

## The Dymocks Favourite Word Competition

In 2003 Dymocks Booksellers held a competition for people to write in and describe their “favourite word”. The prize was the Longer Oxford Dictionary – twelve huge volumes requiring a building permit to shelve. My desire to own these dictionaries was passionate and so I entered hoping to win.

I didn't.

The winner was a high school student in South Australia, whose school went on presumably to enjoy the benefit of these beautiful books.

All well and good. But this was the winning entry:

### “Anatidaephobia”

**The fear that somewhere, somehow, a duck is watching you.**



Anatidaephobia: The fear that somewhere, somehow, a duck is watching you.

The winner was announced but without mentioning that the word, and the definition, were entirely the creative work of American cartoonist Gary Larson.

Now that shits me. Couldn't even use a real word or credit the funny person who thought of it.

Whatever. Here are my three entries. I put a lot of work into them!

(Yes yes I know you can't have three “favourites” but it was a favourite word competition not a logic competition)

## My favourite word

I work as a translator and interpreter in the English and Japanese languages. I own a company and employ several others. We work as a team where translation of written material is viewed as a process to which a number of people contribute on a variety of levels: researching, drafting, client liaison, checking, editing and proof-reading.

In our work we must often account or argue for a particular interpretation of a sentence, or correct a draft prepared by someone else. Many of these discussions take the form of a native speaker of Japanese asking me why something is put in a particular way in English. These discussions invariably teach me as much about English as my explanations do for the person asking the question, and for this reason I find them very enjoyable. This particular

language pair presents many problems, one of them related to my favourite word: **the definite article**.

Words by themselves mean nothing, and even when integrated into a text or utterance rarely carry meaning autonomously, but rather make a contribution to the overall function of the text or utterance. (The word “stop” for example is neither a noun, verb, nor adjective, until it is joined variously to the words: “organ”, “don’t” or “sign”.)

The distinctive problems posed by Japanese relate to it being one of the most elliptic languages in the world, with the majority of sentences completely omitting the subject. So when a Japanese person asks me “Why ‘the’ and not ‘a’?” I must again confirm for myself the specific function of this word, which can vary subtly from context to context.

In broad terms it mediates the introduction and establishment of subject matter, in a way quite foreign to the Japanese speaker. But I saw a deeper significance in these enquiries. These three letters are the sinew by which the obscure becomes the understood. The insignificant becomes famous. The anonymous becomes the only one that will do. Identity is created. Ideas begin as “an idea” progressing rapidly to “the idea” and thence to “it”. “The” implies community, assuming (usually successfully) that we share with the reader or interlocutor a common understanding of the subject matter. Conditions, premises and prerequisites are all laid down, ready for the construction of ever more impressive arguments.

The English speaking language group has, since the Enlightenment, displayed the most prodigious talent for absorbing and processing ideas. But the gift of observation goes nowhere until enshrined within a conceptual framework and the progress from “a” to “the” is a most wondrous production line – sweeping everything from the world of “I saw this once” to the realm of “We all know about it”.

The majestic heights to which all other words may be propelled by being prefixed with this wondrous word are perhaps best illustrated by contemplating the difference between “A girl”, and “The girl”.

It’s the doorway to my culture, my identity, my heritage and my philosophy. It’s the word.

## My favourite word

Learnt first against the bosom, a magic syllable

whose meaning takes a life well-lived to render visible.

Held off cynically at times but intrinsically a part

that is burnished and inscribed, by the failure, the false start.

Shedding skins and layers, becoming something new.

Fresh meanings are acquired. The joke becomes the true.

Revealed (again!): the driving force behind our deepest needs.

All-conquering heartfelt reason of so many thoughts and deeds.

Occasional whip to brandish, and rock to which we cling.

Final justification for every single thing.

A simple word unfolding and enfolding from above.

The spark. The light. The warmth. My favourite word is “love”.

## My favourite word

Asked about one’s favourite word, we often turn to the obvious candidates, “phlox”, “sprocketty”, “qualm”, “coruscate” and so on. Pleasing to utter, and teasing to ponder their meaning when fully developed. They can easily be used in sentences, but sentences of limited application, unless your aim is simply to acquire free dictionaries.

Surely the less self-indulgent measure: “frequency of use” will reveal our true preferences.

- “If” opens the conditional, the hypothesis, and the *subjunctive mood*.  
Testament to human imagination and the future worlds it makes possible.
- “And” sternly imposes complexity on our view of reality as it links more than one assertable fact together.
- “But” showing us the freedom to oppose ideas established even within the span of a single sentence, so that they may compete and leave us with the fittest and best.

All of them crucial, workaday, universally understood words.

But if I’m honest and ask myself, what word have I held dearest? Analysis is of no use, and the dictionary is not necessarily the repository of all that is wonderful in language.

With but a toehold in the margin of English, but beating so loud in my life, fluttering in and out of existence within a year, and used by only one person on Earth, the author of the word, my eldest son.

Eighteen months old, rosy cheeked and running towards me across the International arrivals of Tullamarine airport crying “Wodaddy! Wodaddy! Wodaddy!”

## Why I’d like to win the Oxford English Dictionary

We live in the professional world of text analysis and are comfortable with the descriptive rather than prescriptive paradigm of dictionaries and grammars. Contextual knowledge, our own debates, parsing, logical extension exercises, role play, the whiteboard, the internet and ringing-the-client-and-discovering-it-

was-only-a-typo are all means at least as important as dictionaries to the accurate understanding of an English text prior to drafting in Japanese, or editing an English translation of a Japanese original.

I own several hundred dictionaries, many bilingual and mostly specialist, and use them on a daily basis. I believe I have a realistic view of their usefulness, unlike many other people (in a conversation with a barrister with whom I was briefly acquainted he haughtily and patriotically pronounced “I’d only ever consult the Macquarie”, I asked how would that help him interpret a will written before the Macquarie was published? “Oh”, he said.)

I consult all generalist dictionaries if I think it will help. Webster’s, the Macquarie, Random House, McGraw-Hill, I will often ring my parents and get them to check the two-volume Shorter Oxford which we gave them many years ago (called “the argument-stopper” by this pair of scrabble fiends). Each published dictionary, and *each edition*, may have something to offer us in understanding the paths by which a word has come to be used in the text we are translating.

But the OED is the one. Along with Winchester and Bragg I have no hesitation in proclaiming English as the biggest and best language in the world. This is not chauvinism. The health of a particular language will always be in direct proportion to its ability to promote the interests of its speakers, and English, the most useful, is open to everyone. English places one within the world’s most meticulously recorded and debated written history; the world’s greatest employment market, and the forefront of medical and scientific research. And when you wish to tell others of the wonders of your own culture and language, doing so in English will afford you the largest audience or readership in the world.

A compendium that purports to set out all senses and established collocations of every element of such a stupendously useful human contrivance as the English language will be the crowning glory of all my professional tools and one of my most treasured personal possessions.

Some have asked why don’t I simply buy the CD-ROM. I shudder at their insensitivity. Search-engines have converted the internet to the world’s largest corpus, ready for concordance and frequency analysis. I do this all day long, but you can’t lie in front of the fire or in bed with one, and I do with dictionaries. (The word “interactive”, coined hopefully by the computer industry in order to describe a version of their “wares” slightly less inconvenient than the last version, barely does justice to the revelation that greets the child turning the pages of a picture-book for goodness sake.) Give me a book every day. Give me twenty. There will be shelving and rostra purpose built, hogsheads split and trenchers piled with meats and dainties to celebrate, and at the risk of offering a bribe, you will all be invited.

Given the quality of the arguments I have set forth herein, it will be no surprise that I have harboured for many years a fervent desire to own the complete set, and deep shame, given my profession, that I don’t. Rest assured that at this celebratory gathering these emotions will be speedily transformed into a pious and excoriating attack on my colleagues in the translation community (many of

whom will be present), setting strict limits on the number of words I will look up for them over the phone, and admonishing them that once this limit has been reached, their only respectable course of action will be to rush to their nearest Dymocks store and buy their own damn set.

**That**, ladies and gentlemen, is why I would like to win the Oxford English Dictionary.

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Bastards.