

In any books or articles you may read about John Florio it dismays me to see that hardly anybody has realized that Florio's mission in life was to expand and improve the English language. As a foreign language tutor, and we see him most vividly in this guise in his first book 'First Fruits', we find him wrestling with translation because so many words he was familiar with in Italian or French were simply missing from the English vocabulary.

He identified a barrier between nouns and verbs, primarily because the structure of English is so different from the Latinate languages, which defeated him in his early days, but which he resolved to conquer. In 'First Fruits' he speaks of the possibility of using the gerund form of any word as a means of breeding new words from it, using it as a root.

Shakespeare is of course credited with coining hundreds, if not thousands, of new words in the English language, but I would like to show you that the method for producing all this new vocabulary came from Florio. It was the quest for facile translation which motivated his work and his relationship with Shakespeare and contribution to the making of his plays which allowed him to test his new ideas on the public.

To see if a theatre audience would readily understand new words and begin to use these new tools of communication themselves in the streets, taverns and market places of London. It must have been most gratifying for him to find that this did indeed happen.

When Florio spoke, in 'First Fruits' of a form without gender called 'vario' in Italian he was referring to a form which was neither noun nor verb but in fact the name of a verb 'a hunting we will go' uses the gerund of the verb 'to hunt' and we can see that in his, renaissance Italian mind, nouns are feminine and verbs are masculine when we read in his dictionary: 'words be women and deeds be men'.

Florio found a way to cross the barrier and use the root of any word to make it plastic, capable of variation and more freedom of expression. We should not forget he also sought to bring more harmony to the language and to produce words that could be readily understood. For years I struggled to understand what formula Florio used to create all these new words until I realized quite how seriously he was devoted to Stoic philosophy, and now I can see that he used the syllogisms of Stoic logic as his foundation stone.

In the dedication to his dictionary he speaks a great deal about grammar and talks of 'virtue' and 'following nature' – both concepts which come straight from Stoic philosophy. Let us see now how its methods of resolving problems and arriving at reliable conclusions might have worked for him. Tweedledee accuses Tweedledum. Therefore Tweedledee is 'the accuser'. Tweedledum is accused by Tweedledee. Therefore Tweedledum is 'The accused'.

Here's how Shakespeare's play Richard II opens, where the King is attempting to resolve a dispute between two of his Nobles and has them summoned before him with these words: "ourselves will hear the accuser and the accused freely speak."

Any other writer of the era would merely have used the past participle of the verb, "the man who accuses" and "the man who has been accused" but we see here two new nouns, both derived from the gerund of the same verb. Were theatre audiences baffled by these new words? Not at

all, their structure matches existing language; they can be readily understood and immediately used without fear of misapprehension.

To make nouns from verbs is clever, but it is slightly more difficult to apply the same technique to make verbs from nouns, yet both Florio and Shakespeare apparently did it all the time. Take a look at Frank Kermode's recent book "Shakespeare's Language" to see what I mean. He makes a particular point of showing how Shakespeare used nouns as verbs, initially in fairly simple ways. 'To Trash' in "The Tempest", 'Godded' in "Coriolanus" and 'he words me' in "Antony and Cleopatra" are some of the examples he gives.

Here are some more instances of Shakespeare using nouns as verbs in the action of his plays for the very first time. All of these verbs, as far as can be ascertained, make their debut in Shakespeare. From my point of view, their specific originality is perhaps not as important as the fact that their frequent use conveys the notion that Shakespeare was manipulating 'words and deeds' after Florio's manner on a regular basis. '

Their blood is cak'd' says Timon of Athens, using the noun 'cake' as a verb. The servant Adam in "As You Like It" tells Orlando: 'he that doth the ravens feed, yea, providently caters for the sparrow', using the noun cater, (meaning one who buys provisions) as a verb. Macbeth makes first use of the word 'champion' as a verb rather than a noun when he cries: 'come fate into the list, and champion me to th' utterance!'

Here are some examples of nouns drawn from verbs, all obeying the apparent rules of Florio's system. Shakespeare takes a 14th century verb 'to excite' and devises the noun 'excitement', using it in both "Hamlet" and "Troilus and Cressida". From the verb 'to employ', Shakespeare devises the noun 'employer' in "Much Ado About Nothing" and in this context would have understood the concept of 'employment' too for he takes the verb 'to engage' and twists it around so that Brutus can tell his wife 'all my engagements I will construe to thee.'

In "I Henry IV" using the verb 'to retire' the Earl of Douglas says 'a comfort of retirement lives in this' and Prince Hal remarks: 'lest your retirement do amaze your friends.' A similar trick in "Troilus and Cressida" produces, 'haste we, Diomed, to reinforcement, or we perish all' taken from the verb 'to reinforce'. We can also see that families of verbs and nouns can now share their flowering stem with other blossoms, adjectives, adverbs and pronouns, all related and obeying interactive rules take their place in Shakespeare's new train of words.

Thus from the noun describing a worn out horse 'a jade', Shakespeare devises the adjective 'jaded' in "II Henry IV"; 'traditional' from the noun 'tradition' in "Richard III"; the adverb 'tightly' from the adjective 'tight' in "Merry Wives" and 'stealthy' from the noun 'stealth' in "Macbeth". These are just a few of many hundreds of new words forged in similar fashion in Shakespeare's works and you can readily see that they all begin from the quest to break down the barrier between nouns and verbs.

This course of action must have been informed by the teaching of John Florio, who devised the system and whose own work, especially his dictionary, is constantly peppered with identical or similar examples. A great many of the commonalities noted between Florio's translation of

Montaigne's essays and Shakespeare's plays cover this same ground. Florio appears to have made a start on this great work in the period between 1578, when he first identified the problems of the English language, and 1591, when, in "Second Fruites" he begins to use new words coined in exactly this manner.

Florio would cross linguistic barriers where he saw potential for a sweet new word.

He coins the verb 'amadising' in "Second Fruites" from the French noun 'amadis' and used it to mean 'rhetorical posturing', it's rather a pity that one hasn't survived into modern English, I can think of a good many occasions where I might be tempted to use it and I'm sure you can too! By the time he published the first edition of his dictionary in 1598, he felt he had truly opened up a new 'world of words' and scoffs at any who think his book will show them nothing new, or that a good command of Italian cannot be greatly informed by Florio's new work.

He tells his readers in the preface that for him, words and deeds are all of one gender; he has found a way to make verbs and nouns multi-functional and interactive. Like all great ideas it is essentially simple, but when fully developed and explored, it brought more than an expanded vocabulary to the English language.

It gave writers in particular new opportunities for more perfect expression and a musical harmony and rhythm which echoes the magic of early English (think of the sonorous beat of "Beowulf") and yet borrows from the different songs of Italian to produce an entirely new way of talking in English.

I am frankly not convinced that Shakespeare went on to use the new tools to best advantage when I look at Florio's last great personal work, his translation of Boccaccio's "Decameron" where, by his old age, he had perfected his technique to a level unique at the time.

Here at last is modern English, but with finesse you will rarely find elsewhere.

Florio's translation is still the one used by "Decameron" scholars today and you can find it in full on the internet. By this time he had learned to use significant consonant sounds to suggest mood and atmosphere, to link words more frequently to suggest a specific concept.

Look back through Shakespeare and you will find again that Florio is the source for phrases we now think of as commonplace such as 'rough-hewn'. As a diversion, one evening some years ago, I made a list of Florio's favourite words and phrases, identified from his own work, and set the computer to scour Shakespeare's "First Folio" for instances of the same. Thousands poured out; indeed I regretted setting the machine to print them all because the printer chugged away until four o'clock in the morning and consumed an entire ink cartridge.

How much evidence of two minds thinking alike do we need before we see it must be true?

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FURTHER READING:

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