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Speech Lengths in Early Modern Plays

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ABSTRACT

In 2005, Hartmut Ilseman announced his discovery that until 1599, Shakespeare's plays contained more speeches of nine words than any other length; but after 1599, that length dropped to four words. The change has been described as sudden, and Ilseman linked it to the opening of the Globe theatre. This note shows that the change Ilseman found in Shakespeare is also clearly visible in his contemporaries generally, dispelling the suggested link with the Globe. It shows that the change was gradual, not sudden, and suggests that it was caused by a gradual increase in the use of blank verse lines split between speakers in plays generally.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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In two articles, published in 2005 and 2008, Hartmut Ilseman announced and discussed a new discovery by him about Shakespeare's writing style (Ilseman; Ilseman). By making counts of speech lengths in each play, Ilseman had discovered that until 1599, Shakespeare's plays contained more speeches of nine words than of any other length; but that after 1599, there were more speeches of four words than of any other length. This has been called "a startling pattern"; the change has been described as having arisen "suddenly" and being "an amazing discovery" (Egan). Ilseman speculated that it was connected to the opening of the Globe theatre in 1599, as well as to other happenings discussed in the acclaimed account of Shakespeare's life in that year by James Shapiro (Shapiro). It is my aim in this note to explain what happened and show that it was neither amazing nor sudden, and nor was it connected to the events of 1599.

I present evidence below that what Ilseman found to be true for Shakespeare is true generally for his contemporaries. The speech length most often used in everyone's plays changed from about nine words to four words, and at about the same time, at the turn of the century. My method was to look at more than five hundred plays written between 1576, the year in which the first purpose-built theatre opened in London, and 1642, when theatrical activity was banned. These plays are a very substantial sample, from which we may draw reliable conclusions. I divided the era into three parts: 1576 to 1596; 1597 to 1600; and 1601 to 1642. The first part allows us to look at the period before the change Ilseman detected, the second to look at the transition period, and the third to look at the period from after the transition to the end of the era. Table 1 shows the number of plays and speeches in each part.

This data is unevenly distributed, which is unavoidable, given that fewer plays have survived from the early years. There are only three plays from the 1570s in my sample, and only thirty from the 1580s, although the number jumps to seventy-two for the 1590s. For each time period, I calculated how many speeches there are of each length, as a percentage of the total number of speeches in that period.¹ The results for all three periods are separately presented in Figure 1. Like Ilseman, I have shown only speeches of up to twenty words, the longer speeches occurring much less often and therefore being of no use in working out the most frequently used speech length.

By observing the highest of the black bars in Figure 1, covering the period 1576 to 1596, we see that the most frequent speech length is eight words, though only by a small margin over nine words, with the other lengths some way behind. The grey bars, covering the years after 1600, clearly show

Table 1. Speeches in plays (1576 to 1642).

Period	No. of Plays	No. of Speeches
1576 to 1596	79	35,783
1597 to 1600	34	26,599
1601 to 1642	388	
Total	501	340,224

four words as the most frequent length. In the interim period, 1597 to 1600, we see that there is not much difference between the percentage occurrences of four-, eight- and nine-word speeches, consistent with a transition taking place. Figure 1 thus confirms that the change from eight or nine words to four words occurred generally, not just in Shakespeare’s plays. We can see this in more detail in Figure 2, which gives year-by-year percentages.

In Figure 2, we can see at the left that the proportion of four-word speeches is on a rising trend, albeit with some wide fluctuations, because of the paucity of data in the early years. In the years 1597 to 1600 we see the transition taking place, with four-, eight- and nine-word speeches found in about the same proportions. In 1601, four-word speeches take a clear lead and maintain it without interruption until the end.

We can now see that this was not a sudden change. The proportion of four-word speeches had been rising since at least the early 1590s – possibly earlier, although that is less clear because of the smaller amount of data – and finally overtook eight- and nine-word speeches at the end of the decade. The belief that the change was connected to the opening of the Globe theatre, let alone to the other events of 1599, is now also seen to be misplaced.

It is worth pausing to understand why the change has been misinterpreted by some as sudden. Consider an analogy. Suppose you are driving your car along a road and another car is a long distance behind you but travelling at a faster speed. Eventually, a moment will come when that car will overtake yours. If I am asking the question “which car is in front?” then the answer will for a long time be “your car”, until the instant when the other car overtakes you; at that point, the answer will change to “the other car”. It would be giving a false impression to say that the other car suddenly overtook yours. The change had been coming for some time, as the other car closed in on yours. As Figure 2 shows, the number of four-word speeches had been rising faster

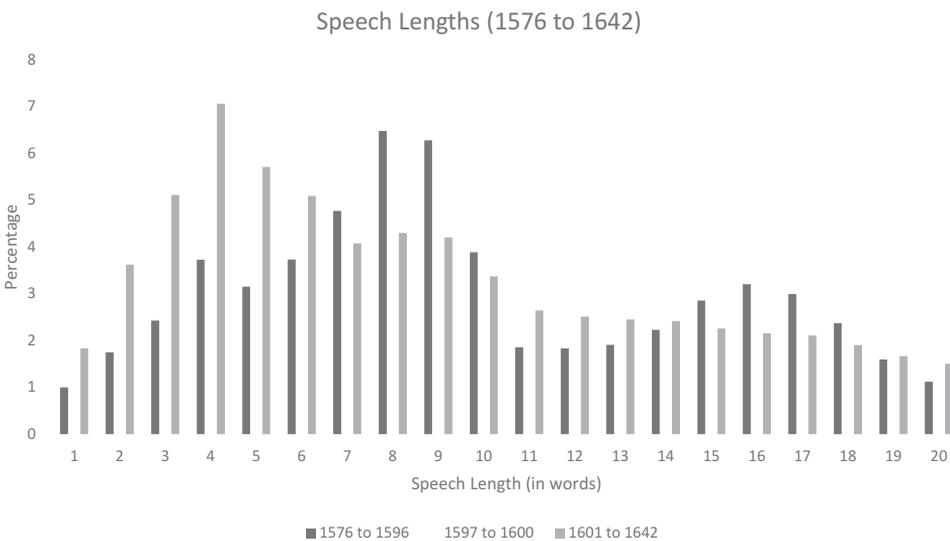


Figure 1. Speech lengths (1576 to 1642).

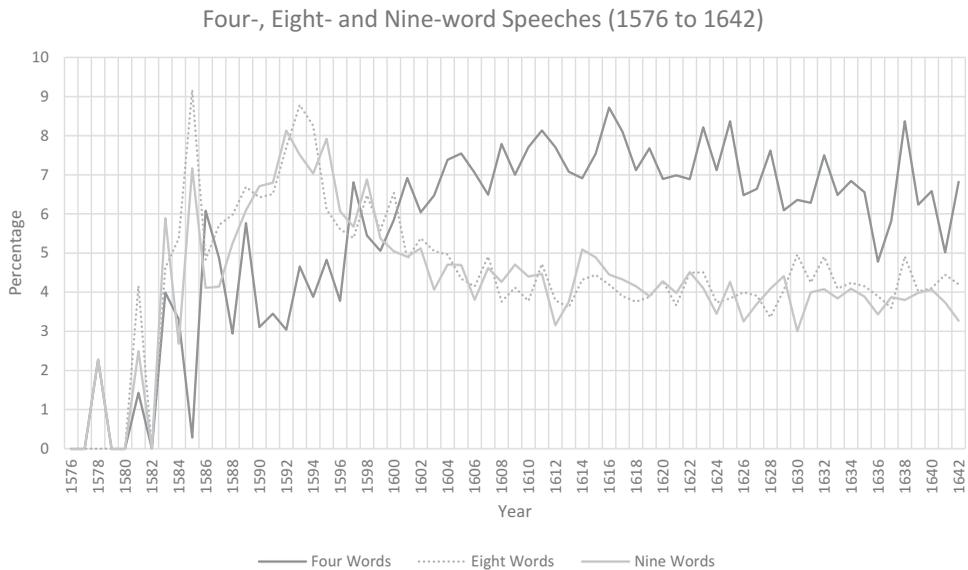


Figure 2. Four-, Eight- and Nine-word speeches (1576 to 1642).

than the number of eight- and nine-word speeches through the 1590s. There had to come a moment when the former overtook the latter. That moment happened to come in 1599, but it would be unwarranted to see the change as sudden, or to suppose that it was caused by the opening of the Globe theatre.

Why did the change happen? An explanation can only be speculative, but I shall offer one here. We may begin by observing that the explanation must be generally applicable, not confined to Shakespeare, since it would be a remarkable occurrence if other authors had changed their speech lengths in about the same time period, but for different reasons than Shakespeare's. Occam's razor invites us to look for a common explanation. Ilsemann explained the change in Shakespeare's writing as part of "the wider context of the relationship between rhetorical speeches and dramatic actions. The suggestion was that rhetoric and declamations receded and were replaced by refined acting using the spatial dimensions of the stage and speeding up events by shorter speeches" (Ilsemann 397). This explanation is consistent with the evidence of Figure 1, which shows that the proportion of speeches of up to six words is higher after the turn of the century than before. I should like to elaborate Ilsemann's explanation.

Eight or nine words seems to me to be the typical length of a line of verse in iambic pentameter, from which I infer that four or five words is the typical length of a half-line. To test this belief, I looked at Shakespeare's *Richard II*, choosing that play because it is entirely in verse, obviating the need to edit it to remove prose passages.² Disregarding stage directions and speech prefixes, and treating hyphenated words as two, I counted by computer the number of words in each line of the play. For this experiment, I applied a rule of thumb that any line with seven or more words is a full line of verse. Of the 2,382 such lines, I found that sixty-four percent are eight or nine words long, and twenty-five percent are seven words long. In summary, eight- or nine-word lines account for almost two-thirds of full verse lines, at least in this experiment.

This is surely an important clue about why the change to four words as the most frequent speech length happened, at least for Shakespeare. It appears that, consciously or subconsciously, he realised that splitting a line of verse between two speakers – by ending one speech on a half-line and starting the next speech with a half-line – has a useful subliminal effect on the hearers. It lessens the impression of two characters making declamations at each other and increases the impression of

a dialogue. The split line is a structural link between two speeches, formally binding them together as dialogue. Now, the splitting of verse lines does not, in theory, mean that the length of speeches must fall. After all, if one speaker ends a long speech with a half-line, while the next speaker begins an equally long speech by metrically completing that half-line, then the most frequent speech length need not fall towards four words. However, in practice, once a dramatist routinely starts to split verse lines between characters, it is bound to happen that sometimes the second speech will consist just of that half-line. If so, it adds to the count of four- or five-word speeches in the play. It is not necessary to suppose that this happened a lot. The most frequent speech length does not have to be a very common speech length; far from it. Four is the most frequent speech length after the turn of the century, yet, as [Figure 1](#) shows, only about seven percent of speeches are four words long. With such small percentages, it is enough if the persistent use of split verse lines in a play causes an increase of just a little in the count of four-word speeches. That may be enough to tip the scale and make four words the most frequent speech length. This is in substance the suggestion already made by MacDonald P. Jackson who, on presenting his own analysis of Ilseman's data, wrote: "In fact there is doubtless a relationship between the diminishing lengths of the shorter speeches ... and the increasing tendency for the end of one speech to be completed by the first line of the next." ([Jackson 305](#)).

Did the habit of splitting verse lines become more prevalent as the years went by, as the explanation above supposes? To answer this question, we need to calculate the number of split lines as a proportion of all blank verse lines and track the change in this proportion over time. That work appears to have been done only for Shakespeare, not his contemporaries. George T. Wright, building on the work of E. K. Chambers, prepared a table showing the proportion of split lines, which he called shared lines, in each of Shakespeare's plays ([Wright 294–5](#)). At about the same time, Marina Tarlinskaja prepared her own table of the same information ([Tarlinskaja 137–8](#)). Inevitably, the two scholars' counts differ, no doubt because of the subjectivity involved in distinguishing verse from prose in some passages of short lines; for example, Wright finds 194 split lines in *Hamlet*, whereas Tarlinskaja finds 178. Notwithstanding these differences, the data presented by both scholars supports the same conclusion, which they both reach, that the proportion of split lines in Shakespeare's plays rose very significantly in his career, from less than one percent in the early plays, such as *The Comedy of Errors*, to a high of around fifteen percent in the late plays, with the peak of around eighteen percent being reached in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Lacking the same analysis for Shakespeare's contemporaries, we are left to wonder if their plays followed the same trend as his. The evidence I have presented, that their speech lengths show the same trend as his, might encourage us to believe that the same is true for split lines. However, Wright makes a comment that should give us pause: "The prominence of short and shared lines distinguishes Shakespeare's verse from almost all pentameter poetry of later periods and especially from later blank verse, where lines shared by separate speeches or paragraphs appear, if at all, only as a faint echo of Shakespeare's technique and without notable expressive function." ([Wright 117](#)). More research into the metrical art of Shakespeare's contemporaries is needed.

Although I have shown that Ilseman's explanation for what happened might not be correct, we must be grateful to him for noticing it. It is because of such insights, obtained through a close study of the texts, especially by using the electronic texts now available to us, that we advance our understanding of the art of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.³

Notes

1. The raw data for all figures in this note is available at <http://www.shakespearetext.com/speech> (accessed 4 May 2019).
2. I obtained my text for this experiment from the Folger Digital Texts API site (<https://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/api>, accessed 4 May 2019), which provides the texts of Shakespeare plays with formatting, stage directions and speech prefixes removed.

- I wish to express my thanks to the anonymous reviewer whose suggestions for further work helped to make this note better.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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