



What time is it?

David Crystal finds time for Williamisms.

Earlier this year I was watching a programme in the 'South Bank Show' series on why Shakespeare was still so popular. Inevitably, the question of his impact on the English language came up, and – just as inevitably – the same old rubbish was trotted out. 'Shakespeare invented a quarter of our language', said one contributor to the discussion. 'Shakespeare is our language', asserted another. They make good sound-bites, but that's about all. Exaggerations of this kind don't help anyone get a real sense of Shakespeare's linguistic creativity. Nor do they help linguist viewers' blood-pressure.

Depending on what you count as a 'word', and how many editions you refer to, there are between about 20,000 and 30,000 different words in the whole Shakespearean canon. If you count (examples like *go*, *goes*, *going*, *gone*, and *went* as different words, you will end up with the higher total. If you count them all as variants of a single 'word' you will end up with

the lower one. Either way, this is not a very large figure compared to a typical modern desk dictionary, which will contain around 100,000 headwords. The new words that Shakespeare created – the *Williamisms*, as I've been calling them – would form only a tiny part of the English lexicon today. We will not find the main legacy of his creativity there. We must look elsewhere for that.

The clue lies in the size of a Shakespearean concordance. According to Martin Spevack's huge work, there are 884,647 words in the canon. Many of these turn up only once, of course. When Hamlet protests to Gertrude about a 'windy suspiration of forced breath' (I.ii.79), this is not only a Williamism (in the sense of 'deep breathing'), it is the only occasion that Shakespeare uses this word. And the same solitary usage is found – to take a small sample from the middle of letter Q – with *quiddities*, *quietus*, *quickness*, *quilt*, *quintain*, and *questionable*.

By contrast, many interesting words are used often – very often, indeed, in a wide variety of contexts – and it is here that so much of Shakespeare's linguistic creativity lies. Whether he invented a word himself or not doesn't really matter. It's the way he put it to work that counts. And his legacy to the English language is to show what can be done with words, if only you dare.

Take the noun *time*. The word occurs over a thousand times in the plays. So how is it put to work? How does he dare? Let's look at just one way – the verbs used with it. In modern English we use metaphors of value and ownership: we *have time*, *find time*, *take time*, *give time*, *use time*, *make time*. We *need* it, *spend* it, *save* it, *waste* it, *lose* it, *gain* it, *fill* it, *buy* it, *value* it, and *play* for it. There are metaphors of speed and measurement: time *passes*, *goes*, *whiles away*, *flies*, *runs*, *hangs* (heavily), or *stands still*; we can *mark* time and *keep* time. Time can *heal*. And if we don't like time, we can *kill* it (before it kills us, as Herbert Spencer once added).

Many of these everyday metaphors were also around in Elizabethan English. There we will find people *spending*, *losing*, and *wasting* time, just as they do now. But Shakespeare revels in alternative images of time, going well beyond the everyday to metamorphose and personify time in different ways. 'A little time will melt her frozen thoughts', says the Duke in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (III.ii.9). And in other plays we find time *untangling*, *reviving*, *sowing*, *blessing*, *conspiring*, *brawling*, *begetting*, *weeping*, *inviting*, *unfolding*, *ministering*, *expiring*, and much more. People in the plays also deal with time innovatively: they *hoodwink* it, *redeem* it, *persecute* it, *confound* it, *greet* it, *name* it, *obey* it, *mock* it, *weigh* it, *jump over* it, and a great deal else.

The locus classicus for imaginative verb-use with time must be in *As You Like It* – this dialogue between

the lovers Rosalind and Orlando. Rosalind is in disguise, and recognizes Orlando, but he does not recognize her. She is feeling mischievous, so she tempts him into a word battle (III.2.291ff).

Rosalind I pray you, what is't o'clock?

Orlando You should ask me what time o'day: there's no clock in the forest.

Rosalind Then there is no true lover in the forest, else sighing every minute and groaning every hour would detect the lazy foot of Time as well as a clock.

Orlando And why not the swift foot of Time? Had not that been as proper?

Rosalind By no means, sir: Time travels in diverse paces with divers persons. I'll tell you who Time ambles withal, who Time trots withal, who Time gallops withal, and who he stands still withal.

Orlando I prithee, who doth he trot withal?

Rosalind Marry, he trots hard with a young maid between the contract of her marriage and the day it is solemnized. If the interim be but a se'nnight, Time's pace is so hard that it seems the length of seven year.

Orlando Who ambles Time withal?

Rosalind With a priest that lacks Latin, and a rich man that hath not the gout: for the one sleeps easily because he cannot study, and the other lives merrily because he feels no pain, the one lacking the burden of lean and wasteful learning, the other knowing no burden of heavy tedious pedantry. These Time ambles withal.

Orlando Who doth he gallop withal?

Rosalind With a thief to the gallows: for though he go as softly as foot can fall, he thinks himself to soon there.

Orlando Who stays it still withal?

Rosalind With lawyers in the vacation: for they sleep between term and term, and then they perceive not how Time moves.

Beaten, Orlando changes the subject.

Time travels in diverse paces with divers persons? Einstein had a similar idea, some 300 years later, when he devised special relativity. He called it the 'clock paradox', also known as the 'twin paradox'. As so often, Shakespeare was there first.

Illustration Belle Mellor