

Myths about the English Language:

From dropping letters to Shakespeare's neologisms

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What are myths about language?

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- Laurie Bauer, Peter Trudgill, Rosina Lippi-Green, James and/or Lesley Milroy, Dennis Preston, Richard Watts, etc.

A definition

Sets of 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”.

Four myths about English (held by the British English)

1. Posh British English people don't drop the letters of words when they speak
2. American English is ruining British English
3. British English is becoming increasingly rude
4. Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

The Mountain of English: *greetings from the top!*

"But look, the morn, in
russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of
yon high eastern hill..."

Yes it does, doesn't it.



You can understand
SHAKESPEARE

You can speak
the **QUEEN'S ENGLISH**



And what
exactly
do you do?



I ain't gonna
whaddy mean?
I mean I don't
wanne and I
ain't gotta!

You can understand
Hollywood films

You can successfully
negotiate multi-billion £
business contracts with
top international companies



Go away
and leave
me alone!

You can understand
the host family canary

You can communicate
at the disco

SORRY, WHAT
DID YOU SAY?

PARDON?



DO.
YOU.
SPEAK.
ENGLISH
??!!?

You can understand
if people shout loudly
one word at a time



You can say "yes" and "no"
(usually at the right times)



(well, nearly...!)

Posh English people don't drop letters

So, how do English people who are not posh speak?

“It is a fact that in the 20th century the working-class were completely illiterate and communicated with each other in a very simplistic manner not recognisable as speech.” (a student exam paper)

Posh English people don't drop letters

Network of beliefs:

- Being working-class = being illiterate (or less literate)
- Being illiterate (or less literate) = not saying it as it is written
- Not saying it as it is written = not being able to speak well

Posh English people don't drop letters

“Someone who speaks RP would pronounce all their consonants at the end of words, whereas a cockney from London would not.” (a student exam paper)

Posh English people don't drop letters

Elizabeth II: 'country **and** the commonwealth ... trials **and** sorrows ...
courage **and** service ... fun **and** laughter ... warmth **and** affection ...
dedication **and** enthusiasm ... me **and** my family ... death **and** the void ...
her life **and** the honour ...'



Posh English people don't drop letters

Historical roots

Strang (1970: 81) on “h dropping”:

“[...] not till the close of the 18thc does explicit condemnation of “dropping h’s” begin. With the spread of education a new view about *h*’s comes to dominate usage, at the expense of traditional pronunciations – the view that if it is in the spelling it must be pronounced; of course, **this view can only prevail where spelling itself is highly regularised [...]**” (my emphasis)

“For pronunciation the best general rule is, to consider those as the most elegant speakers who deviate least from the written words” (Samuel Johnson, Preface, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755)

Posh English people don't drop letters

Writtenness: The underlying belief system

“Standard language ideology” (Milroy and Milroy 1998; Lippi-Green 1994)

“The chief characteristic of a standard ideology is the belief that there is one and only one correct spoken form of the language, modelled on a single correct written form” (Milroy 1999:174)

American English ruining British English

Prince Charles commenting on American English:

“very corrupting [...] people tend to invent all sorts of nouns and verbs and make words that shouldn’t be [...] We must act now to ensure that English – and that, to my way of thinking, means English English – maintains its position as the world language well into the next century.” (1995, *The Times*)

American English ruining British English

All of the following words are currently used in British English.
Which of them have come from American English?

blizzard, blurb, cafeteria, cocktail (the drink), electrocute, jazz, radio, stooge, belittle, swamp, snazzy, kissogram, trial (as a verb), unsackable, truish

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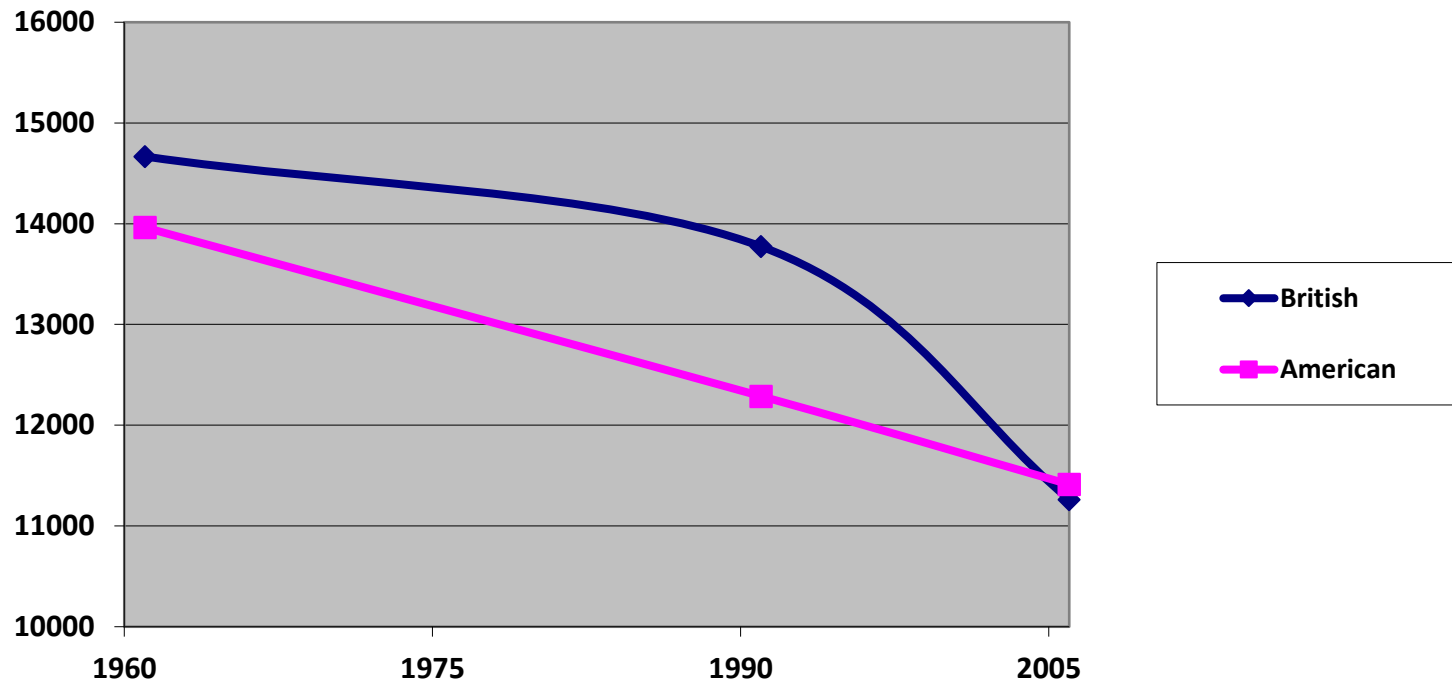
American English ruining British English

But is English English following American English?

- *movie* taking over *film*?

American English ruining British English

The modal verbs (e.g. *can*, *could*, *would*, *may* in British and American English (Paul Baker) (frequency per million)



American English ruining British English

Leech, Geoffrey *et al.* (2009) *Change in Contemporary English: A Grammatical Study* (CUP)

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American English ruining British English

Leech, Geoffrey N. *et al.* (2009) *Change in Contemporary English: A Grammatical Study* (CUP)

“We have come across many examples in this book where the generality of American influence on British English cannot easily be denied, but where it is far from eclipsing the **independent developments** found in this and other national standards.” (p.259, my emphasis)

American English ruining British English

The standard language ideology:

- Writing is relatively permanent; writing is of high value

Therefore:

- Change is bad; new language forms are of low value
- American English forms are often relatively new.
- Newness is more salient than a word's provenance.

People are abandoning polite English



People are abandoning polite English

EveningStandard.

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Londoners, stop being so rude and unfriendly, says think tank: call for a 'civility code' to help make London a nicer place to live

PIPPA CRERAR City Hall Editor | Monday 9 October 2017 11:02 |  46 comments

People are abandoning polite English

Historical background

Politeness and social hierarchy:

Politeness = “elegance of manners; gentility; good breeding” (Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755; Sheridan 1790; Webster 1828)

Politeness, correctness and writtenness:

[Nurses and women around a gentleman’s son should ensure that] “they speke none englisshe but that which is cleane, polite, perfectly and articulately pronounced, omittinge no lettre or sillable, as folisshe women often times do of a wantonesse, wherby diuers noble men and gentilmennes chyldren, (as I do at this daye knowe), haue attained corrupte and foule pronuntiation.” (Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named The Governour*, l.v., 1531, p.22-3)

People are abandoning polite English

Network of beliefs

- The working-class are rough, aggressive and uneducated
- Rough, aggressive and uneducated people are rude (N.B. meanings of *rude*)
- Rude behaviour is not “nice” or correct

People are abandoning polite English

Is it true that the English are becoming more impolite?

- Culpeper and Archer (2010): Study of 1,200 requests in trial proceedings and drama from around Shakespeare's time.
- **1 in 3 requests** were made with the simple imperative, e.g. "Fetch me the water", "Get thee gone", "Bake the bread", "Go!"

People are abandoning polite English

- Today, only **1 in 10 requests** (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) are made with the simple imperative. Most use forms such as “Could you fetch me the water?” (cf. Aijmer 1996).

Conclusion: we are more polite?

People are abandoning polite English

Not necessarily.

- Politeness is not just what people say but whether they are perceived to be saying something appropriate, right, supportive, etc..
- Problem: what counts as appropriate, etc. is changing
- Old values clashing the new – “Victorian values” (e.g. respect privacy, don’t disturb someone, be deferential) vs. “the express yourself philosophy” (e.g. let your feelings out, get to the point, be friendly) (cf. Cameron 2008)

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 invented a **quarter** of our language”
- “Shakespeare invented **half** the words in the English language”
- “Shakespeare *is* our language”

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

Academic views:

- “That Shakespeare invented – or, at least, successfully promoted – more new English words than anyone else in history is a truth universally acknowledged.” (Robert N. Watson, 2012, *Shakespeare Survey*, 65: 358-377)
- This is an ironic statement, but Watson (2012, p.358) says that it is “probably true”, though the numbers are over-inflated.

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

General problems/issues

- (1) Defining words (compound words).
- (2) Finding words (spellings, word-forms, lexemes; antedating)
- (3) Establishing words (nonce words and postdating)

These problems/issues have also had a dramatic effect on the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), on which most estimates of Shakespeare's neologisms are based.

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

Compound words

Cooper (2013: 3): Shakespeare's "much commented upon neologisms [...] rely on the ease with which English can create new compounds or usages for words already there."

Compound words with first citations from Shakespeare listed in the OED:

headshake (noun)

go-between (noun)

mountain wind (noun)

barefaced (adjective)

well-educated (adjective)

shooting star (noun)

- In the original texts, they were all open. So why did the OED represent them as compound words?

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

Compound words: Are they units of meaning?

The meaning of the whole word is not completely predictable from the meanings of the parts (Brinton and Traugott 2005: 96)

shooting star – together the elements denote a specific and distinct concept: a meteor looking like a star moving rapidly across the sky. It's not completely predictable from its parts.

mountain wind – the first element modifies the second. It seems predictable. Moreover:

- Why is *mountain wind* in the OED but not *hill wind*, *valley wind*, *bluff wind*, *ridge wind*, *sierra wind*, *volcano wind*, and so on?
- Can a dictionary ever contain every word that is modified by another as a headword?

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

Finding words: Spellings, word-forms and lexemes

Spellings

- An illustration: You decide to study the the word *would* in a corpus. You type it into the search program ...
- But you miss: *wold*, *wolde*, *woolde*, *wuld*, *wulde*, *wud*, *wald*, *vvould*, *vvold*, etc., etc.
- Partial solution: *Variant Detector* (VARD) program

Word-forms and lexemes

- Dictionary headword (the lemma): *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*

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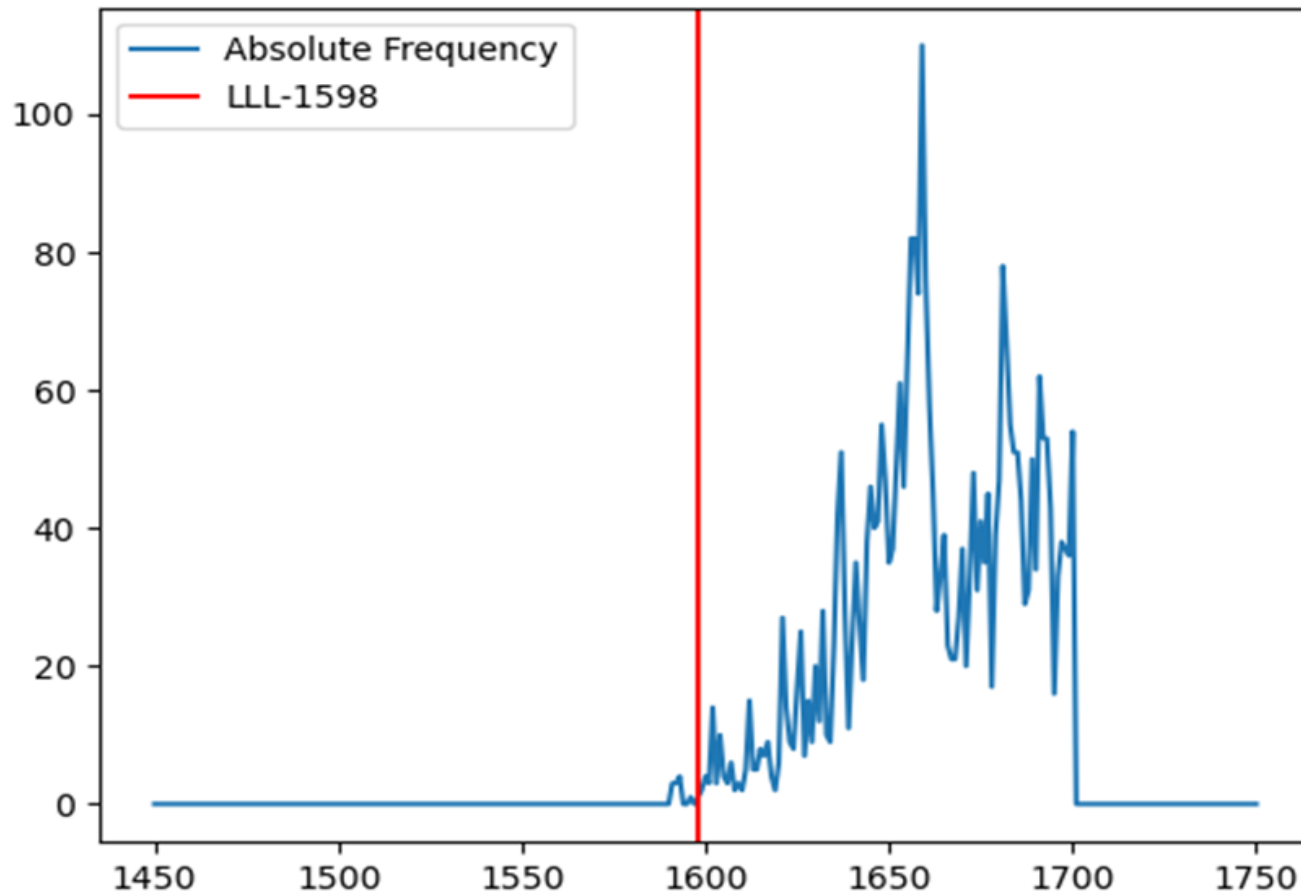
Word-forms and lexemes

- Dictionary headword (the lemma): *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**
- Partial solution: Lemmatiser

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

Finding words: Antedatings

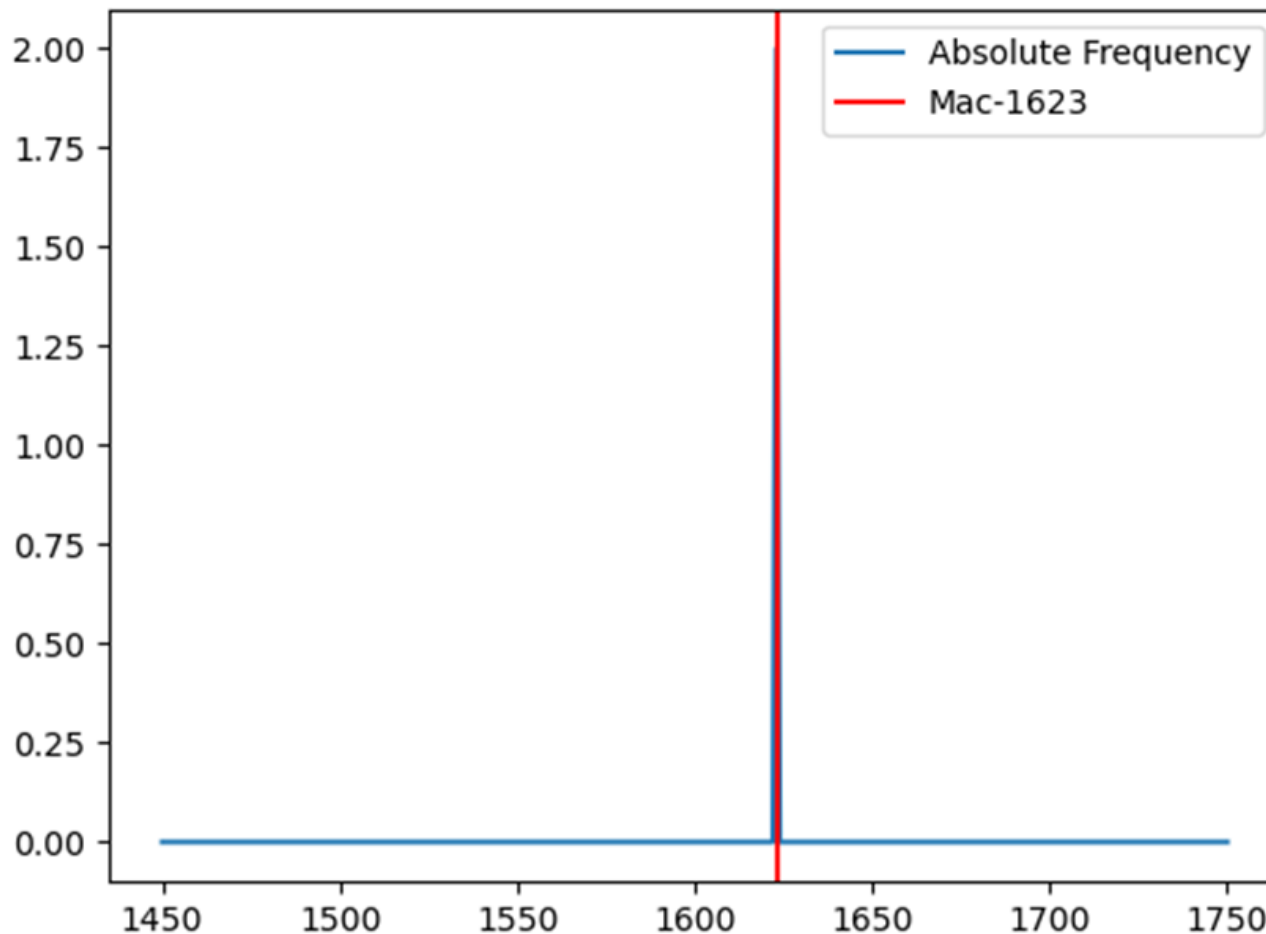
Schäfer (1980: 65-6): 60% of the OED's dates are reliable



Domineering

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

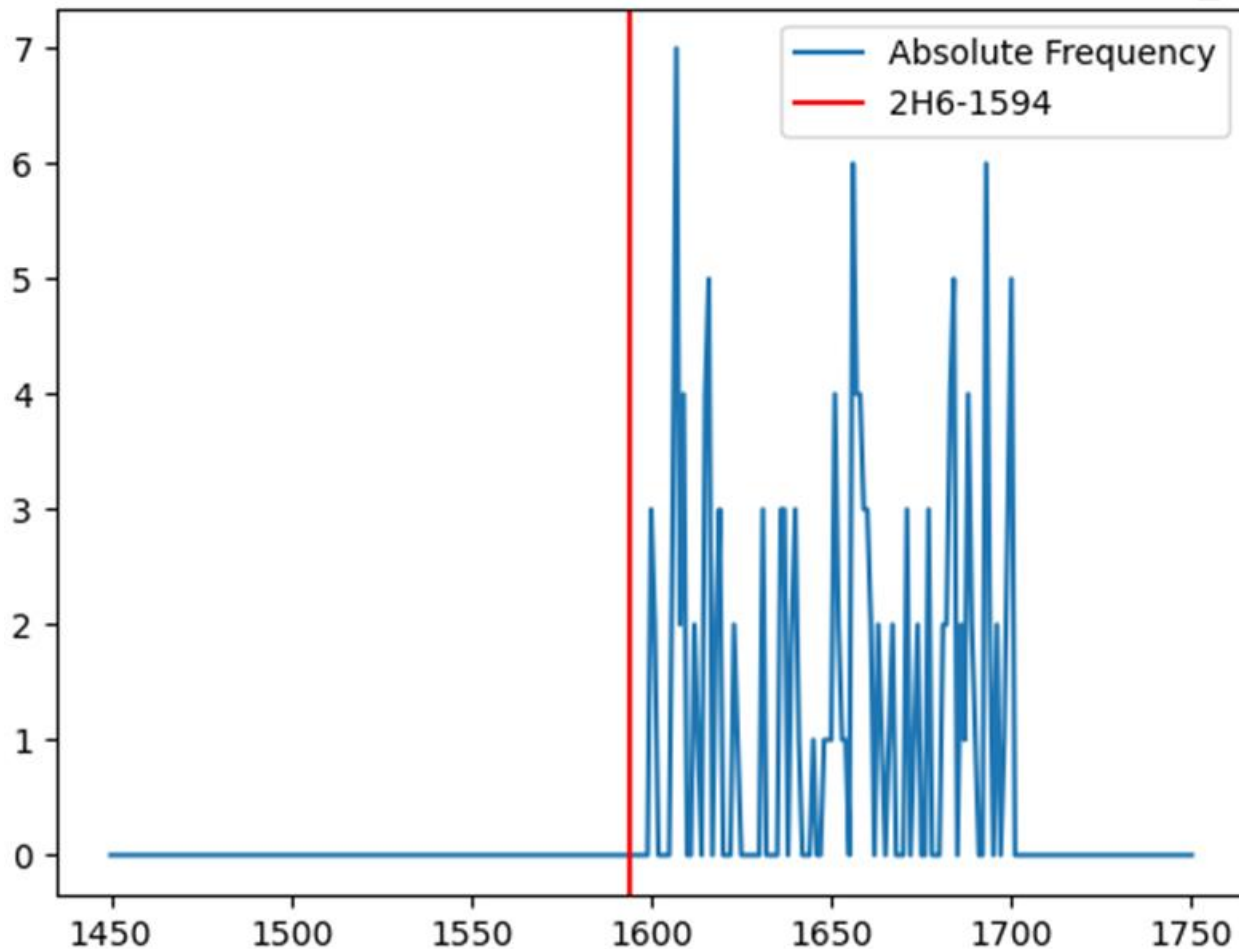
Establishing words: Nonce words



Heat-oppressed

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

Establishing words: Postdating (and “time gaps”)



Hobnail

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

Establishing words: Postdating (and “time gaps”)

Crystal (2017): the “assumption is that the wider the time-gap, the more plausible is the claim that the word is a genuine neologism.” (because it isn’t already out there for somebody else to record)

But surely there are limits.

These are some of the words listed in the OED which are first recorded in Shakespeare and then next recorded 150 years or more later:

cat-like (adjective)

half-cheek (noun)

mangling (adjective)

outsweeten (verb)

overhandled (adjective)

phraseless (adjective)

Shakespeare coined more words than any other writer

So, how words did Shakespeare invent?

Work on neologisms:

- 1,502 words recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary as first citations in Shakespeare
- *Early English Books Online* (EEBO-TCP): 125,000 titles of printed material, 1473-1700. About 1.2 billion words.

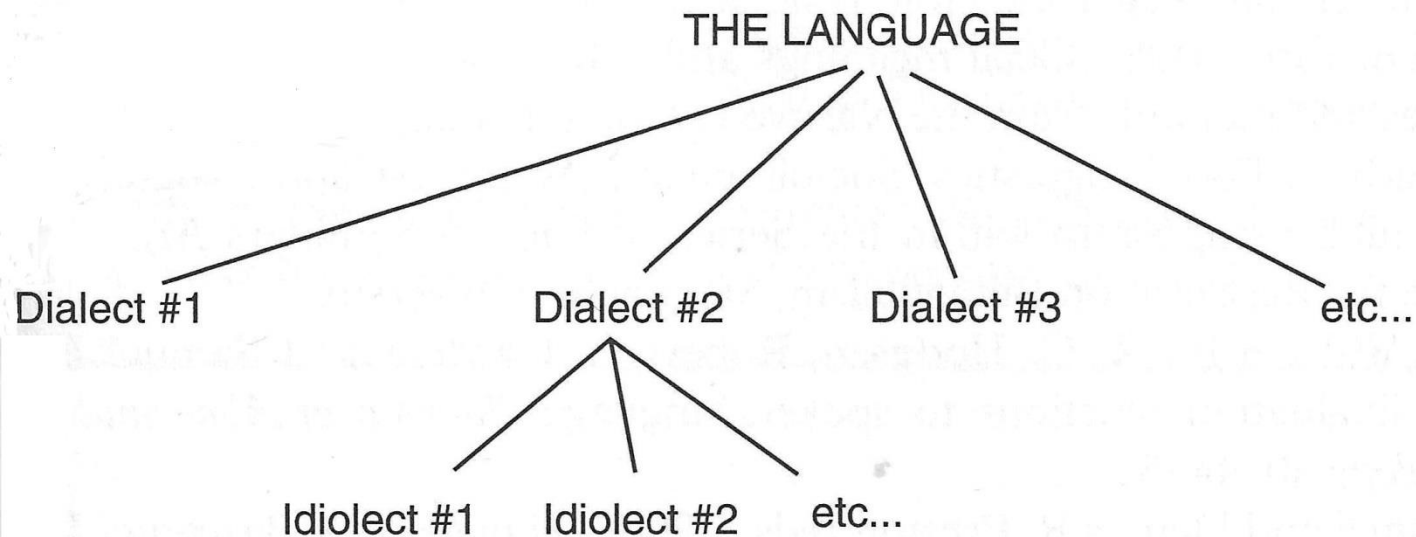
Preliminary findings:

- Fewer than a quarter of those 1,502 words can reasonably be attributed to Shakespeare.
- It will be less than that, once excludes words that were probably recorded, nonce words, etc.

Conclusions: Putting the myths together

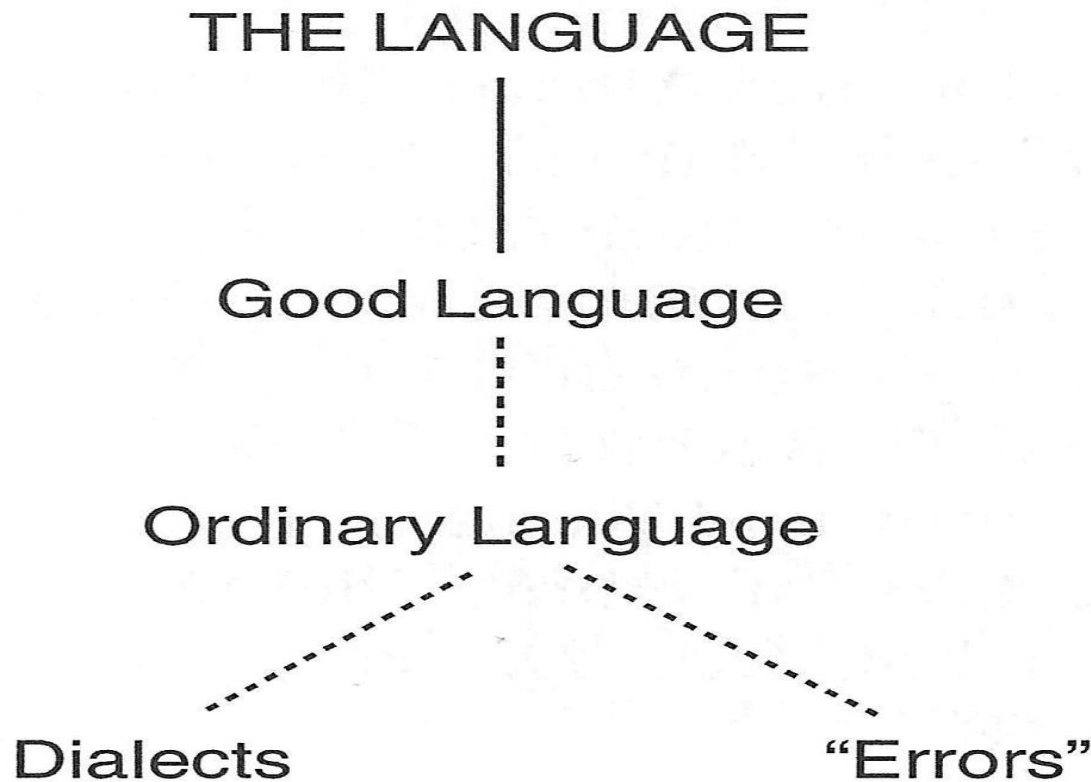
Folk Linguistics (Dennis Preston e.g. 2003)

A linguistic theory of language



Conclusions: Putting the myths together

A folk theory of language



THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE / SHAKESPEARE

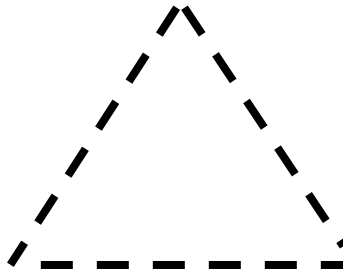


Good English

(= written standard)



[Ordinary English]



- Other Englishes
- Dialects
- Spoken English
- Recent English
- Sub-English

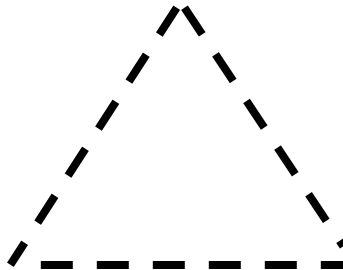
**Bad
English**

- Errors
- Ungrammatical English
- Incorrect English
- Impolite English

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE / SHAKESPEARE

Good English
(= written standard)

[Ordinary English]



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Bad English

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Sociological correlates

**Educated/
Literate**



**Uneducated/
Illiterate**

High Class



Low Class

Thank you!

