

In the third of a series of articles on *Williamisms*, David Crystal examines Shakespeare's additions to the English dictionary

New words? It all-depends

People often ask me exactly how many new words Shakespeare coined, and feel somewhat cheated when they hear my reply – following in the footsteps of Professor Joad – that ‘it all depends on what you mean by word’. But it isn’t a cheat. It’s the compound words which are the difficulty – those items which consist of two elements, each with a separate identity elsewhere in the language, as in washing-machine and window-cleaner.

If everything were neatly hyphenated like this, there wouldn’t be a problem. Unfortunately, life is not so simple. Which would you write?

flower pot flower-pot flowerpot

All three versions are found in modern English. Indeed, there are hundreds of compound words where people cannot decide whether to write them spaced, hyphenated, or solid. When copy-editors are working on a book, they keep long lists of such words, to ensure consistency. But no two publishing houses keep the same lists.

Usage was even more uncertain in Shakespeare’s day. Punctuation conventions were still at a primitive stage of development, and usage would continue to change well into the 19th century. So you have to sympathise with the compositors of the First Folio who, lacking any punctuation manuals, had to decide what to do with the original expressions they encountered in the manuscripts. You’ll get a sense of their problem if you put your self into their shoes. How would you handle one of Shakespeare’s favourite constructions –

the double-adjective without conjunction?

If you want to say that someone or something has two attributes – ‘big and beautiful’, ‘cold and windy’ – the straightforward way is to use a conjunction, and this was also the case in Elizabethan English.

But float upon a wild and violent sea
(*Macbeth* 4.2.21)

However, if you are a poet, committed to lines of iambic pentameter, that *and* can be a real nuisance, as it gets in the way of the metre.

In particular, you have a problem if the first adjective has two syllables, with the stress on the first syllable: there’s an extra beat to eliminate. Here’s an instance from *The Merchant of Venice* (3.4.46). Portia wants to call Balthasar both ‘honest’ and ‘true’. It would upset the rhythm to put:

As I have ever found thee honest and true
So Shakespeare goes for the most direct solution, omitting the and:

As I have ever found thee honest true

This text now arrives on your typesetter’s table. How are you going to punctuate it? *Honest true* isn’t a normal grammatical construction, after all. So will you treat the adjectives as separate, by putting a comma between them? If you do this, you are attributing a separate and distinct meaning to each adjective. Is that what Shakespeare meant? Or is *honest true* an instance of a poet asking us to imagine a new quality, a fusion of two ideas, a notion of ‘honest truth’? If you decide this, you will need to hyphenate it, to show that it is a compound word.

Unfortunately, the year being 1623,

Shakespeare wasn’t around to ask any more. So the Folio compositors made their own minds up – and not very consistently. They left *honest true* with a space between the words. (The Wells & Taylor edition of the plays makes a compound of it, printing it *honest-true*.) But when they encountered the identical construction in *King John* (3.2.43), where John is persuading Hubert to kill Arthur, they separated the two adjectives by a comma:
*Or if that surly spirit, melancholy,
Had baked thy blood, and made it heavy, thick*
Then, in *The Winter’s Tale*, when Camillo protests his loyalty to Leontes (1.2.247), they go for a hyphen:

*If ever I were wilful-negligent
It was my folly...*

This last example actually blurs the distinction between adjective (‘wilful and negligent’) and adverb (‘wilfully negligent’). Shakespeare could have said *wilfully* – he uses the word several times in other contexts. But it would not work here, for the same reason that *and* does not: the *-ly* syllable would interfere with the metre.

So, do you sense any real difference between the adjective-pairs *honest true* and *heavy, thick* and *wilful-negligent*? If you leave the punctuation like this, the answer must be ‘yes’, and you would be forced to recognise just one Shakespearean neologism here – *wilful-negligent*. If you hyphenate everything, you are proposing three compounds – three fused meanings – and thus three Williamisms. Your decision will turn out to be important, for there are hundreds of cases of this kind in the complete works – *deep-contemplative, honourable-dangerous, boisterous-rough, fearful-bloody, precious-princely...*

So, how many new words are there in Shakespeare? It’s an unexpectedly difficult question to answer. As Joad would say, it does indeed all depend – on what you think Shakespeare meant.

David Crystal is the author of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, and Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor

**Now Balthasar, as I haue euer found thee honest true,
So let me finde thee still**

The Merchant of Venice, First Folio