Shakespeare’s language

Prof. Jonathan Culpeper

@ShakespeareLang
But is it “Shakespeare’s Language”?
But is it “Shakespeare’s Language”?

- 36 plays were put together and published in 1623 as the "First Folio – Shakespeare had been dead for 7 years.

- 18(?) plays had been previously published individually, but some are considered “bad” (perhaps reconstructed from memory)

- An early play-text was a bundle of manuscript fragments written for performance, rather than a whole play written for publication
But is it “Shakespeare’s Language”? 

• Collaboration amongst playwrights is known to have been very common.

• Plagiarism is a modern notion; re-using portions of text from elsewhere could be considered complimentary.

• We have no record of Shakespeare’s spoken language, only literary written language.
But is it “Shakespeare’s Language”? 

So ....

“Shakespeare’s language” = 

surviving written texts that purport to represent, for the most part, the language that Shakespeare produced for his ‘literary’ works
What did Shakespeare’s language sound like? Jonathan’s super quick guide

Some key differences (?):

• The vowel of mud was the one we hear in the North
• The vowel of bath was the one we hear in the North
• The vowel of book, cook, etc. was the same as in some Northern areas (note the ‘oo’)

• The vowel of face was the same as in some Northern areas
• The vowel of right was halfway between reet in some Northern accents and Southern right (i.e. [rəɪt] “r-er-ee-t”)
• The vowel of house was halfway between hoos in some Scottish and Northumbrian accents and house elsewhere (i.e. [həʊs] “h-er-oo-s”)

What did Shakespeare’s language sound like? Jonathan’s super quick guide

Some key differences (?):

• $<r>$ was pronounced after vowels, e.g. arm
• Meat rhymed with great
• Swan rhymed with can
• Which and witch did not sound the same (note the ‘h’)
• The 's' in the middle of words like pleasure sounded like [z] (followed by 'er')
• etc, etc.
What did Shakespeare’s language sound like?

So ...

it is closer to the spelling and
it is more like accents further from London than nearer to London.
The “To be ...” Speech: Olivier
What did Shakespeare’s language sound like?

Have a go!

Theseus, Duke of Athens:

Why, the knights must kindle
Their valor at your eye. Know, of this war
You are the treasure, and must needs be by
To give the service pay.
Shakespeare’s words

Borrowing words
Early modern English, the English of Shakespeare’s time, was having a bonanza borrowing words from other languages.

What language are these words from?

absurdity, assassinate, benefit, critic, exist, exaggerate, external, jocular, obstruction, relaxation, relevant, vacuum, virus, excursion, fact, impersonal, expectation, exact, eradicate, etc.
Latin borrowing into English
Shakespeare’s words

This gave Shakespeare more ammunition:

Spot the words borrowed from Latin here:

*Macbeth*
Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.
Shakespeare’s words

This gave Shakespeare more ammunition:

*Macbeth*

Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The *multitudinous* seas *incarnadine*,
Making the green one red.
Shakespeare’s words

This gave Shakespeare more ammunition:

*Macbeth*

Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The *multitudinous* seas *incarnadine*,
Making the green one red.

Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The *many* seas *make red*,
Making the green one red.
Malapropisms: Learner errors

Gobbo: He hath a great infection, sir, as one would say, to serve. (MV 2.2)

Gobbo: He hath a great affection, sir, as one would say, to serve. (MV 2.2)

Elbow: My wife, sir, whom I detest before heaven and your honor— (MM 2.1)

Elbow: My wife, sir, whom I protest before heaven and your honor — (MM 2.1)
Quickly: She’s as fartuous a civil modest wife, and one, I tell you, that will not miss you morning nor evening prayer, as any is in (Windsor WIV 2.2)

Quickly: She’s as virtuous a civil modest wife, and one, I tell you, that will not miss you morning nor evening prayer, as any is in (Windsor WIV 2.2)

Quickly: She does so take on with her men; they mistook their erection. (WIV 3.5)

Quickly: She does so take on with her men; they mistook their direction. (WIV 3.5)
Shakespeare’s words

Making words

*Compounds*
heat-oppressed brain
birth-strangled babe
even-handed justice
new-born babe
bare-faced power
lily-livered boy
pale-hearted fear

Seem to peak in Act IV
Adding bits to words

Affixes: The case of un-

unaware, unabated, unchanging, unclog, unfair, unfix, unhelpful, unintelligent, unsolicited

undeaf, unfamed, unfeed, ungained, ungrown, unpay, unpregnant, unprovoke, unsex, untalked, unthink
Shakespeare’s words

Did he really invent a load of words?
What does it say on the internet?

• “Shakespeare coined more words than other writers, around 1700 words ...”
• “The English language owes a great debt to Shakespeare. He invented over 1700 of our common words ...”
• “Shakespeare introduced nearly 3,000 words ...”
• “Shakespeare is credited by the Oxford English Dictionary with the introduction of nearly 3,000 words into the language”
• “Shakespeare invented a quarter of our language”
• “Shakespeare invented half the words in the English language”
• “Shakespeare is our language”
What exactly is being counted?

A letter or letters bounded by spaces

*orthographic word* = ‘a string of uninterrupted non-punctuation characters with white space or punctuation at each end’ (Leech et al. 2001: 13-14)
Shakespeare’s words

Counting word-forms and lexemes?

• Dictionary headword (lexeme): *do*

• Modern word-forms: *do, does, doing, did, done*

• Early modern word-forms: *do, does, do(e)st, doth, doing, did, didst, done*
Counting word-forms and lexemes?

Dictionary headword (lexeme): *do* = 1

Modern word-forms: *do, does, doing, did, done* = 5

Early modern word-forms: *do, does, do(e)st, doth, doing, did, didst, done* = 8
Shakespeare’s words

So how many words (lexemes) did Shakespeare create? (neologisms)

• 1,502 words recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary as first citations in Shakespeare

• We are checking these in *Early English Books Online* (EEBO-TCP): 125,000 titles of printed material, 1473-1700. About 1.2 billion words.

Preliminary findings:

• If the current pattern continues, less than a quarter of those 1,502 words can reasonably be attributed to Shakespeare.
Shakespeare’s words

Issues

• How do we know that Shakespeare coined it as opposed to recorded it? Cf. *down staires* vs. *incarna[r]dine* (v.)

• Is it actually just a ‘nonce word’ rather than neologism? Cf. *dropsied* vs. *domineering*
Shakespeare’s meanings

False friends

Naughty

Now = badly behaved, improper, indecent (related to sex), etc.
Then = wicked evil

E.g. 'So shines a good deed in a naughty world (MV 5.1)

Dear

Now = loved, cherished, friendly form of address, etc.
Then = positive meanings, but also negative, e.g. harsh

E.g. Romeo: ‘Is she a Capulet? O dear account!’ (RJ 1.5)
Shakespeare’s meanings

**Fact**

**Now** = something that is known or proved true by evidence

**Then** = something done

**e.g.** ‘[…] how monstrous is was for Malcolm and Donalbain To kill their gracious father? Damned fact! (Mac 3.4)

What about the word *wench* here?

[Othello looking at the dead Desdemona]

‘O ill-starred wench! Pale as your smock’
Shakespeare’s meanings: **good**

**good** adj. (good, better, best):

1. A polite address: '(my) good Lord/friend/Sir/Master/Lady/Madam/etc.' Typically used when meeting or parting, thanking or making suggestions. *But (good my Lord) do it so cunningly* TGV, III. 1.

2. Honest, truthful, principled; of high moral standards. (This sense also shapes the discourse markers '(in) good faith/sooth/troth', which mean truly or honestly). *a man of good repute, carriage, bearing, & estimation* LLL, I. 1.

3. Positive rather than negative. Typically, contrasted with 'bad'. *Is thy news good or bad?* ROM, II. 5.

4. In one's favour, especially favourable wishes or blessings. *The Gods be good to us* COR, V. 4.

5. A welcoming, cheerful manner. *Therefore for Gods sake entertain good comfort, And cheer his Grace with quick and merry eyes* R3, I. 3.
Shakespeare’s grammar

More options; more ammunition

Third-person present singular endings: -eth vs. -s

The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes’ (MV)
Shakespeare’s grammar

More options; more ammunition

To add ‘do’ or not to add ‘do’: Negative sentences and questions

Lady M. ‘Consider it not so deeply’ (Mac 2.2)
  ‘Do not consider it so deeply’

Lady M. ‘Out damned spot [....] what need we fear?’ (5.1)
  what do we need to fear?
Shakespeare’s grammar

Multiple negation

Most famous modern example: Pink Floyd ‘Another brick in the wall’

We don’t need no education
Shakespeare’s grammar

Multiple negation in Shakespeare

I am **not** valiant **neither** (*Oth*)

love **no** man in good earnest, **nor no** further in sport **neyther** (*AYL*)
What happened to Shakespeare’s language?

Do Shakespeare’s coinages survive into today’s English?

• A glimpse of phrases first recorded in Shakespeare and their more recent life.
Four phrases first recorded in Shakespeare and their use in printed material over the last 200 years (Google’s N-Gram Viewer)
Concluding thoughts

• Shakespeare’s language should be seen in the context of the language of his time.

• He didn’t have supernatural powers (e.g. creating all the words of the English language), but he was highly creative.

• I’ve only been scratching the surface – there is much we don’t yet know about Shakespeare’s language.
Linguistics and English Language

Dr Daniel Van Olmen
Linguistics

The study of language systems, functions and uses, often contrasting languages, e.g.:
- Sound systems
- Morphological and syntactic systems
- Semantics and pragmatics
- Language acquisition and loss
- Language change
- Bilingualism and multilingualism
English Language

Focus on English, application of theories to real world issues & the study of texts, e.g:

The grammar and sounds of English
The history of English
The sociolinguistics of English
English in literature
Teaching English as a Foreign Language
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What our students say: the National Student Survey 2017

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94% 84% 98% 87%
Entry requirements

- **AAB** at A Level is our typical offer

- Unconditional offers are made subject to interview

- In August we *try* to accept applicants who have put us down as first choice - even if their actual grades are a *little* lower than expected

- (But the number of places for ‘near misses’ varies from year to year and we cannot make any guarantees!)
Our main degree schemes

LINGUISTICS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE MEDIA
Our main degree schemes

- English Language and Linguistics
- English Language and Literature
- English Language and Creative Writing
- Combined Degrees with Modern Languages
- Linguistics and Psychology
- Study Abroad Degrees
Many students choose to consolidate their interests in language and linguistics by taking another subject in our department.

No choices made until intro week in the autumn.

Lots of advice provided from academics and taster sessions.
Joint Hons Degree Programmes

e.g. Linguistics and German

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Module options
- English Phonetics
- Sounds of the World’s Languages
- Advanced English Phonetics
- Topics in Phonological Theory

- English Grammar
- Structures of the World’s Languages
- Corpus-based English Language Studies
- Cognitive Linguistics

- Discourse Analysis
- Stylistics
- Understanding Media
- The Language of Advertising
- Corporate Communication
- Forensic Linguistics
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• Psycholinguistics
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- LEXICOGRAPHY
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Who to contact

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Thank you!