

## **“As Made These Things More Rich” (Hamlet): The Linguistic Influence of Shakespeare**

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### **Abstract**

The fragrant smell of William Shakespeare, propelled through the composed words of his sonnets and plays, has enriched world literature and culture. Shakespeare's influence is well recognized and clear. In the field of linguistics, Shakespeare's inspiration has also been rightly noted. Especially in (but not limited to) the West, Shakespeare has influenced the language. A complete linguistic analysis of Shakespeare would be both comprehensive and narrow, and beyond the researcher's intended choice for this paper. Instead, the researcher will focus on two specific areas. The first discusses Shakespeare's use of metaphor becoming Megaphor. The second discusses Shakespeare's influence on English language and culture.

### **Introduction**

...[W]ords of so sweet breath composed  
As made these things more rich.

Ophelia, *Hamlet* III: i

The sweet breath of William Shakespeare, propelled through the poised words of his sonnets and plays, has improved world literature and culture. His influence is well documented and clear. In the field of linguistics, Shakespeare's influence has also been duly noted. Especially in (but not limited to) the West, Shakespeare has influenced the language.

A complete linguistic analysis of Shakespeare would be both comprehensive and deep, and beyond the researcher's intended scope for this paper. Instead, the researcher will focus on two specific areas. The first discusses Shakespeare's use of metaphor becoming a *Megaphor*. The second discusses Shakespeare's influence on American English language and culture.

### **Shakespeare as Megaphor**

Most linguists agree that analogic thinking is much more significant in language creation, development and use than previously considered. Part of this analogic thinking is the use of metaphor. Metaphors “[are] not just figures of speech in

literature,” Ungerer and Schmid write, “but also pervasive in everyday language” (117).

In English, Shakespeare is a master of such language. Consider the following examples from Shakespeare’s sonnets that use the metaphor of *eye* (which also include the use of metonymy – a special type of metaphor where the one phrase or word substitutes for a larger concept):

Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed. (sonnet 18, lines 5-6)

Lo, in the orient when the gracious light  
Lifts up his burning head, each under eye  
Doth homage to his new-appearing sight  
Serving with looks his sacred majesty. (sonnet 7, lines 1-4)

Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war  
How to divide the conquest of thy sight. (sonnet 46, lines 1-2)

(Ungerer 114)

Whether *eye* is meant to be the sun, or a concept of vision greater than the speaker’s ocular capability, Shakespeare shows the power of figurative language. While people may not speak in a poetic pentameter in everyday speech, metaphor is predominant in people’s conversation. We cannot speak long or well without metaphor.

Consider this well-known metaphor, from *Romeo and Juliet*:

That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet. (II: ii)

People recognize the metaphor as more than speaking about flowers in general, or roses specifically. The researcher uses it to show the importance of Shakespeare in our language.

For illustrative purposes, imagine a set of concentric circles. Let us start with the innermost circle. Here, we find the *contextual metaphor*. In this particular moment of the play, Juliet is speaking of Romeo (and Romeo overhears her speech). She laments the fact of their families’ quarrel. While Juliet regrets that she is a Capulet and Romeo a Montague, she sees that Romeo is more than a Montague, or any name: “Thou art thyself.” This is the meaning of the metaphor in its “literal,” scene-specific sense.

Go one circle out, and we see the *general metaphor*. Divorced from its specific context, the phrase still retains its usefulness. With wonderful poetic compaction, it shows that what of a thing (in the metaphor, its “smell”) remains constant even if it is identified by another label. Consciously, this is the level we *think* we are at when we commonly use the phrase.

But there is still one more circle out, and here is where Shakespeare’s eye shines. On this level, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” is more than its

contextual or general use would suggest. When the phrase is used, anyone even remotely knowledgeable about Shakespeare has multiple points of familiarity. From a functional, conscious point, we of course analyze the words and recognize the general metaphor. But because of Shakespeare's predominance, most have (however brief, or subconscious) a recognition that it is *Shakespeare's* words; a significant number know it is from *Romeo and Juliet*; a small number know it as a contextual metaphor and can recall the act and scene where it is spoken. We think not only of roses, or whatness, but about an Elizabethan author and characters who die for love. Our implicit knowledge of Shakespeare colors our perception, and therefore our use or reaction, to the metaphor. This "implicit knowledge" comes from our common culture, one in which Shakespeare features prominently. Therefore, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" pushes several buttons at once, and rises to the level of a *cultural metaphor*, or in one word (in my definition of it), *megaphor*.

Yet Shakespeare still rises further! Taken as a body of literature, the only other written words more influential than Shakespeare in the West is the Bible itself. In the secular world (in- and outside of the West), it remains unchallenged. Shakespeare's text becomes *the* Megaphor of our common humanity.

Do we overstate Shakespeare's importance? Here, entering on stage left, is Harold Bloom. Although he confesses to be a worshipper at the Bard's feet, he presents in elegant prose the argument that we can only risk *understating* Shakespeare's influence. In fact, he argues that Shakespeare invented the Human! His characters have claimed a deified status, an "inwardness" (6) that make them unique: "More even than all the other Shakespeare prodigies . . . Falstaff and Hamlet are the invention of the human, the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it" (4). "After Jesus, Hamlet is the most cited figure in Western consciousness," Bloom writes. "No one prays to him, but no one evades him for long either" (xxi). Other authors before and during Shakespeare's time gave us "eloquent caricatures, at best, rather than [the] men and women" that populate his own plays (7). We are an audience molded in the image of its Author:

Shakespeare teaches us how and what to perceive, and he also instructs us how and what to sense and then to experience as sensation. Seeking as he did to enlarge us, not as citizens or as Christians but as consciousnesses, Shakespeare outdid all his preceptors as an entertainer. (18-19)

In short, the Bard "extensively informs the language we speak" (17).

For the researcher's part, Researcher believes Bloom's claim that Shakespeare invented the human is perhaps a slight exaggeration. But of Shakespeare's influence, there is no doubt. To paraphrase Bloom: Shakespeare may not have invented the metaphor, but he invented the secular idea of megaphor, and *is* the Megaphor for our collective culture.

### Shakespeare, “The Great Author of America”

The researcher now turns to Shakespeare’s influence on American English. First, we must establish the influence of Shakespeare on American *culture*, and therefore it is important to put the history of Shakespeare and early America into context. Many people have forgotten (or never knew) the importance of the Bard on “pop culture” in America’s nineteenth century. Today, the common perception is that only elite academics can truly understand and enjoy Shakespeare, while the vulgar rabble may understand bits and pieces (often using his words and phrases, as we discussed above), they at best only appreciate (rather than love) the Bard. This belief exists as an eternal truism, and is therefore false on two fronts. First, the American “vulgate” of today do enjoy Shakespeare (as cinematic examples of proof, see the success of *Romeo + Juliet* [1996] or *Shakespeare in Love* [1998]). Second, for most of the nineteenth century, Americans could not get enough Shakespeare.

“[F]rom the large and often opulent theaters of major cities to the makeshift stages in halls, saloons, and churches of small towns and mining camps,” Lawrence Levine writes, “... Shakespeare’s plays were performed prominently and frequently” (20). In the 1880’s, Karl Kurtz (a German visiting the United States) said:

There is, assuredly, no other country on earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such general high esteem as in America ... If you were to enter an isolated log cabin in the Far West and even if its inhabitant were to exhibit many of the traces of backwoods living ... you will certainly find the Bible and in most cases also some cheap edition of the works of the poet Shakespeare.

(qtd. in Levine 17-18)

Shakespeare was intimate and familiar to Americans, and not to just some city folk in the Northeast. We not only enjoyed him, we embraced the Bard as our own: “James Fenimore Cooper ... called Shakespeare ‘the great author of America’ and insisted that Americans had ‘just as good a right’ as Englishmen to claim Shakespeare as their countryman” (20). Parodies of Shakespeare’s work abounded in the nineteenth century – something only possible if a great number knew Shakespeare’s work to get the joke. Bardolators of today may look back in horror that Shakespeare was often performed alongside the playbill with dancing dogs, jugglers, and minstrel shows. People argued in print and in the streets whether the emotional Edwin Forrest was a better American Shakespearean actor than the cerebral Edwin Booth, with the same passion that sport fans argue on talk radio today. Indeed, the 1849 Astor Place Opera House Riot occurred because of such passions. While across town, Edwin Forrest’s *Macbeth* was getting raves, the Englishman William Charles Macready’s *Macbeth* was getting boo’ed at Astor Place. His “aristocratic demeanor” annoyed the audience (63). Macready wanted to end the run of the production, but was persuaded to stay by people such as Washington Irving and Herman Melville. On May 10, eighteen

hundred people packed Astor Place while ten thousand stood outside. A riot broke out, killing twenty-two people and injuring one hundred and fifty more (63-64). This is how much Shakespeare meant to Americans! Levine sums it up thus:

Shakespeare was performed not merely alongside popular entertainment as an elite supplement to it; Shakespeare was performed as an integral part of it. Shakespeare was popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America. (21)

With Shakespeare's influence on American culture assured, do we see the same kind of influence on American English? Yes. "Early modern English was shaped by Shakespeare," Bloom tells us (10), but American English was shaped as well. We see this in two areas.

The first is grammatical fallacies. These fallacies are often pointed out by critics of American English (and English in general) as examples of our laziness and inability to be accurately articulate. However, Shakespeare himself used these same "wrong" constructions:

- "*You and me*" is correct, "*You and I*" is not. "Yet around 400 years ago," Aitchinson writes, "in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the merchant Antonio says: 'All debts are cleared between you and I,' so breaking the supposed 'rule' that *you and me* is the 'correct' form of the after a preposition" (16).

- *Double negatives are wrong*. For emphasis, however, it seems accepted: "most scholars agree that the more negatives there were in a sentence, the more emphatic the denial or rejection" (Cheshire 120):

I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth  
And that no woman has; nor never none  
Shall mistress be of it, save I alone.

(*Twelfth Night*, III: i, qtd. in Cheshire 120)

- "*It is I*" is correct, "*It is me*" is not. It is Latin grammatical constructions that make "It is me" seem incorrect. But both forms are used in *Twelfth Night* (II.v):

Malvolio : You waste the treasure of your time with a foolish  
knight –  
Sir Andrew : That's me, I warrant you.  
Malvolio : One Sir Andrew.  
Sir Andrew : I knew 'twas I, for many do call me fool.

(qtd. in Bauer 134)

When elitists bemoan American English as ungrammatical, we can see they are only following in the footsteps of that most influential author.

The second area where Shakespeare shapes American English is in our supposed "pure" language ancestry. Here, the influence is based on myth instead of fact, yet that does not diminish the importance Americans place on Shakespeare. In "In the Appalachians They Speak Like Shakespeare," Michael Montgomery

tackles this myth and reveals it to be false: “Two things in particular account for its continued vitality: its romanticism and its political usefulness. Its linguistic validity is another matter” (67). Montgomery cites several reasons why it is invalid; there is little evidence it is true, the little evidence that exists is not persuasive (70), and one incontrovertible fact:

Shakespeare and Elizabeth I lived 400 years ago, but the southern mountains have been populated by Europeans for only half that length of time ... Since no one came directly from Britain to the Appalachians, we wonder how they preserved their English during the intervening period. (71-72)

The myth persists, however. The fact that so-called uneducated rural dwellers would want to identify with Shakespeare show how much Americans revere and want to identify with him, even in the “backwoods” of the United States.

### **Conclusion**

One can see the incredible linguistic influence Shakespeare has on the West, particularly English-speaking people. By the wealth of his text, and his excellent use of metaphors, Shakespeare has become the all-embracing Megaphor that permeates our language today. In addition, American culture and language owe a particular debt to the playwright and poet; no other country outside of England has so loved the Bard and made him an adopted son. This short research paper cannot expect to be definitive. Nevertheless, the researcher hopes that it has been successfully shown an introductory exploration into these two issues from a linguistic perspective.

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