Shakespeare and the English Language

When Shakespeare's plays were first printed together, Ben Jonson provided a poem describing Shakespeare as 'not of an age, but for all time'.[1] Subsequent criticism built on this, constructing what has been called the 'myth' of Shakespeare as a cultural phenomenon: a 'universal' genius whose qualities transcend history, and who can 'speak' to us across time.[2]

The myth of Shakespeare's universality is powerful; but it is also very dangerous, especially in relation to his language. Shakespeare used English at a particular moment in its history: its vocabulary was expanding rapidly while its grammar standardised. He had choices to make about grammatical constructions, pronouns, and nouns that are no longer open to us. But Shakespeare's culture also thought *about* language differently, and applied different aesthetic values to it. If we see Shakespeare as 'universal', we run the risk of blinding ourselves to the strangeness of Shakespeare's linguistic practice and culture.

In this reading I will briefly outline some of these issues.[3] First, how imposing our own aesthetic values leads us to misjudge Shakespeare's vocabulary. Second, how a failure to understand what the Renaissance thought about meaning stops us appreciating Shakespeare's wordplay. In a final section, I move away from words, to suggest that Shakespeare's real linguistic genius might instead be found in grammar.

1   Words

One of the commonest claims about Shakespeare's language is that he invented hundreds of words. For example, the writer Melvyn Bragg states that Shakespeare declared himself to be 'A man on fire for new words'.[4] A fine rhetorical flourish, but unfortunately not only a careless *mis*quotation of *Love's Labour's Lost* ('a man of fire-new words' 1.1.175), but also a gross misrepresentation of what the line actually means. It is about the character Armado, not Shakespeare, and it implies that the new words he invents are a foolish linguistic pretention.

This should give us pause, but did Shakespeare, nonetheless invent a lot of words? It is true that his name crops up regularly as the first citation for new words, and new meanings for old words, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. However, since Jürgen Schäfer's work in the 1980s,[5] we have known that such apparent creativity has to be treated with caution. The army of readers who read English books for examples for the *OED* searched Shakespeare more carefully than they searched other contemporary writers, and in many cases they missed earlier uses of those words by writers who were not Shakespeare. Furthermore, wider studies of English in Shakespeare's time have shown that almost *all* writers coined new words in the period: the English vocabulary expanded more quickly at this time than at any other (though many words were used once or twice and never again).[6] Once the bias in the *OED* collecting is allowed for, Shakespeare does not look unusual when compared to his contemporaries. In fact, Marvin Spevack has suggested that Shakespeare avoids one of the main sources of new words - Latin - using up to 50% fewer Latin-derived terms than the average of his contemporaries (and this would match the implied criticism of Armado's Latinate vocabulary in *Love's Labour's Lost*).[7] Shakespeare's preference seems to have been to extend, often by dazzling metaphorical leap, the meaning of familiar words, rather than conjure entirely new ones from the semantic deep.

So we must be cautious about statistics claiming to show that Shakespeare was the first user of many words. What, though, of another common claim: that Shakespeare, as befits his genius, had a much bigger vocabulary than any of his contemporaries?[8] Again, at first sight the evidence seems clear: Shakespeare uses more words (c. 20,500) than contemporaries like Jonson (c. 19,000) and Middleton (c. 14,000). But it is not quite as simple as this: more writing by Shakespeare survives - so he had more opportunity to use different words. When we compare the *rate* at which he uses words he has not employed before, he turns out to be strictly average.[9] It is as if we were comparing the careers of three goalscorers: Jackie Milburn, Malcolm Macdonald, and Alan Shearer say. Here are their career totals:[10]

name	total goals scored
Jackie Milburn	200
Malcolm Macdonald	121
Alan Shearer	206

On these figures, it looks as though Milburn and Shearer were clearly more prolific strikers than Macdonald - if they were writers, we might be talking about them having larger vocabularies. But we are overlooking a crucial extra piece of evidence: how many games they played. When we add this in, the picture changes:

name	total goals scored	total games played
Jackie Milburn	200	397
Malcolm Macdonald	121	228
Alan Shearer	206	395

A player who plays more games, like a writer who writes more texts, gives himself more opportunities to score: we need to look at the *rate* at which a striker scores:

name	total goals scored	total games played	goals per game
Jackie Milburn	200	397	0.504
Malcolm Macdonald	121	228	0.531

Alan Shearer	206	395	0.522

Now we see that their rates of scoring are rather similar: about 0.5 goals per game, with Macdonald and Shearer slightly ahead of Milburn. Similarly with Shakespeare: he uses more words (scores more goals) than his contemporaries, but he writes more plays (plays more games). Once we look at the rate at which he uses words he has not used before, he looks very similar to those around him.

Why is our culture so keen on the false notion of an 'exceptional' Shakespeare, inventing words and wielding a gargantuan vocabulary? Our notions of poetic genius come from the Romantics, and for them, originality and newness were key elements in aesthetic theory. Even today, essentially Romantic notions of what art should be underlie most of our aesthetic judgements. Newness is all: adaptation, remaking (in film and elsewhere) occupy lowly rungs on the scale of artistic achievement.

But the Renaissance had no such fetish for newness: indeed, it was more likely to be viewed suspiciously. Throughout Shakespeare's plays, characters who speak with authority, disparage the new, and the fashionable, as ephemeral (Mercutio dismisses linguistic fashion when he derides 'new tuners of accent' *Romeo and Juliet* 2.4.29). 'Original' did not have the positive connotations for Shakespeare it has for us - and nor was 'artificial' pejorative. Where the Romantics celebrated the poet's ability to create out of nothing, Renaissance thinkers were wary of the dangers of inventing things that had never, and could never exist: not because they were inherently bad, but because their relationship to truth was unstable. Defenders of poetry and the imagination celebrated the access it offered to the ideal: to how things should be. But many distrusted 'new' or fictional ideas as likely to be false. Shakespeare, we should remember, was an adapter, not an originator, of stories.

We can see, then, that our own, historically conditioned, aesthetic values lead us to assume that Shakespeare must have exceeded his contemporaries in linguistic invention and potential. In terms of his vocabulary, however, as the statistics show, Shakespeare is resolutely average.

2   Meanings and puns

If our aesthetic theories have led us to overestimate Shakespeare's vocabulary, they have also caused us to reject his use of the pun (another aspect of his language which is typical of its time). Dr Johnson dismissed Shakespeare's puns as trivial, and most subsequent criticism has agreed. Is it not strange, though, that the greatest writer in English (and his culture) should have spent so much energy on pointless linguistic games? If we put Shakespeare back into history, it becomes possible to explain, and perhaps even appreciate, his wordplay.

The Renaissance had two competing theories about how language worked, and specifically how words came to have meanings. The dominant one was Aristotle's, and it held that language was an arbitrary human construction: words had meaning because people agreed what each designated. Any word could just as easily mean something else - as long as convention allowed. Juliet gives a textbook account of this when she bemoans the fact that Romeo, as a Montague, is from a family bitterly at war with her own:

> 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy:
>
> Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
>
> What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot
>
> Nor arm nor face nor any other part
>
> Belonging to a man. O be some other name.
>
> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
>
> By any other word would smell as sweet;
>
> So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
>
> Retain that dear perfection which he owes
>
> Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,

And for thy name, which is no part of thee,

Take all myself

(*Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.38-49)

If Romeo were not a Montague, he would still be himself: his name is not a physical part of him like his hand or foot. A rose would smell the same if we used a different term for it - and Romeo would still be as perfect if he had a different name.

The alternative to this arbitrary view of meaning was associated with Plato, and its crucial difference was in the rejection of the notion of arbitrariness in language. The Platonic view posited a deep, divine or occult, connection between the *form* of words (their sounds or spelling) and their *meanings*. 'Rose', by this view, did not just designate a particular plant because everyone agreed that it would: it somehow had the essence of 'rose' in its structure - in the same way that 'H_2O' tells you something about the nature of water that 'water' does not.

Generally in the Renaissance, commentators on language shift between the two viewpoints, seemingly untroubled by the fact that they are mutually exclusive. Writers who begin arguing for one position, are likely to revert to the other, consciously or not, a page or two later. This is, to some extent, a consequence of the rhetorical method which dominated intellectual life in the period. Rhetorical teaching tended to put more emphasis on the arrangement and treatment of material than on reaching a conclusive answer. In this case, however, there was another reason for vacillation between the positions. The Platonic position on meaning, irrational as it was frequently shown to be, had an allure it retains today. The dream of being able to do things with language - really *do* things - runs through magic, religion, even much early science.

The allure of the Platonic position can perhaps be seen in the way Shakespeare, and other writers at the time, treat puns. For us, puns are often rather feeble, mechanical exercises in spotting arbitrary similarity between the forms of words otherwise unrelated: 'son' and 'sun' for example, when Richard has the 'winter' of 'discontent' banished by the 'son of York' (*Richard III* 1.1.1-2). But on a Platonic view, the

similarity is not necessarily arbitrary - and this is reinforced by the fact that neither 'son' nor 'sun' had a fixed spelling in Shakespeare's time - so they are arguably not different words in our sense at all. Viewed this way, puns become witty plays on multiple meanings, all of which are kept alive, rather than static, laboured jokes: a true Shakespearean pun is one word with two simultaneous interpretations - not two words, each with a distinct meaning. And perhaps the Platonic position is not as irrational as we might think: after all, in Juliet's case, if Romeo's *name* was different, then *things* would be too, and they would be free to marry.

3   Grammar

If Shakespeare's linguistic genius is not manifest in the size or fecundity of his words, what is it that he does as a writer that makes him stand out? At the start of *Henry V*, a prologue introduces the play, apologising for the fact that the small theatre, and limited acting troupe, cannot do justice to the wide fields of France, or the huge armies that fought there. The audience, the prologue declares, must make up for this with their imaginations:

> Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
>
> Printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth
>
>   (26-7)

These two lines are typical of the way Shakespeare creates effects out of entirely familiar language, rather than by inventing new words, and also the way he combines semantic effects (to do with meaning) with syntactic ones (to do with grammar).

Let's begin with semantic effects. Semanticists (linguists who study meaning) commonly identify a quality they call 'animacy' in nouns. 'Animacy' refers to the degree to which something is alive, and the extent to which it is capable of growth, movement, and thought. Plants are thus animate, in that they can grow, but they generally lack the capacity for intentional movement, so they are less

animate than birds and animals - which in turn are less animate than humans, as they lack the full range of human thought.

 Of the three nouns in the passage ('horses', 'hoofs', 'earth'), we can argue that 'horses' are the most animate, 'hoofs' the next (since, although they consist of hard, inert matter, they are at least attached to a living thing), and 'earth' the least. However, if we look at the language of the passage, we discover that all three are treated as if they had more animacy than we might expect.

For example, the horses do not simply place or stamp their hooves in the earth: they *print* them. Printing is a specifically human activity – so the metaphorical use of it here functions to imply conscious volition on the part of the horses, and thus increases their animacy. Similarly, when the horses' hoofs are described as 'proud', the metaphor implies a degree of animacy not normally associated with the noun - hard, dead tissue cannot have feelings of pride. Finally, the earth is described as 'receiving' - again, an adjective which increases animacy by implying active volition.

Running in parallel with these semantic effects are syntactic ones with a similar purpose, and which are also typical of Shakespeare. The most normal order of elements in English clauses is:

> [subject] + [verb] + [object]

which we can refer to as 'SVO'. There is an example of a clause which matches this in the first line quoted above:

> ^{Subject}[you] ^{Verb}[see] ^{Object}[them]

Normally in English, the subject is a highly animate noun or pronoun, and the object is often less animate. Here, the human, highly animate pronoun 'you' does something ('see') to the non-human, less animate, horses ('them'). This is, cridely speaking, how the world works: more animate things typically do things to less animate things. Now let's look again at Shakespeare's lines, with subjects, objects, and verbs marked:

> Think, when S(we) V(talk) of O(horses), that S(you) V(see) O(them)

V(Printing) O(their proud hoofs) i'th' receiving earth

'them', as we have already seen, is the object of 'see'. But notice what happens: as soon as the horses are introduced in the role of object ('them'), they are transformed in to the subject of 'Printing'. It is the horses (them) who are seen by us, but it is also the horses (they) who do the printing. By a sleight of grammatical hand, the horses are *simultaneously* the inactive object of 'see' and the active subject of 'Printing':

$$^{Subject}[\text{you}] \; ^{Verb}[\text{see}] \; ^{<Object}[\text{them}]^{Subject>} \; ^{Verb}[\text{printing}]$$

 The rapid shift we have just observed from grammatical object to subject role, with an implied increase in activity and animation, is very common in Shakespeare, who seems to have a need to animate, and activate, almost everything he mentions, however inactive or inanimate we might think it. It is also typical of Shakespeare that he uses both grammatical and semantic means to achieve this (making 'them' simultaneously an object and a subject, and using the semantic implications of 'Printing' to increase the animacy of 'horses').

A further feature of Shakespeare's syntax is unusual word order. John Porter Houston has identified a tendency for Shakespeare to invert the object and the verb, producing subject-object-verb clauses (SOV), rather than the normal subject-verb-object (SVO).[11] At its simplest, this adds emphasis, and perhaps strikes us as archaic, without causing serious problems in understanding:

Queen   Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

Hamlet   Mother, you have my father much offended.

(*Hamlet* 3.4.8-9)

In Present-day English we would expect 'S(thou) V(hast much offended) O(thy father)' and 'S(you) V(have much offended) O(my father)', with the objects 'thy father' and 'my father' in their more normal position after the verb. When Shakespeare employs SOV order in longer sentences, we may find it harder to follow the sense:

> What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
>
> That thou so many princes at a shot
>
> So bloodily hast struck?   (*Hamlet* 5.2.370-2)

Here, a more usual order would be, 'that S(thou) V(hast struck) O(so many princes) at a shot'.

This tendency in Shakespeare is useful to know about if we are trying to understand why we - or perhaps students we are teaching - have problems following Shakespeare's meaning. It will become even more interesting however, if future research confirms Houston's claim, that Shakespeare uses SOV word order far more frequently than his contemporaries - and that the rate at which he uses it increases over his career. Recent linguistic work on other syntactic features has confirmed the frequent literary-critical observation that Shakespeare's late style is more complex syntactically than his early one: perhaps Houston has identified a key characteristic of Shakespeare's language - one that really does set him out from his contemporaries.

Conclusion

Many have felt that Shakespeare's language must hold the key to his genius - but analysis of his linguistic practice has lagged behind almost every other part of Shakespeare scholarship. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare's language can only be seriously studied in relation to what others were doing at the time: if we want to make a claim about Shakespeare's vocabulary, we must also know about Middleton's; and yet the effect of the Shakespeare 'myth' has been to take Shakespeare out of history, and divorce the study of his work from the study of 'lesser' contemporary writers. This is an exciting time in the study of Shakespeare's language however: digital technology will soon make it possible for individual scholars to search and compare the complete corpus of Early Modern printed texts on their laptops. We will be able to put Shakespeare back into history.[12]

Footnotes

1   Ben Jonson, 'To the memory of my beloved, the author Master William Shakespeare' - dedicatory verse to the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare, line 142.

2   See Graham Holderness (ed.), 1988, *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester, Manchester University Press); Terrence Hawkes, 1992, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London, Routledge); Michael Dobson, 1995, *The Making of the National Poet* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).

3   Many of the ideas in this essay are discussed in fuller form in my 2010 book, *Shakespeare and Language: Reason, Eloquence and Artifice in the Renaissance* (Arden).

4   Melvyn Bragg, 2003, *The Adventure of English* (Hodder and Stoughton), page 144.

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

6   Terttu Nevalainen, 1999, 'Early Modern English lexis and semantics', in Roger Lass (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the English language: volume III 1476-1776* (CUP), pp. 332-458.

7   Marvin Spevack, 1985, 'Shakespeare's language', in John F. Andrews (ed.), *William Shakespeare: his world, his work, his influence* (3 vols), (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York), vol. 2, pp. 343-61.

8   See, for example David Crystal, 2008, *Think on my Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language* (CUP), p. 6, which makes this 'largeness' claim even while debunking other language myths about Shakespeare.

9   For a full discussion of these issues, see Hugh Craig, forthcoming, 'Shakespeare's vocabulary: myth and reality', *Shakespeare Quarterly*; and Ward E. Y. Elliott and Robert J. Valenza, 2011, 'Shakespeare's vocabulary: did it dwarf all others?', in Mireille Ravassat and Jonathan Culpepper (eds), *Stylistics and Shakespeare's Language: Transdisciplinary Approaches* (Continuum).

10   All three strikers played for Newcastle United: Milburn 1943-57; Macdonald 1971-76; Shearer 1996-2006. Figures are taken from http://www.nufc.com/2010-11html/players.html [accessed 31.8.2010]

11   John Porter Houston, 1988, *Shakespeare's Sentences: a study in style and syntax* (Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press), especially chapter 1.

12   For introductions to Shakespeare's language, see Lynne Magnusson, forthcoming (2011), 'Language' in Arthur Kinney (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pagination unknown; Jonathan Hope, 2010, 'Shakespeare and language', in Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (eds), *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 77-90. For a hint of the digital future, see Jonathan Hope and Michael Witmore, 2010 'The hundredth psalm to the tune of "Green Sleeves": Digital Approaches to the Language of Genre', *Shakespeare Quarterly* vol, 61, no. 3 (Fall 2010), pp. 357-90.