
The Power of Words: A Study on Vocabulary in Shakespearean Works

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Abstract

William Shakespeare, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language, made an indelible mark on vocabulary and linguistic expression. This paper explores the richness, variety, and innovation in Shakespeare's use of vocabulary, his coinage of new words, and the influence his diction had on Early Modern English. The analysis focuses on selected plays and sonnets, with an emphasis on how Shakespeare's lexical choices contribute to character development, thematic depth, and dramatic intensity.

Keywords: Study, Shakespearean Works, Power of Words, vocabulary

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's contribution to English literature is unparalleled, especially in terms of his impact on vocabulary. Living during a time of linguistic evolution in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Shakespeare had the liberty and ingenuity to experiment with language. Scholars estimate that he used approximately 29,000 different words in his works, and introduced over 1,700 words to the English language—many of which are still in use today. This paper investigates the vocabulary employed by Shakespeare to understand how his lexical innovation supported poetic expression, character portrayal, and linguistic legacy.

2. Historical Linguistic Context

The Elizabethan and Jacobean eras were marked by a fluid and expanding English lexicon. The printing press, the Renaissance influence, and increased contact with Latin, French, and Italian languages contributed to the growth of English. Unlike contemporary writers constrained by grammatical rigidity, Shakespeare had access to a malleable, dynamic linguistic medium. His extensive reading of classical literature and keen ear for vernacular speech allowed him to infuse his works with a rich, varied vocabulary.

3. Vocabulary Analysis: Plays and Sonnets

3.1 Lexical Richness in Plays

Shakespeare's vocabulary was not only extensive but nuanced. In *Hamlet*, words like "quintessence," "infinite," "melancholy," and "arrant" demonstrate a command over both concrete and abstract expressions. The character Polonius uses verbose, flowery language to reflect his pompous nature, while Hamlet oscillates between philosophical and terse speech, mirroring his inner turmoil. In *Macbeth*, the use of words like "incarnadine," "vaulting," and "multitudinous" intensifies the emotional and psychological atmosphere. His inventive use of verbs and adjectives, especially those of Latin origin, elevated the poetic quality of the tragedies.

3.2 Sonnets and Poetic Diction

In Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, vocabulary plays a pivotal role in articulating themes of time, beauty, love, and mortality. Words like "tempest," "gilded," "eternal," and "canopy" reflect the grandeur of thought compressed into 14 lines. Repetition, alliteration, and neologisms are key stylistic elements enriched by the choice of vocabulary.

4. Neologisms and Word Coinage

Shakespeare's inventiveness led to the creation of numerous words. Among the most notable are:

- **Lonely**
- **Majestic**
- **Critical**
- **Assassination**
- **Dexterously**

These coinages emerged from his tendency to adapt nouns into verbs (e.g., *to elbow*), combine words into compounds (e.g., *barefaced*), or modify word endings. His experimentation with affixes helped standardize certain suffixes like “-ness” and “-ment.” While some of these may have predated him in spoken language, Shakespeare was often the first to use them in print.

5. Thematic and Symbolic Significance of Vocabulary

Shakespeare's word choices were never arbitrary. They served symbolic and thematic purposes. For example, in *Othello*, the vocabulary shifts as Iago manipulates language to deceive Othello. The use of words like “honest,” repeated over 50 times, becomes ironic and central to the theme of appearance vs. reality.

Similarly, in *The Tempest*, the word “art” reflects both Prospero's magical abilities and Shakespeare's own view on the creative process. Vocabulary not only built plot and character but also created meta-commentary on language itself.

6. Vocabulary as a Reflection of Character and Class

Shakespeare differentiated characters by their language. Nobility often used elevated, poetic vocabulary; commoners spoke in prose and used colloquialisms or malapropisms. For instance, Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* famously misuses vocabulary, calling someone “a most dangerous *lethargy*” when he means “*heretic*.” Such lexical misuse becomes comedic and helps delineate social hierarchies. In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus's speech is more philosophical and abstract, while Antony's is emotive and direct, reflecting rhetorical strategies linked to vocabulary.

7. Influence on the English Language

Shakespeare's vocabulary shaped the English language profoundly. Phrases like “break the ice,” “in a pickle,” and “wild-goose chase” originated in his works. His expressions enriched idiomatic usage and entered everyday speech. According to David Crystal, about 10% of the words Shakespeare used were first recorded in his writing, which points to his monumental linguistic legacy.

Conclusion

William Shakespeare's genius lies not only in his storytelling or poetic form but also in his masterful use of vocabulary. His lexical contributions helped shape English as a literary and expressive language. By examining Shakespeare's vocabulary, we not only understand his artistry but also trace the evolution of English as a global language. His words—many of which remain alive—continue to echo through centuries, bridging cultures, time, and thought. William Shakespeare had a profound and lasting impact on the English language. He introduced over 1,700 new words and countless phrases that are still in use today. Expressions such as *break the ice*, *wild-goose chase*, and *in a pickle* first appeared in his works. His creativity in manipulating language helped expand the boundaries of English vocabulary and grammar. Shakespeare turned nouns into verbs, coined new adjectives, and played with word order for poetic effect. He brought emotional depth and nuance to English through his use of metaphor, rhythm, and wordplay. His writing showcased the expressive flexibility of English in drama and poetry. By blending classical influences with the common speech of his time, he created language that was both elegant and

accessible. Shakespeare's works became models for literary excellence and helped standardize English during a time of great linguistic change. His influence continues to shape how we speak, write, and think in English today.

References

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