
The myths about Shakespeare's language

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Arts & Humanities
Research Council




THE QUEEN'S
ANNIVERSARY PRIZES
FOR HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION
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Shakespeare might not be a pleasurable experience

Comments from British undergraduates (TheStudentRoom; our study):

- “Shakespeare uses overcomplicated sentence structure to say simple things which makes him seem pretentious and hard to understand, with old and outdated vocabulary.”
 - “I've never really seen the relevance of Shakespeare when it comes to teaching English. I mean he might as well have written his plays in a foreign language.”
 - “If I could go back in time, I'd kill Shakespeare so that today's schoolchildren wouldn't have to study his crap.”
- 

Coming up ...

- Setting the scene: Encyclopaedia of Shakespeare's Language project
 - What is a language myth?
 - Myths about Shakespeare's language:
 1. Shakespeare's language is all Shakespeare's language (Gary Taylor, authorship attribution and corpus linguistics, and a digression on n-grams)
 2. Shakespeare had a larger vocabulary than any other writer (Ward & Valenza, and Craig)
 3. Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer (with a digression on word counting)
 4. Shakespeare's language transcends time and space (with a brief discussion of the word 'good')
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What will the project produce?

The key output: The encyclopedia

Two volumes:

- (1) a kind of dictionary, and
- (2) a compendium of word patterns relating to characters, character groups, plays, play-genres, themes, etc..

To be published by Bloomsbury in paper and electronically.



What is innovative about it?

- It will be the first systematic and comprehensive account of Shakespeare's language using methods derived from corpus linguistics.
- It will be comparative, looking at language use in Shakespeare *and* his contemporaries.

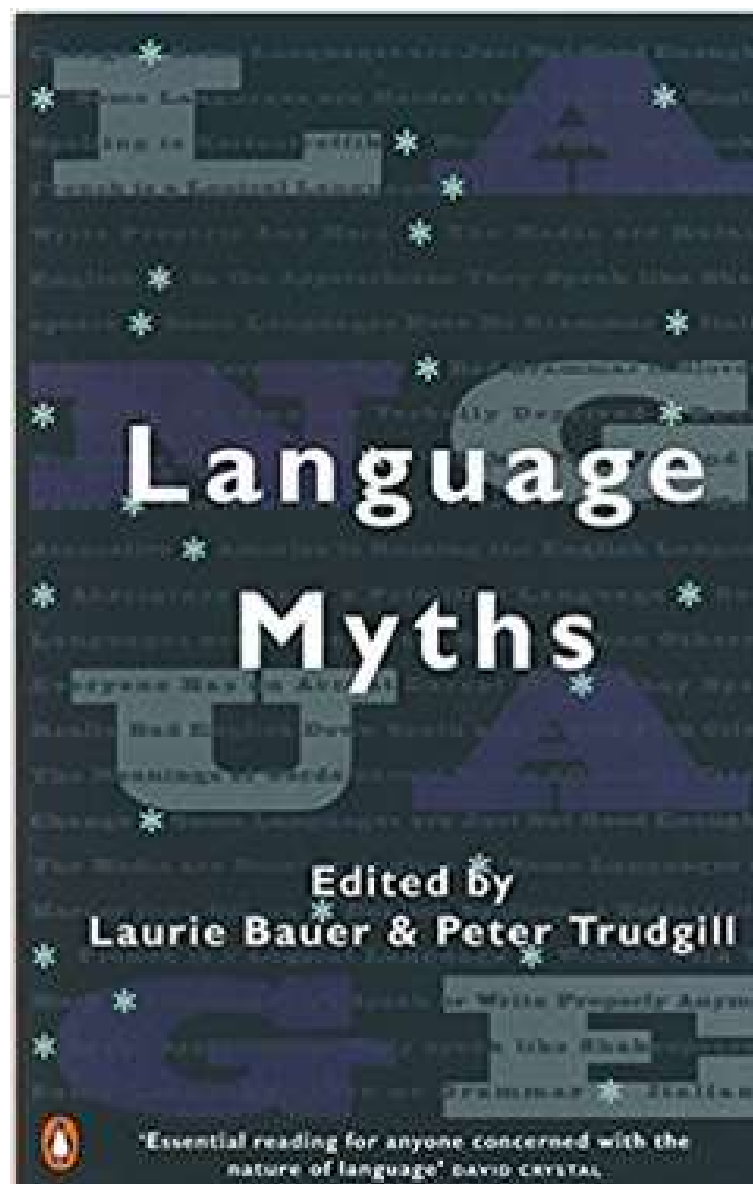


Why now?

- Corpus-based techniques have developed sufficiently to handle non-standardised spellings, provide evidenced accounts of meanings, contribute to the description of style, etc.
- Comparative historical resources have developed considerably, notably, *Early English Books Online* (EEBO-TCP), amounting to some 1.2 billion words.



What is a myth about language?



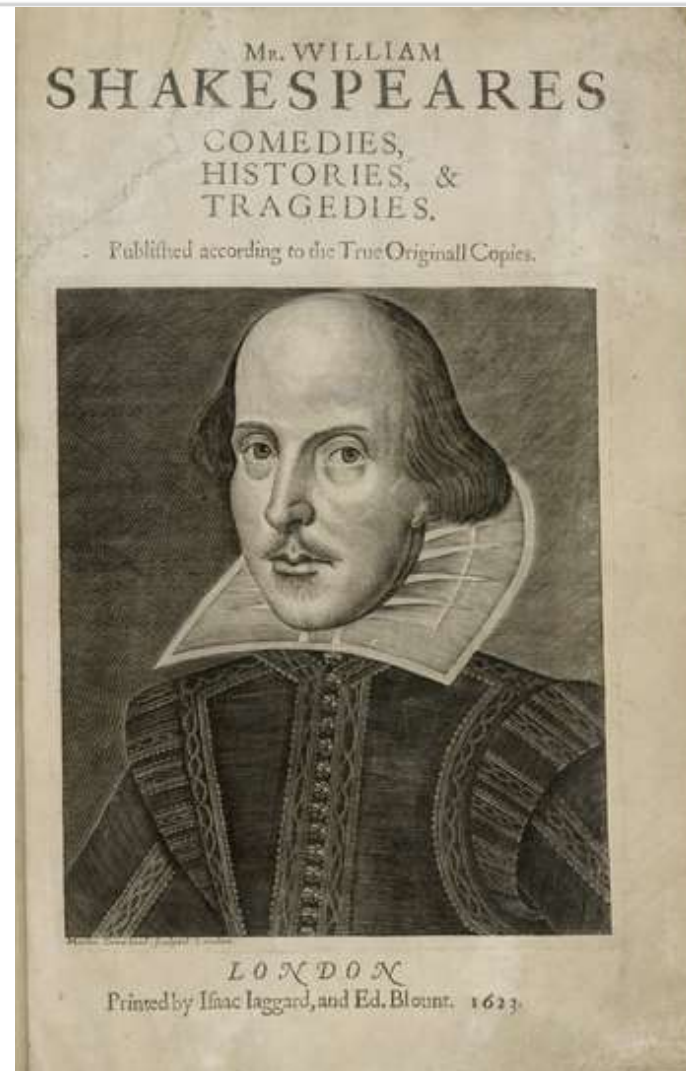
What is a myth about language?

Language myths are:


Beliefs about language that are produced and reproduced within particular communities, and become part of a cultural ideology or “folk wisdom” that is used to evaluate language and account for how it is. They are inconsistent with observed linguistic “facts”.



Myth 1: Shakespeare's language is all Shakespeare's language



Myth1: Shakespeare's language is all Shakespeare's language

- No clear authorial oversight. 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 as Quartos, 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 unitary whole written for publication.
 - Collaboration amongst playwrights is known to have been very common.
 - Plagiarism is a modern notion; re-using portions of text from elsewhere could be construed as complimentary.
- 

Myth1: Shakespeare's language is all 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



Myth1: Shakespeare's language is all Shakespeare's language

But what exactly was the contribution made by other authors to "Shakespeare's works"? And vice versa.

- Authorship attribution (cf. forensic linguistics).
 - Gary Taylor & Gabriel Egan (2016). *The New Oxford Shakespeare*. Christopher Marlowe credited as co-author of *Henry VI* plays, Thomas Middleton as co-author of *All's Well That Ends Well*; *Arden of Faversham* added to Shakespeare's 'canon'.
 - What was the basis for these decisions?
 - N-grams.
- 

Myth1: Shakespeare's language is all Shakespeare's language

"I will finish this lecture shortly"

I will

will finish

finish this

this lecture

lecture shortly

I will finish

will finish this

finish this lecture

this lecture shortly



Myth1: Shakespeare's language is all Shakespeare's language

- Does the disputed text have more n-gram types (i.e. different n-grams) in common with Shakespeare's works or Marlowe's?
- Etc.

But such authorship attribution studies do not account for meaning.



N-grams in Shakespeare and beyond

Shakespeare	EModE Plays	Present-day Plays
I pray you I will not I know not I am a I am not my good lord there is no I would not it is a and I will	it is a what do you and I will it is not I have a I will not in the world I tell you I know not I warrant you	I don't know what do you I don't want do you think do you want I don't think to do with do you know going to be don't want to

Three-word N-grams in order of frequency (coloured items appear in another column)

Data in 2nd and 3rd columns draw from Culpeper and Kytö (2010)

N-grams in Shakespeare and beyond



N-grams in Shakespeare and beyond



Purpose-built outdoor theatres:

The Theatre (1576),
The Curtain (1577),
The Rose (1587),
The Swan (1595),
The Globe (1599), and
The Fortune (1600).



Myth 2: Shakespeare had a larger vocabulary than any other writer

The vocabulary size of an educated adult monolingual today:

Most studies approx **9,000 – 18,000** words

(Treffers-Daller, J. & Milton, J., 2013, *Applied Linguistics Review*, 4(1): 151-172)



Myth 2: Shakespeare had a larger vocabulary than any other writer

Shakespeare:

- “[...] astonishing vocabulary of some **25,000** words” (Greenblatt, S. 2008, *The Norton Shakespeare*, p.65)
- “Twice as large as an educated person today ... **30,000**” (McCrum, R. et al. 2002, *The Story of English*, p.102)
- Vocabulary of **20,000** words “*was* a large vocabulary in its day” (Crystal, D., 2008, *Think on my Words: Exploring Shakespeare’s Language*, p.2)



Myth 2: Shakespeare had a larger vocabulary than any other writer

Problems:

1. What counts as a word?
2. What assumptions are made in calculating vocabulary size?



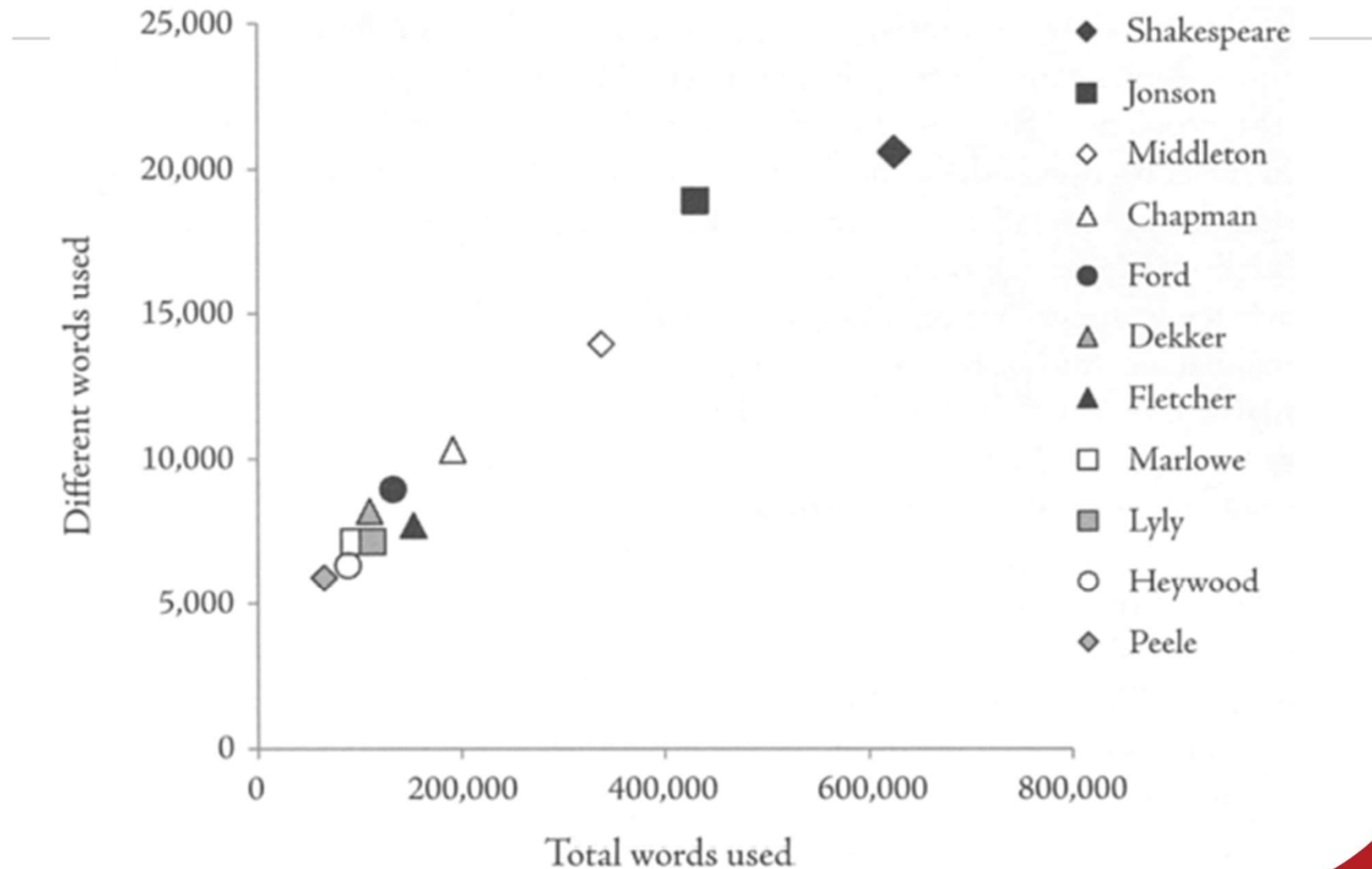
Myth 2: Shakespeare had a larger vocabulary than any other writer

Problems: assumptions

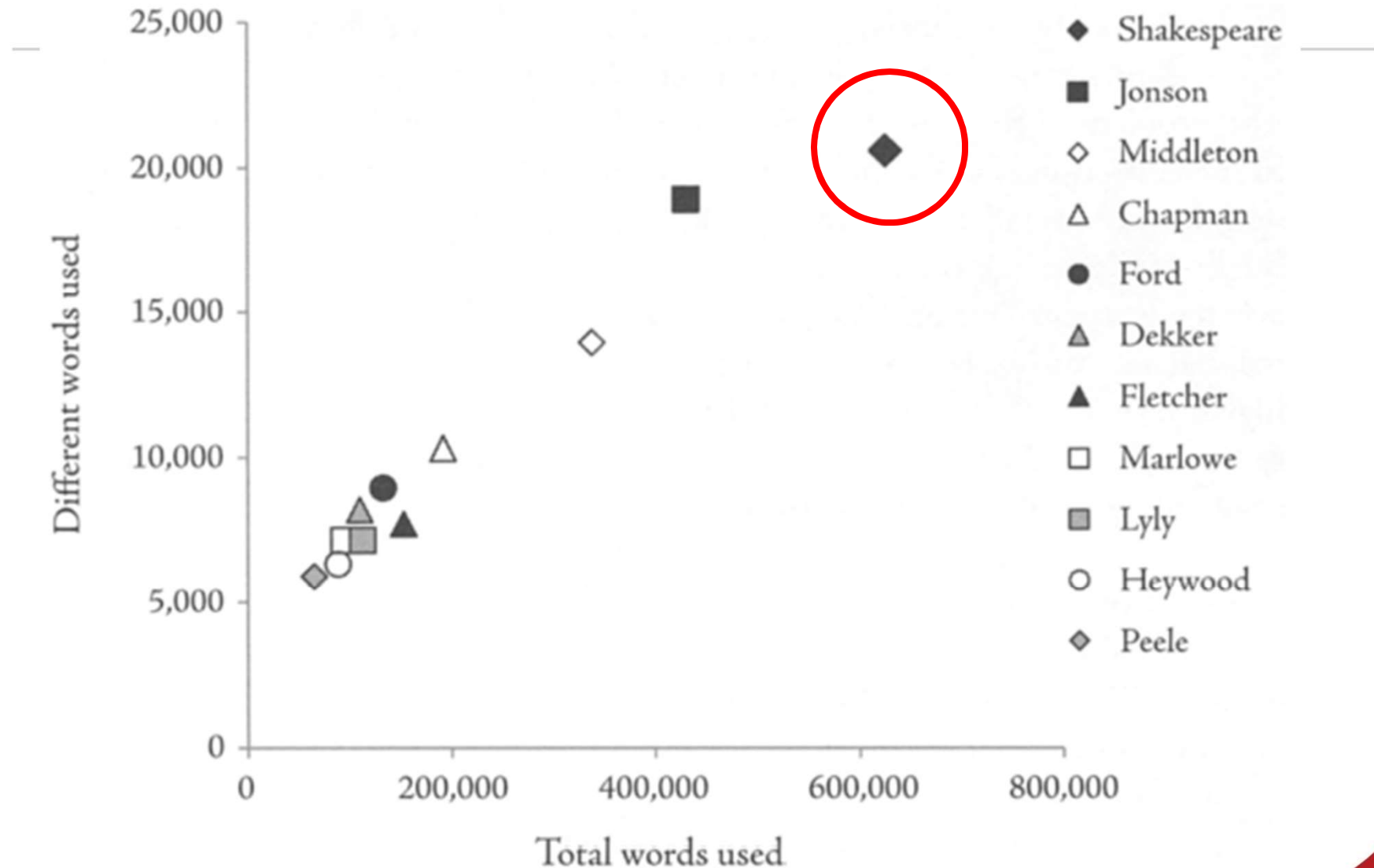
Author	Total different words (approx.)
Shakespeare	21,000
Jonson	18,500
Peele	6,000



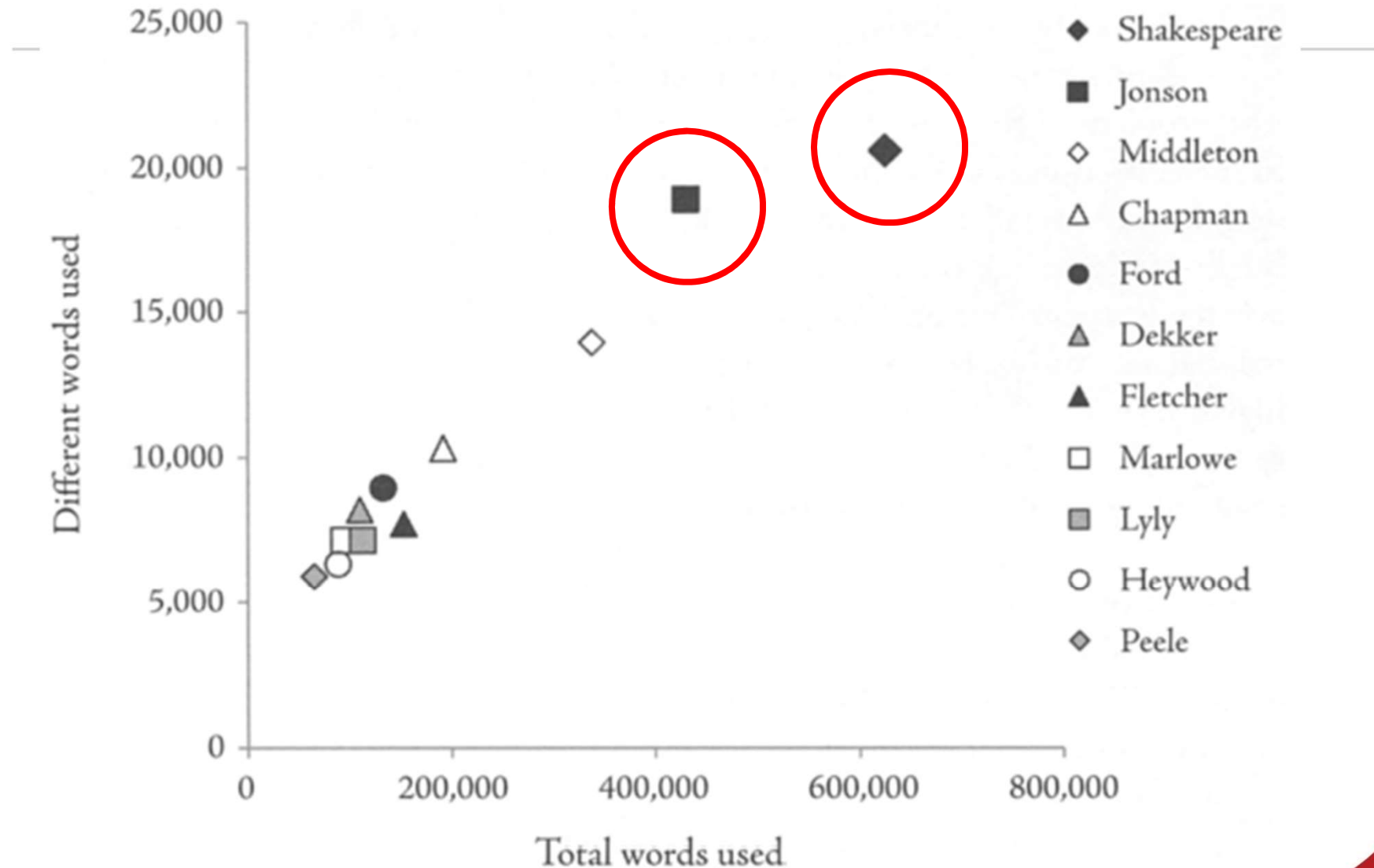
Hugh Craig (2011) Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62(1), p.61



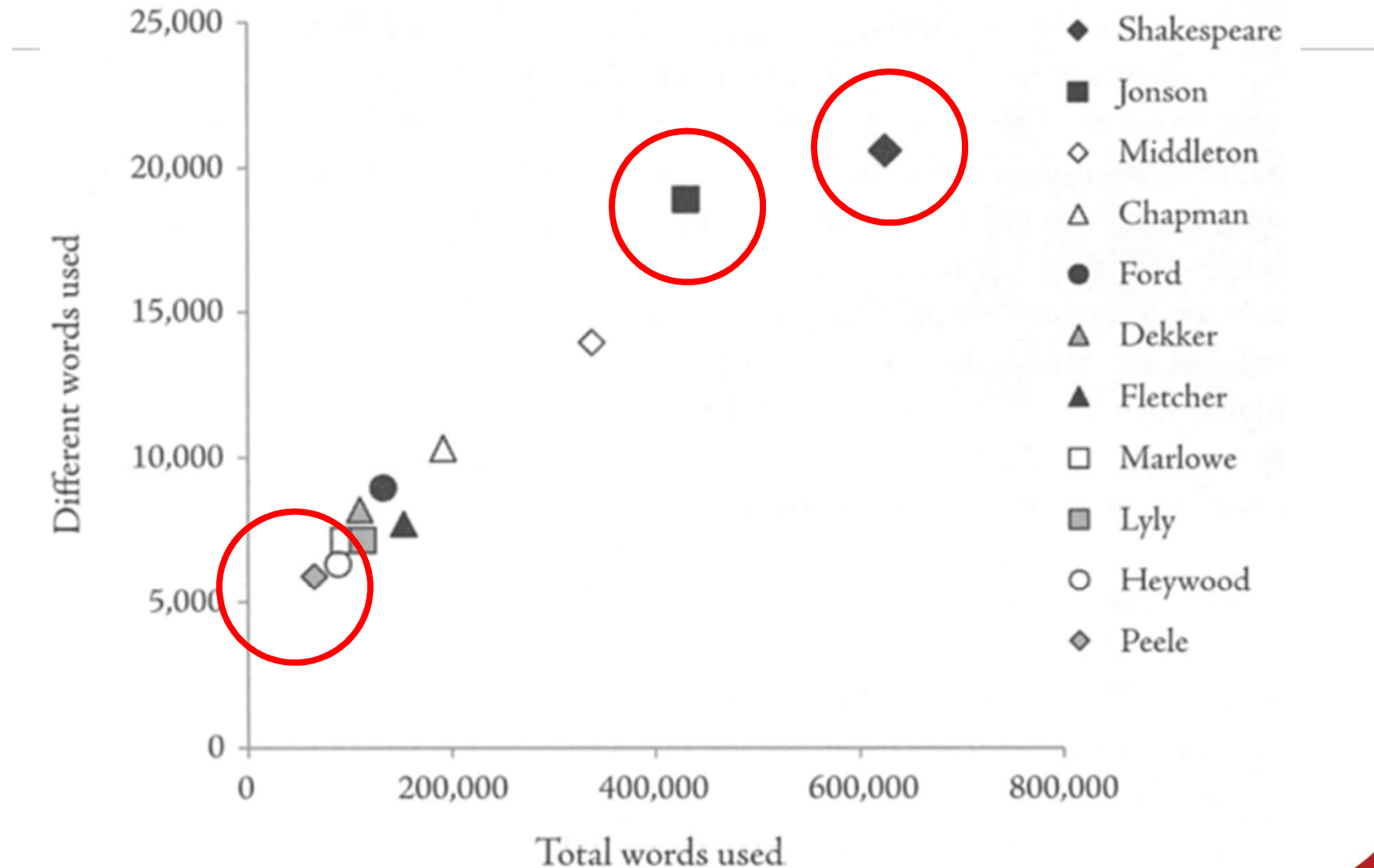
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Hugh Craig (2011) Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62(1), p.62

Table 1: Number of different words used in the first 10,000 words of plays¹

Author	Segments	No. of different words		
		Lowest	Highest	Average
Webster	3	1,694	1,957	1,827.0
Dekker	5	1,502	2,011	1,772.0
Peele	4	1,649	1,845	1,749.5
Marlowe	5	1,554	1,924	1,740.8
Jonson	12	1,494	1,964	1,727.1
Greene	4	1,512	1,829	1,675.5
Shakespeare	28	1,426	1,930	1,663.5
Lyly	8	1,497	1,688	1,604.5
Chapman	10	1,281	1,783	1,581.3
Heywood	5	1,389	1,769	1,554.6
Middleton	12	1,308	1,655	1,550.8
Fletcher	7	1,394	1,682	1,525.5
Wilson	3	1,333	1,710	1,499.0

¹ Analysis is by author, arranged by average count, largest value first.

Hugh Craig (2011) Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62(1), p.62

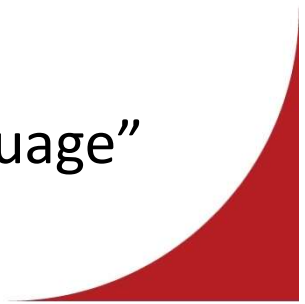
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Myth 3: Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

What can we 'learn' from 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”
- 

Myth 3: Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer (contd.)

Academic views:


- How deep and apparently inexhaustible were the wells of his memory and invention, and how marvellous his aptitude for word-coining, are evident from the addition of 302 peculiar words in writing *Troilus and Cressida* (Alfred Hard, 1943, *The Review of English Studies*, 19(75): 254)
- Of Shakespeare it may be said without fear of exaggeration that his contribution to our phraseology is ten times greater than that of any writer to any language in the history of the world. (Weekley, E. 1952 [1928] *The English Language*, p. 55).

Myth 3: Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer (contd.)

Work on neologisms (with Shery Banas and Poppy Plumb):

- 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.
- 

Myth 3: Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer (contd.)

Issues

- How do we know that Shakespeare coined it as opposed to recorded it? Cf. *down staires* vs. *incarna[r]dine* (v.)
- What about borrowings, such as Latin *acerb[ic]*, that appear in mixed Latin-English texts before Shakespeare?
- Is it actually just a nonce word rather than neologism? Cf. *dropsied* vs. *domineering*



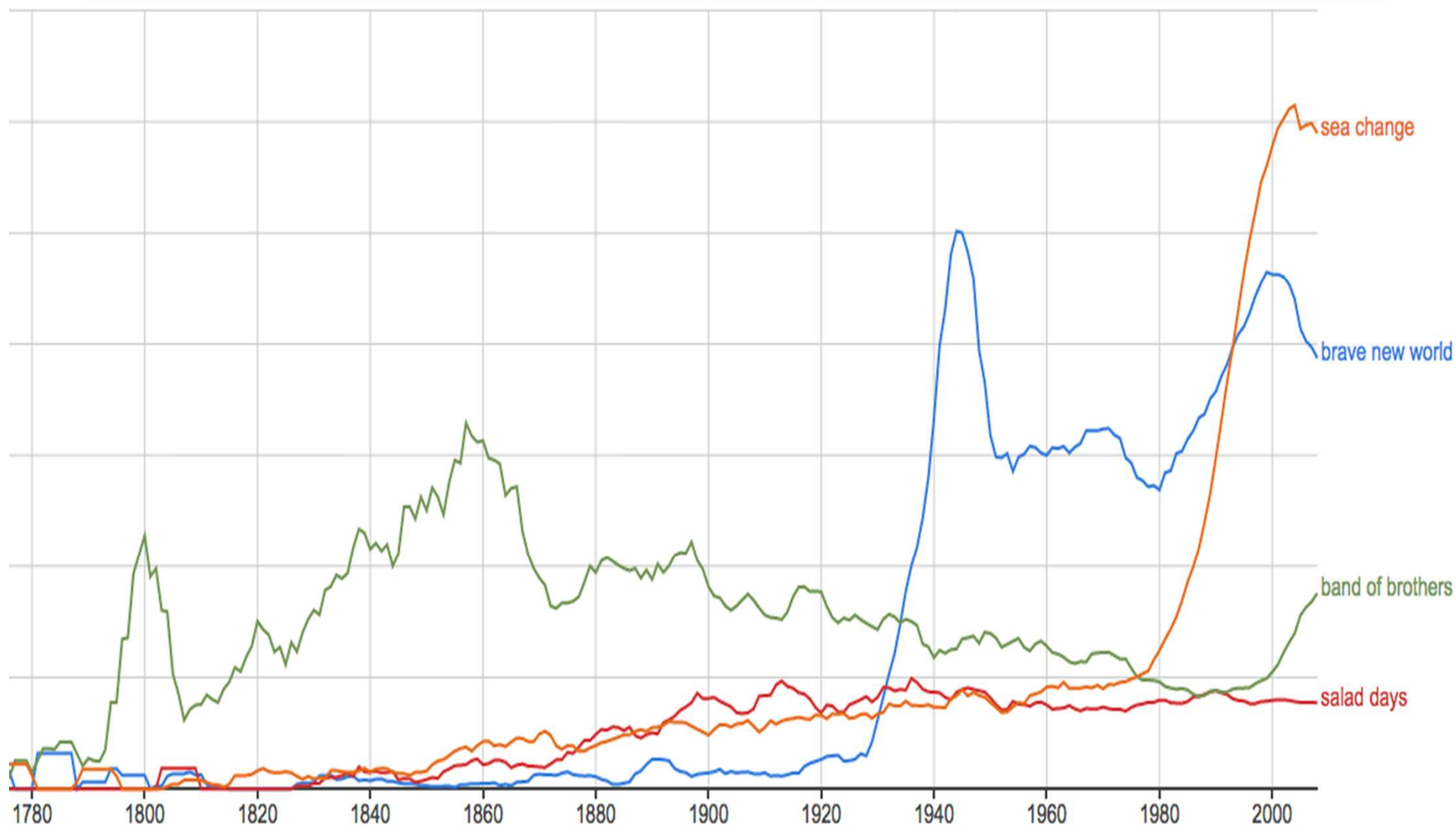
Myth 3: Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer (contd.)

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)



A digression on the problem of counting words

- a) Defining a word
- b) Word-forms and lexemes
- c) Spelling variation



A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

Defining a word

a) A phoneme or phonemes bounded by pauses?

Tybalt: Gentlemen, **good den**, a word with one of you.

Romeo and Juliet, III.1

b) A semantic unit of meaning?

- *The plane landed* = 3 words?
- *The plane took off* = 3 words? (cf. phrasal verbs)
- *He kicked the bucket* = 2 words? (cf. idioms)

well come, in deed, my self, etc.



A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

c) 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)

A 'natural' division?



A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

To m m g n d d o b

I l i K e y o u g n d I L o r e y o u

L o v e f r o m

E m i l y

A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

hourglass

hour-glass

hour glass



A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

Word-forms and lexemes

- Dictionary headword:

do

- Modern (morphological) word-forms:

do, does, doing, did, done

- Early modern (morphological) word-forms:

do, does, do(e)st, doth, doing, did, didst, done



A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

Word-forms and lexemes

Dictionary headword:

do = 1

Modern (morphological) word-forms:

do, does, doing, did, done = 5

Early modern (morphological) word-forms:

do, does, do(e)st, doth, doing, did, didst, done = 8



A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

Spelling variation:


Problem: You decide to study the use of the word *would* in a corpus. You type it into your search program ... and look at the result.

But you miss: *wold*, *wolde*, *woolde*, *wuld*, *wulde*, *wud*, *wald*, *vvould*, *vvold*, etc., etc.

One orthographic word today; many in EModE.

Solution: *Variant Detector* (VARD) program, primarily devised by generations of scholars at Lancaster, but most recently given a significant boost by Alistair Baron.

Further problem: What do you regularize the spelling to? There is no standardised regular form in the way that there is today.

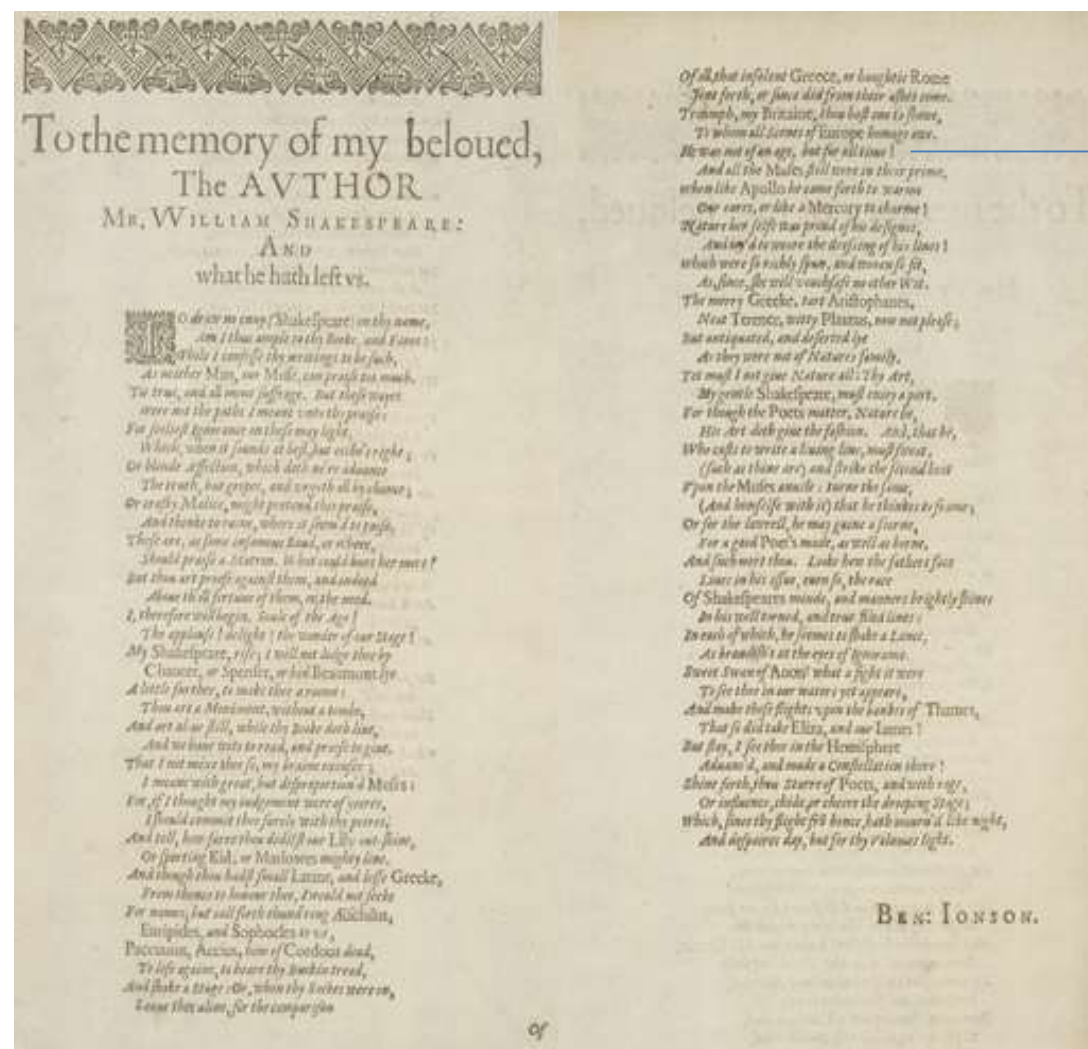


A digression on the problem of counting words (contd.)

Solution: Our policy was to

- 1) Prioritise the orthographic definition of words. But deploy the semantic definition in addition where necessary (e.g. some compounds).
- 2) Distinguish lexemes (lemmatisation). We generally preserved the morphology, e.g. 2nd + 3rd person verb inflections (–(e)st, –(e)th), past tense forms (e.g. *holp*), past participle forms (e.g. *holpen*), plural forms (e.g. *shooen*), non-standard superlatives (e.g. *horrider*), and (*you/thou*).
- 3) Regularise spellings. Only use a spelling that had EModE currency. Prioritize the most frequent spelling in Shakespeare.

Myth 4: Shakespeare's language transcends time and space




He was not of an age, but for all time!

Myth 4: Shakespeare's language transcends time and space

- Universal characters, emotions, themes language??

“Shakespeare has given us a universal language medium in which are crystalized the battle hymns, the intellectual conceptions and the spiritual aspirations of the Anglo-Saxons.”

(Rutherford, N.J. and Bennett, E.H., 1918-1922, *English Speaking World*, Vol.2
(8): 14)

- No Shakespearean dictionary has treated Shakespeare's language as relative, i.e. put Shakespeare's usage in the context of that of his contemporaries.
- 

Myth 4: Shakespeare's language transcends time and space - *good*

Crystal & Crystal (2004:201-202):

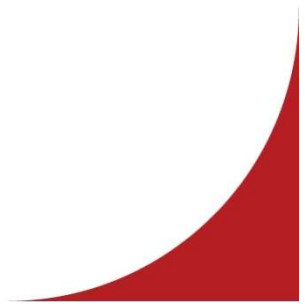
(1) [intensifying use] real, genuine ('love no man in good earnest'). (2) kind, benevolent, generous. (3) kind, friendly, sympathetic. (4) amenable, tractable, manageable. (5) honest, virtuous, honourable. (6) seasonable, appropriate, proper. (7) just, right, commendable. (8) intended, right, proper. (9) high-ranking, highborn, distinguished. (10) rich, wealthy, substantial.

+ phrases and compounds

good (n.) 1 goodwill, goodness *HF* IV.ii.60 [Griffith to Katherine, of the fall of Wolsey's foundation at Ipswich] *Drowning to further the good that did it*
2 good fellow *Per* II. Chorus:9 [Gower alone, of Pericles] *The good in conversation ... / Is still at Jarrus* *Tim* I.i.3, 15; *Tim* II.ii.75
3 interest, advantage, benefit *Cor* II.ii.234 [Sicinius to Brutus, of Coriolanus] *It shall be to him then as our good will, / As sure destruction*
good, do prosper, succeed, triumph *2H6* IV.ii.14 [Dick to Cade] *If we mean to thrive and do good, break open the good*
good, do one 1 make prosper, enable to succeed *MA* I.i.269 [Claudio to Don Pedro] *Your highness now may do me good* *2H6* I.ii.77; *2H6* III.ii.38
2 be of use to, provide assistance to *2H6* III.ii.119 [King to all, of Gloucester] *myself ... / Look after him, and cannot do him good*
good (adj.) 1 [intensifying use] real, genuine *AF* I.ii.25 [Celia to Rosalind] *love no man in good earnest* *Tim* II.ii.232
2 kind, benevolent, generous *Tim* I.ii.242 [Timon to Apemantus] *if thou wert not sudden, I would be good to thee* *Tim* III.ii.24
3 kind, friendly, sympathetic *1L* V.ii.274 [Bondage to all] *The King was sometime ripe for a good word*
4 amenable, tractable, manageable *TS* I.i.127 [Hortensio to Gremio, of a husband for Katherine] *there be good fellows in the world, as a man could fight on them*
5 honest, virtuous, honourable *Cor* II.ii.58 [Menenius to Brutus and Sicinius, of their supporters] *they be deadly that tell you have good faces*
6 seasonable, appropriate, proper *CE* II.ii.70 [Antipholus of Syracuse to Dromio of Syracuse] *learn to just in good time*
7 just, right, commendable *2H6* II.ii.28 [Suffolk to Gloucester, of malice] *no worse than well because / So good a quarrel*
8 intended, right, proper *Rj* I.ii.45 [Mercutio to Romeo] *Take our good meaning*
9 high-ranking, highborn, distinguished *Ra* I.ii.40 [Bolingbroke to Mowbray] *Thou art ... a miscreant, / Too good to be so* *1P* better (adj.)
10 rich, wealthy, substantial *Cor* I.ii.15 [First Citizen to all] *We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good* *2H4* IV.ii.15; *2H4* IV.ii.12
good, 'tis very well *Tit* I.ii.412 [Saturninus to Bassianus] *'Tis good, sir. You are very short with us*
good (adv.) [intensifying use] really, genuinely *2H4* III.ii.44 [Folstaf to Bardolph] *the sack that thou hast drunk we would have bought me lights as good cheap at the dearest chandler's in Europe*
good-conceited (adj.) cleverly devised, ingeniously composed *Cym* II.ii.16 [Cloten to musicians, of their playing to Innogen] *a very excellent good-conceited thing*
good deed (adv.) in truth, in reality *WT* I.ii.42 [Hermione to Leontes] *yet, good deed, Leontes, / I love thee not a jar o' th' clock behind / What lady she her lord* *1P* **DISCOURSE MARKERS**, p.127
good-den / e'en / even / morrow *1P* **GREETINGS**, p.206; **FAREWELLS**, p.170
good-faced (adj.) smooth-faced, pretty *WT* IV.ii.112 [Altoycus to Clown] *good-faced sir ... sweet sir*
good life comfortable position, respectable way of life *2H4* III.ii.112 [Mistress Page to Mistress Ford] *defend your reputation, or bid farewell to your good life for ever* *1P* **song of good life**

Myth 4: Shakespeare's language transcends time and space - *good*

Crystal & Crystal (2004:201-202):

- (1) [intensifying use] real, genuine ('love no man in good earnest').
 - (2) **kind**, benevolent, generous.
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 - (4) amenable, tractable, manageable.
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 - (8) intended, **right**, **proper**.
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 - (10) rich, wealthy, substantial.
- 

Myth 4: Shakespeare's language transcends time and space - *good*

No	Text	Solution 1 to 50	Page 1 / 71
1	WT WT_1_2	's some comfort . What ? Camillo there ? Aye , my	good Lord . Go play (Mamillius) thou art an honest man
2	H5 H5_3_6	It is well . The Fig of Spain . Exit . Very	good . Why , this is an arrant counterfeit Rascal , I remember
3	TC TC_2_1	if he knock out either of your brains , he were as	good crack a fusty nut with no kernel . What with me too
4	TN TN_4_2	Who I sir , not I sir . God be with you	good sir Topas : Marry Amen . I will sir , I will
5	1H4 1H4_1_3	my Love , and your high Majesty . The circumstance considered ,	good my Lord , Whatever Harry Percy then had said , To such
6	R3 R3_2_4	Because sweet Flowers are slow , and Weeds make haste .	Good faith , good faith , the saying did not hold In him
7	MND MND_1_1	and Demetrius . Happy be Theseus , our renowned Duke . Thanks	good Egeus : what 's the news with thee ? Full of vexation
8	Oth Oth_3_4	this is from some Mistress , some remembrance ; No , in	good troth Bianca . Why , whose is it ? I know not
9	Cor Cor_1_1	Country ? Very well , and could be content to give him	good report for it , but that he pays himself with being proud
10	CE CE_3_2	hold you still : I 'll fetch my sister to get her	good will . Exit . Enter Dromio , Syracuse . Why how now
11	R2 R2_1_1	heaven . Thou art a Traitor , and a Miscreant ; Too	good to be so , and too bad to live , Since the
12	WT WT_2_3	commanded None should come at him . Not so hot (good Sir) I come to bring him sleep . T is such
13	1H6 1H6_3_1	than I do ? except I be provoked . No , my	good Lords , it is not that offends , It is not that
14	1H4 1H4_4_4	how much they do import , You would make haste . My	good Lord , I guess their tenor . Like enough you do .
15	WT WT_2_3	and frame of Hand , Nail , Finger .) And thou	good Goddess Nature , which hast made it So like to him that
16	Cym Cym_4_2	In this place we left them ; I wish my Brother make	good time with him , You say he is so fell . Being
17	Oth Oth_3_3	To let you know my thoughts . What dost thou mean ?	Good name in Man , & woman (dear my Lord) Is
18	KJ KJ_4_3	he may inquire us out . Exeunt Lords . Here 's a	good world : knew you of this fair work ? Beyond the infinite
19	WT WT_3_2	(cracking it) Break too . What fit is this ?	good Lady ? What studied torments (Tyrant) hast for me ?
20	2H4 2H4_2_1	I warrant he is an infinitive thing upon my score .	Good Master Fang hold him sure : good Master Snare let him not
21	Cor Cor_4_6	very many of us , that we did we did for the	best , and though we willingly consented to his Banishment , yet it
22	2H6 2H6_4_9	you love your Prince & Country : Continue still in this so	good a mind , And Henry though he be unfortunate , Assure yourselves

Myth 4: Shakespeare's language transcends time and space - *good*

No.	Tagged lemma	Total no. in whole corpus	Expected collocate frequency	Observed collocate frequency	In no. of texts	Log Ratio
1	morrow SUBST	123	4.154	158	32	13.142
2	even SUBST	34	1.148	47	14	11.393
3	sooth SUBST	39	1.317	20	13	4.913
4	cheer SUBST	49	1.655	21	16	4.424
5	luck SUBST	25	0.844	10	6	4.254
6	lieutenant SUBST	58	1.959	15	4	3.319
7	worship SUBST	99	3.343	21	10	2.945
8	turn SUBST	58	1.959	12	10	2.9
9	neighbour SUBST	68	2.296	14	6	2.891
10	camillo SUBST	49	1.655	10	1	2.875
11	monsieur SUBST	51	1.722	10	2	2.803
12	adieu INTERJ	99	3.343	18	13	2.669
13	angel SUBST	83	2.803	15	9	2.658
14	news SUBST	321	10.84	52	17	2.468
15	troth SUBST	99	3.343	16	9	2.464
16	will SUBST	370	12.495	59	31	2.44
17	excellent ADJ	126	4.255	20	12	2.433
18	comfort SUBST	179	6.045	26	13	2.282
19	opinion SUBST	99	3.343	14	8	2.237
20	bad ADJ	340	11.482	48	26	2.234
21	faith SUBST	223	7.531	31	18	2.208
22	very ADJ	500	16.885	66	22	2.121

Good (= 3507) (CQPweb)

Encyclopaedia of Shakespeare's Language

Definition preview: definition 104 for entry [good_ADJ](#)

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.

good will As now.

good morrow Good morning.

good night As now.

Does Shakespeare's usage reflect that of his contemporaries? A glance at collocates in EEBO 1560-1640

Good
(= 577,864)

Works

Cheer

Evil

Advisement

Hap

Deeds

Sooth

Readers

Christian

Concluding reflections

Shakespeare and the myths. Why?


“Shakespeare has given us a universal language medium in which are crystalized the battle hymns, the intellectual conceptions and the spiritual aspirations of the Anglo-Saxons.”

(Rutherford, N.J. and Bennett, E.H., 1918-1922, *English Speaking World*, Vol.2 (8): 14)



Concluding reflections

Aside from the myths:

- The notion of a word
 - Spelling variation
 - Words and lexemes
 - N-grams
 - Counting assumptions
 - Meanings and collocations
 - Corpus linguistics and lexicography
 - Corpus linguistics and historical linguistics
 - Etc.
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Project website

<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/shakespearelang/>

