merry Wives of Windsor* once again depicts Welsh English and French English. The most celebrated example of regional English in Shakespeare, Edgar's adopted accent in *King Lear* ('Chill not let go zir, without vurther cagion' 4.6.235), is not an actual accent of English, but a literary stereotype, found, virtually unchanged, in plays, songs and translations from the 1400s right through to the seventeenth century.

Shakespeare is often hailed as the supreme coiner of words, but this claim should be treated with caution. We know that the Oxford English Dictionary often gives a Shakespearean usage for the first citation of a word when in fact the word can be found earlier in the work of other writers.[2] Shakespeare certainly did create new words, but he does this most often, and most forcefully, by derivation. This is a set of processes which create new words, not by borrowing, but by working on already-existing words. For example, Lear takes a recently fashionable loan-word, 'accommodated', used satirically elsewhere in Shakespeare, and turns it into a serious element of his discourse on the fragility of humanity by adding the English prefix 'un-': 'unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, fork'd animal as thou art' (*King Lear* 3.4.106-8). Compounding means fusing two words together, which Leontes does memorably when

he calls Hermione a 'bed-swerver' - an adulteress (*The Winter's Tale* 2.1.93).

Conversion is one of Shakespeare's favourite, and most powerful, derivational devices. It refers to the practice of switching the grammatical role of a word, and it is often most effective when it involves a switch from noun to verb: 'He childed as I fathered' (*King Lear* 3.6.110). In his use of derivation, Shakespeare conforms to the practices of his age: although there is much research still to be done on word-formation in the period, current evidence suggests that Shakespeare was more typical than unique.

Although studies show dervation to be the most frequent source of new words in the period, borrowing was also important.[3] The Early Modern period saw a huge influx of borrowed words into English, with Latin, and the Latin-derived languages Italian, French and Spanish, particularly influential. There was much contemporary comment on such borrowings: on the one hand, new words were held to enrich the language by expanding its resources and stylistic potential; on the other, the Latin-derived terms were sometimes felt to be overly scholarly ('Inkhorn' as contemporary writers had it), and such words were dark and obscure to most speakers of English. Those who had a classical education could be expected to understand words borrowed from Latin, as Shallow does when he works out what Bardolph's 'accommodate' means in *2Henry IV*: 'Accommodated! it comes of *accommodo*' (3.2.71-2). Ordinary speakers were often puzzled by them, however – Dogberry has 'aspicious' for 'suspicious' (*Much Ado* 3.5.46); and Dull 'polusion' for 'allusion' (*Love's Labour's Lost* quarto and folio texts – normally modernised to 'pollution' 4.2.46). In response, writers published the first dictionaries of English: 'hard word' lists concentrating on Latinate borrowings; and playwrights like Shakespeare developed a characteristic self-glossing style, where

Latinate terms were paired with their native equivalents so as to avoid alienating sections of the audience: 'for cogitation / Resides not in that man that does not think' (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.271-2); 'O, matter and impertinency mix'd,/ Reason in madness!' (*King Lear* 4.6.174-5).

In general terms, Early Modern English grammar does not differ significantly from that of Present-day English. However, in a number of key areas, the general lack of standardisation in English, and Shakespeare's upbringing away from the south-east where stanbdardisation was most advanced, meant that Shakespeare had choices to make where today we have none. Frequently, these choices have stylistic connotations, with older variants being associated with formality – though variation in linguistic form was also a useful metrical resource. Grammatical variation tends not to trouble readers or playgoers unduly – they are often unaware of it until it is pointed out to them – but it does concern editors, who need to know if an unusual form is a misprint, or a possible Early Modern usage. Shakespeare editing began in the age of prescriptivism, and this often resulted in Early Modern variant forms being labelled as 'errors', and encouraged an approach to modernisation which, explicitly or implicitly, regarded the early texts as inherently faulty, and ripe for 'improvement'.

The major syntactic difference between Early Modern English and that of today is in the deployment of the auxiliary verb 'do' across all the major clause types. Present – day English requires the use of 'do' in most questions ('*Did* you see the play last night?') and negatives ('No – I *didn't* make it to the theatre on time'). But in Middle and Early Modern English, these types of clause could be formed without 'do', using inversion ('*Saw you* the play last night?) or simple insertion of the negative particle ('I made it *not*

School of Arts and Scienc…, 4/5/10 12:30
**Comment:** I'm not sure readers will understand this explanation. Could it be replaced with: "However, in a number of key areas, the lack of standardization in English [the fact that English was not yet standardized], meant Shakespeare had more choices" [partially accepted]

Jonathan Hope 17/2/09 10:14
**Deleted:** long-term changes, and his linguistic conservatism,

to the theatre on time'). Additionally, if we add 'do' to a simple statement today, it inevitably carries emphasis: 'I *DID* see the play last night'. In Early Modern English, however, it was possible to add 'do' to verbs in statements without any implication of emphasis: 'I did see the play last night'. This semantically empty use is sometimes called 'periphrastic' or 'dummy do'.

So Shakespeare had a choice virtually every time he wrote a statement, question or negative: he could employ the old system, where 'do' is not used in questions or negatives and can be unemphatically used in statements; or he could use the new system, where 'do' is obligatory in questions and negatives, but cannot be added to statements. In keeping with the general variability of Early Modern English, we find Shakespeare applying both systems throughout his work, and sometimes in the same sentence. Take, for example, this speech: '*I held* the sword and *he did run* on it (*Julius Caesar* 5.5.65). Here we see that the first verb follows the modern system for statements, no use of 'do', while the second verb has a dummy 'do'. Shakespeare could easily have written, 'I *did hold* the sword and he *did run* on it' (or indeed 'I *held* the sword and he *ran* on it'; or 'I *did hold* the sword and he *ran* on it'). Why then did he choose to write 'I *held* the sword and he *did run* on it'? The answer has to do with metrics. Using 'do' once gives a line of exactly ten syllables: not using 'do' at all would give only nine syllables; and adding 'do' to both verbs would give eleven.

We can see something similar happening in the following two negative statements, again within one line: 'Cassius: You love me *not*. Brutus: I *do not like* your faults.' (*Julius Caesar* 4.3.89). Here, the first negative uses the older, non-'do' pattern (in Present-day English we would have to write 'You *do not* love me'), while the second

uses the newer system. Again, just one use of 'do' gives a perfect ten-syllable line. Questions also offer the possibility of variation between systems. Note the following successive questions from *King John*, the first using the new system ('do' obligatory in questions), the second, the older one: 'Why *do you bend* such solemn brows on me?/ *Think you* I bear the shears of destiny?' (4.2.90-1).

In his use of the old and new auxiliary 'do' systems, Shakespeare emerges as conservative compared to other playwrights: he is more likely to use the older system than they are. About 20% of Shakespeare's sentences use the old system, while this figure drops to 10% in his contemporaries and the next generation of writers.[4]

Moving on from auxiliary 'do', we find a series of grammatical features where Early Modern English differs in degree or kind from present-day English. Subjunctives, for example, are more frequent in Early Modern than in Present-day English, and occur in a greater variety of contexts. Today, subjunctives are restricted almost entirely to 'if' clauses ('If I *were* you...') and are perceived as formal. In Early Modern English, they certainly occur with 'if' clauses: 'If York *have* ill demean'd himself in France' (*2Henry VI* 1.3.103) and 'If it *were* so, it was a grievous fault' (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.79) – note the shift from subjunctive 'were' in the 'if' clause to indicative 'was' in the result clause. Subjunctives can also be triggered by any kind of hypothetical meaning. Note the distinction implied in 'Welcome *is* banishment, welcome *were* my death' (*2Henry VI* 2.3.14) where the character uses the indicative 'is' for something that has actually happened (banishment), and the subjunctive 'were' for something that could happen.

Differences involving absence are easy for us to overlook. The following uses of simple present tense forms would be highly unlikely in Present-day English: 'You *speak*

to Casca' (*Julius Caesar* 1.3.116); 'they *stay* for me/ In Pompey's Porch' (*Julius Caesar* 1.3.125-6). Today, we would use progressive 'be' + *-ing* forms in these contexts: 'You *are speaking* to Casca'; 'They *are waiting* for me...', but this construction was rare in Early Modern English, and is confined to informal contexts (prose in comedies, for example: 'I *am toiling* in a pitch' *Love's Labour's Lost* 4.3.2-3). Similarly, it is unlikely that any reader of Shakespeare will notice the almost complete absence of the word 'its' from the plays - the normal neuter possessive pronoun is 'his': 'That same eye whose bend doth awe the world/ Did lose *his* lustre' (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.122-3) with no implication of personification.

Third-person singular present tense verbs are another instance of variation in Early Modern English, since they can take either an '-(e)s' inflection as today, or an '-eth' ending. Compare 'one fire *burns* out another's burning' (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.2.45) and 'It *burneth* in the Capels' monument' (*Romeo and Juliet* 5.3.127). A range of factors affected the choice of one ending over the other. Historically, '-(e)s' is the rising form, and, as is often typical of changes in progress, it is associated with less formal contexts: speech rather than writing, prose rather than verse. This might explain the shift in the examples from *Romeo and Juliet*: the first example is a piece of conventional folk-wisdom, which might be associated with informality. Metrical factors play a role too: '-eth' can add an extra syllable to a word, potentially useful in verse. Some verb-forms ('hath' and 'doth' for example) seem to be resistant to the change to '-(e)s' regardless of other factors.

There was also a great deal of variation in the formation of past tense forms and past participles in Early Modern English. Most English verbs form their past tense by

adding '-ed' to the base form of the verb ('help' – 'helped'), but an alternative method of marking past tense is for the root vowel to change ('sing' – 'sang').  Many verbs show variation between both these paradigms: 'help' - 'helped'/'holp'; 'catch' - 'caught'/'catched'; 'tell' - 'told'/'telled'.  Similarly, while some verbs have a distinct past participle form, often ending in '-en' ('given'), there has been a tendency in the history of English for simple past tense forms to replace the distinct '-en' past participle, and this has often produced variation between the two forms.  Standardisation has ended this variation in written English at least, but we often find in Shakespeare simple past tense forms functioning as '-en' participles where today we would expect a distinct participle form: 'I have much *mistook* your passion' (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.48), 'Y'have ungently, Brutus,/ *Stole* from my bed' (*Julius Caesar* 2.1.237-84), 'Brutus hath *riv'd* my heart' (*Julius Caesar* 4.3.85).

Perhaps the most stylistically significant difference between Early Modern and Present-day English is in the potential Early Modern speakers had to vary between two pronouns in the second person singular.  Where today, 'you' is the only available pronoun, Early Modern English retained an older form, 'thou' (and its derivatives 'thee', 'thy', 'thine').  Choice between the two forms relied on a complex system of social and emotional semantics.  At a social level, usage compares with that of many modern languages which retain two singular pronouns: French, German, Finnish.  'You', historically a plural form, was used to denote respect, usually up the social scale, while 'thou', historically the singular form, was used down the social scale.  However, Early Modern literary usage, especially in Shakespeare, shows a nuanced emotional semantic which can easily over-ride social expectations: in the opening scene of *Julius Caesar*, the

tribune Murellus begins to address a cobbler as 'you' – unexpectedly respectful, and perhaps because he is trying to flatter him – but switches quickly into a tetchy 'thou' when the cobbler engages him in verbal swordplay.  Hamlet addresses his father's ghost with 'thou' in scene 1.4, which is the expected address to a spirit, especially one whose identity Hamlet doubts, but he switches to 'you' in scene 3.4, implying that he now believes the ghost to be his father.

Theories of meaning (semantics) were much discussed in the Renaissance (particularly in regard to legal and theological matters), and the main positions were inherited from classical debates. The principal question was, 'From where do words derive their meaning?' and there were two conventional positions on the matter, one derived from Plato, the other from Aristotle.  The 'Platonic' position, voiced by the characters of Cratylus and Socrates in Plato's *Cratylus*, is that there is, or should be a 'natural' relationship between a word and its referent – that words derive their meaning from a non-arbitrary connection to the thing named [5].  Somehow, the 'true' name for something, is linked to, and expresses, the essence of the thing named, so the namer must understand the nature of things in order to be able to name them correctly. The standard Renaissance example of such a process is Adam's naming of the animals, hence this is sometimes referred to as the 'Adamic' theory of meaning.

The alternative position, best known from Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, stressed the conventional nature of meaning – words have meaning because of the way they are used ('custom' as many writers have it), and through their relationship with each other. Under this theory, names are arbitrary, and Renaissance writers on language pointed out that the words for widely known items such as 'bread' and 'wine' differed hugely

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**Comment:** Could bracketed material be deleted?  Readers probably won't understand (I don't!) [accepted]

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between languages - yet if the Platonic theory were correct, the terms for such staples would be the same in all languages. Although 'custom' is recognised by many Renaissance writers as the governing force in meaning, and the best guide to usage, the occult attraction of the Platonic/Adamic theory remained strong: it adds potency to Renaissance wordplay, and resurfaces not long after Shakespeare's death in the seventeenth century ideal language movement.

related topics: Literacy, rhetoric, Tudor education, wordplay, pronunciation

FURTHER READING

The best starting points for the study of Early Modern English are Barber, Charles. *Early Modern English* (Edinburgh, 1996) and Nevalainen, Terttu. *An Introduction to Early Modern English* (Edinburgh, 2006). Chapter-length introductions to the study of Shakespeare's language are Hope, Jonathan, 'Shakespeare's "native English"' in Kastan, David (ed.) *A Companion to Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1999), and de Grazia, Margreta, 'Shakespeare and the craft of language' in de Grazia, Margreta and Wells, Stanley (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (Cambridge 2001). Sylvia Adamson et al., *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language* (London 2001) is a good starting point for the study of Shakespeare's language, as is David Crystal's *'Think on my Words': Exploring Shakespeare's Language* (Cambridge 2008). A good collection of more advanced linguistically-inclined articles is Salmon, Vivian and Burness, Edwina (eds), *Reader in the Language of Shakespearean Drama* (Amsterdam, 1987), while more

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literary articles are collected in Alexander, Catherine (ed.), *Shakespeare and Language* (Cambridge 2004).  There are two recent grammars of Shakespeare: Blake, Norman, *A Grammar of Shakespeare's Language* (Basingstoke, 2002); and Hope, Jonathan, *Shakespeare's Grammar* (London, 2003).

**Comment [School of Arts and Scienc…, 4/5/10 12:30]:** Might Lynne Magnusson's *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language* be added? [accepted]

NOTES

1       Paula Blank, *Broken English: Dialects and the Politics of Language in Renaissance Writings* (London, 1996) page 40.

2       Jürgen Schäfer, *Documentation in the O.E.D.: Shakespeare and Nashe as Test Cases* (Oxford, 1980).

3       Charles Barber, *Early Modern English* (Edinburgh, 1997), chapter 6, 'The Expanding Vocabulary'.

4       Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Socio-linguistic Study* (Cambridge, 1994).

5       Vivian Salmon, 'Views on meaning in Sixteenth-Century England', in *Language and Society in Early Modern England* (Amsterdam, 1990) pp. 55-75.

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