

Reading Shakespeare's Language

Most readers new to Shakespeare initially struggle with understanding the language. For most, the problems can be traced to three general causes: vocabulary, syntax, and wordplay or rhetorical devices.

Vocabulary

Some facts about Shakespeare and words:

- The Oxford English Dictionary credits Shakespeare with introducing nearly 3,000 words into the language.
- Besides introducing new words, Shakespeare makes use of obsolete words, like “ycleped” (called) and “wight” (man).
- Scholars estimate Shakespeare's vocabulary at between 25,000 and 29,000 words, nearly twice that of the average college student. The normal working vocabulary of a speaker of English is around 5,000 words.
- In the words of Louis Marder, "Shakespeare was so facile in employing words that he was able to use over 7,000 of them—more than occur in the whole King James version of the Bible—only once and never again."

Use of a good edition of the play, with footnotes or facing page notes (like the Folger edition), can usually help solve this problem. Good readers learn to approximate meaning with some accuracy from context and from a little imaginative use of their existing vocabulary. For example, while we might not use the word “misadventure” anymore, it is not too difficult to see that this word means something like “ill chance” or “unlucky.”

A special vocabulary case is Shakespeare's common use of contractions. Some readers complain about these “poetic” contractions used to create the correct number of syllables in a line. But consider this exchange overhead in the hallway (along with their possible translations):

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| “Goin’ to class?” | Are you going to class? |
| “Already been.” | I have already been to class. |
| “And?” | And how was it? (or And did you enjoy it? or And what happened in class? etc.) |
| “Whatever.” | What business is it of yours? or It was a most enjoyable class, perhaps the best one of my academic career, etc. |

Shown below are a few of the most common contractions found in Shakespeare.

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| 'tis = it is | i' = in |
| ope = open | e'er = ever |
| o'er = over | oft = often |
| gi' = give | a' = he |
| ne'er = never | e'en = even |

Syntax

Consider the following simple example, taken from Randal Robinson's *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language*. Take the simple sentence "I ate the sandwich." Rewrite the sentence by changing the order of the words but not the meaning of the sentence. Did you come up with six sentences?

I ate the sandwich.
I the sandwich ate.
Ate the sandwich I.
Ate I the sandwich.
The sandwich I ate.
The sandwich ate I.

In modern English, the most common sentence pattern is subject (S), verb (V), object (O), or I (S) ate (V) the sandwich (O). But as this example shows, most common does not mean only possible, and while some of these constructions ("Ate the sandwich I") are pretty unusual, they are nonetheless grammatically correct.

Unusual word order in a sentence is called inversion. Shakespeare used inversion to create specific dramatic and poetic effects. Inversion can be used to emphasize key words, to create specific poetic rhythms, to give a character a specific speech pattern (think Polonius, for example), or for a variety of other purposes.

Experienced readers "re-order" the words to understand the sentence. They locate the subject and the verb and "re-write" the sentence for clarity ("Ate the sandwich I" is quickly changed to "I ate the sandwich").

Rhetorical Devices

Samuel Johnson claims that puns are to Shakespeare what "luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire." While puns were held in low regard in the Eighteenth century, puns and various other kinds of wordplay abound in Shakespeare, and much of it is rightly understood by modern audiences would scandalize those who insist on Shakespeare being taught in the schools! ("She doth teach the torches to burn bright!" indeed!)

Besides simple wordplay, Shakespeare makes use of many rhetorical devices, ranging from the commonplace (metaphor, simile, and so on) to the exotic (polysyndeton—the repetition of conjunctions in a series of coordinate words, phrases or clauses). It is impossible to master Early Modern rhetoric in a few weeks. An important step, though, is simply being aware that these texts are highly rhetorical, and the rhetoric works both to embellish the text and express characterization.

Here's a short list of the most common rhetorical devices compiled by the Shakespeare Resource Center.

alliteration repetition of the same initial consonant sound throughout a line of verse
"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought...." (Sonnet XXX)

anadiplosis the repetition of a word that ends one clause at the beginning of the next
"My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,

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| | And every tale condemns me for a villain." (Richard III, V, iii) |
| anaphora | repetition of a word or phrase as the beginning of successive clauses "Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!" (<i>King John</i> , II, i) |
| anthymeria | substitution of one part of speech for another "I'll unhair thy head." (<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> , II, v) |
| antithesis | juxtaposition, or contrast of ideas or words in a balanced or parallel construction "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more." (<i>Julius Caesar</i> , III, ii) |
| assonance | repetition or similarity of the same internal vowel sound in words of close proximity "Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks." (<i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , V, iii) |
| asyndeton | omission of conjunctions between coordinate phrases, clauses, or words "Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils, Shrunk to this little measure?" (<i>Julius Caesar</i> , III, i) |
| chiasmus | two corresponding pairs arranged in a parallel inverse order "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (<i>Macbeth</i> , I, i) |
| diacope | repetition broken up by one or more intervening words "Put out the light, and then put out the light." (<i>Othello</i> , V, ii) |
| ellipsis | omission of one or more words, which are assumed by the listener or reader "And he to England shall along with you." (<i>Hamlet</i> , III, iii) |
| epanalepsis | repetition at the end of a clause of the word that occurred at the beginning of the clause "Blood hath bought blood, and blows have answer'd blows." (<i>King John</i> , II, i) |
| epimone | frequent repetition of a phrase or question; dwelling on a point "Who is here so base that would be a bondman? If any, speak; for him I have offended. Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any speak; for him have I offended." (<i>Julius Caesar</i> , III,ii) |
| epistrophe | repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive clauses "I'll have my bond! Speak not against my bond! I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond." (<i>Merchant of Venice</i> , III, iii) |
| hyperbaton | altering word order, or separation of words that belong together, for emphasis "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall." (<i>Measure for Measure</i> , II, i) |
| malapropism | a confused use of words in which an appropriate word is replaced by one with similar sound but (often ludicrously) inappropriate meaning "I do lean upon justice, sir, and do bring in here before your good honor two notorious benefactors." "Are they not malefactors?" (<i>Measure for Measure</i> , II, i) |
| metaphor | implied comparison between two unlike things achieved through the figurative use of words "Now is the winter of our discontent Made glorious summer by this son of York." (<i>Richard III</i> , I, i) |
| metonymy | substitution of some attributive or suggestive word for what is meant (e.g., "crown" for royalty) "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears." (<i>Julius Caesar</i> , III, ii) |

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| onomatopoeia | use of words to imitate natural sounds "There be moe wasps that buzz about his nose." (<i>Henry VIII</i> , III, ii) |
| paralepsis | emphasizing a point by seeming to pass over it "Have patience, gentle friends, I must not read it. It is not meet you know how Caesar lov'd you." (<i>Julius Caesar</i> , III, ii) |
| parallelism | similarity of structure in a pair or series of related words, phrases, or clauses "And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover To entertain these fair well-spoken days, I am determinèd to prove a villain And hate the idle pleasures of these days." (<i>Richard III</i> , I, i) |
| parenthesis | insertion of some word or clause in a position that interrupts the normal syntactic flow of the sentence (asides are rather emphatic examples of this) "...Then shall our names, Familiar in his mouth as household words— Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter, Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester— Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered." (<i>Henry V</i> , IV, iii) |
| polysyndeton | the repetition of conjunctions in a series of coordinate words, phrases, or clauses "If there be cords, or knives, Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams, I'll not endure it." (<i>Othello</i> , III, iii) |
| simile | an explicit comparison between two things using "like" or "as" "My love is as a fever, longing still For that which longer nurseth the disease" (Sonnet CXLVII) |
| synecdoche | the use of a part for the whole, or the whole for the part "Take thy face hence." (<i>Macbeth</i> , V, iii) |

Some Strategies

- Read the summary of the scene before reading the scene. (In the Folger edition, the scene summary is printed at the beginning of the notes for the scene.)
- Be prepared to re-read and remember that no one understands everything about Shakespeare (or any good text) on the first, second, or even tenth reading.
- Don't begrudge the difficulty of the language—the language is the point! In the words of Vladimir Nabokov's fictional poet John Shade, the reader should "get drunk on the poetry of Hamlet or Lear" and learn "to read with his spine and not with his skull."
- Remember that it's a play, so try to visualize it. Read the parts aloud, perhaps even "do the police in different voices" (i.e. assign a vocal style to each character). You could even get your friends together and put on a play ("Hey, we can sell tickets!").
- Attend a performance or watch a filmed version of the play. Don't let the performance, however, substitute for the pleasure of reading, and don't forget that every performance is also an interpretation.