Collocating auspiciously

In the eighth of a series of articles on words invented by Shakespeare, David Crystal finds Williamisms forging some novel alliances.

When you think about lexical innovations in Shakespeare - the *Williamisms,* as I've been calling them - the obvious things which come to mind are the brand-new words (such as *exsufflicate* - 'puffed up', found only in *Othello,* III.iii.186) and the distinctive idiomatic expressions, many of which have become part of the language (such as *all our yesterdays,* in *Macbeth,* V.v.21). But in between there are masses of novel word combinations (*or collocations*), which tend to be less often noticed.

Most collocations pass us by without even noticing them. There is nothing remarkable in hearing that someone was *green with envy* or that there are *purple passages* in a book, even though there is nothing especially green about envy, and the *passages* are not literally coloured *purple.* These are simply usages which have come to be part of traditional English idiom. The collocations, in other words, are highly predictable. You can fill the blank. 'Green with —'? '— with envy'? There used to be a television game show in which contestants used to have to do just that.

Authors have the same basic intuitions about language as the rest of us. If I were to ask you (or Tom Stoppard) 'Which words are most likely to go with *auspicious* in English?', you (and he) would probably reply with a word like *occasion.* 'It was a very auspicious occasion', you might say. You might prefer *moment, event,* or *time,* or some such word. But I guarantee that you would not suggest *apple,* or *computer.* This isn't to deny that you could invent a sentence about an 'auspicious apple', of course. (Stoppard probably has.) But you'd have to use your ingenuity to do so. Poets, of course, rely greatly on their ability to find fresh and unexpected collocations. 'A grief ago', says Dylan Thomas. The horses were 'megalith-still', says Ted Hughes.

Shakespeare will have shared the intuitions about the collocation of his time - and used them. There will be thousands of word combinations which would have been standard daily idiom, just like 'auspicious occasion' - 'plain truth', 'golden sun', 'sweet air'... Nothing distinctively Shakespearean about these. What makes Shakespeare so different - and this is one of the most distinctive features of his linguistic creativity - is his use of striking collocations. Now we are talking about 'candied tongues', 'absurd pomp', and 'pregnant hinges' - to take just two lines at random *(Hamlet,*

III.ii.58). It is these juxtapositions of images which stay with us, and which provide us with so much of his quotability.

Auspicious, as it happens, is a Williamism. In fact, it is an unusual *Oxford English Dictionary* double whammy, with Shakespeare responsible for both the first and the second instances recorded there. The first is said to be in 1601 (in *All's Well That Ends Well,* where fortune is described as an 'auspicious mistress', III.iii.8), and the second is in 1610 (in *The Tempest,* 'auspicious gales', V.i.318). Shakespeare in fact used the word on four other occasions too: in Hamlet ('auspicious eye', I.ii.11) - which actually antedates the *OED* first usage, if we follow the dating of Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor *(Hamlet,* c.1600-1, All's Well, c.1604-5) - *The Winter's Tale* ('auspicious fortune', IV.iv.52), *King Lear* ('auspicious mistress', II.i.39), and again in *The Tempest* ('auspicious star', I.ii.183).

One imagines, given the freshness of the word auspicious, that each of these collocations would have made an impact on the audience of the time. This suggestion is reinforced if we look at the other adjectives which were being used with these nouns around that time. The adjectives which are found in *OED* quotations, pre-Shakespeare, for *mistress* are *low, worthy, special, absolute, great* (twice)*, noble, sovereign,* and *sweet* - all rather literal and predictable. Those for *fortune* - not very many (this word tended to be used as a solitary noun) - are *good* (twice)*, fair, evil, extreme,* and *great* - again, not a very imaginative set. *Auspicious* does seem to be a somewhat more imaginative collocation for these words.

Is there any way in which we can be sure? Not really - at least, not until we get a historical dictionary of collocations to rely on. It'll happen, eventually: once more material is available in computational databases, it won't be difficult to ask for every two-word combination in the 16th century, and see which adjectives were actually used with *fortune, mistress, star,* and so on. Then we'd be getting much closer to capturing the intuitions of the audiences of the period, and to seeing just how daring Shakespeare was being when he brought two words together. An auspicious computer, indeed.

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